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## **Trendreport #5**

# **Religion and National Identity as Political Allies:**

**The Intertwining of Extremist Ideologies as  
Exemplified by Turkish Ultranationalism**



**Authors:**  
**Miriam Uludoğan-Heß & Maida Ganević**

## Religion and National Identity as Political Allies: The Intertwining of Extremist Ideologies as Exemplified by Turkish Ultranationalism

Miriam Uludoğan-Heß & Maida Ganević

### Abstract:

*This trend report examines the relationship between nationalism and religiously motivated extremism as increasingly intertwined ideological phenomena. Using the example of Turkish ultranationalism – specifically the so-called “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis” – it analyzes how ethno-nationalist and Islamic-religious frames of reference merge into hybrid ideological formations. Comparisons with Iran and the United States show that such interconnections are not specific to any one region. In the German context, the report highlights, in particular, the relevance of transnational influences and diasporic dynamics.*

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## Introduction

### Nationalism and Religiously Motivated Extremism: An Analysis Based on the Example of Turkish Ultranationalism

In the context of preventing and combating extremism, the question of the relationship between religion and national identity is becoming increasingly significant. This is particularly evident in the case of Turkish ultranationalism, which – alongside the PKK – represents one of the largest pools of potential recruits involved in so-called „foreign-related extremism“ in Germany (cf. Müller et al. 2025, 9; BfV 2024; Ortner and Kökten 2025, 7). At the same time, current developments indicate that religiously oriented currents within this movement are gaining influence, particularly when compared to more secular positions.

This presents an additional challenge for practical prevention work: To understand the context of these phenomena, people often ask whether the issue is primarily one of religiously motivated extremism or of right-wing extremist ideologies. However, practical experience shows that this categorization is not always clear-cut. For instance, clients are sometimes prematurely classified as adhering to the Islamist spectrum, even though their attitudes and actions would be more accurately attributed to Turkish right-wing extremism, without pronounced religious references (cf. Müller et al. 2025, 19). Because of such difficulties in categorization, a more nuanced examination of the underlying ideologies and their interconnections is needed.

For this reason, this paper proposes a critical reexamination of the relationship between nationalism and religiously motivated extremism. While both phenomena are frequently viewed as opposing forms of collective identity, the reality is not that simple. In practice, there are overlaps and points of mutual compatibility between national and religious frames of reference (see Kuru 2025).

On the one hand, the differences are significant: In Islamism, for example, the concept of a global Muslim community plays a central role, which means that national borders are relativized or even rejected – a

stance that aligns with the inherently universalist logic of religious-cultural identity, defining belonging through faith rather than origin. In contrast, national, ethno-cultural identity follows a largely particularist logic, as belonging is constituted through ancestry, language, or other narratives of origin.

On the other hand, overlaps can also be observed where religion is deliberately incorporated into certain nationalist contexts as an identity-defining element. Examples such as Turkey illustrate that especially in the realm of ultranationalist ideologies, religious references can play a significant role in shaping national self-conceptions. As a result, the boundaries between religious and national identity patterns are often fluid.

This publication deliberately puts the focus on the religiously oriented wing of Turkish ultranationalism. The term „Turkish ultranationalism“ is used throughout to describe the phenomenon. Authors such as Bozay et al. (2024, 10) argue for the use of this term because it captures the specific characteristics of what is often referred to as „Turkish-right-wing extremism“ with greater analytical precision. The phenomenon combines diverse elements, ranging from ethnic-nationalist exaltation to racism and antisemitism and even to religious fanaticism. Therefore, it cannot be unambiguously attributed to a single ideology of inequality (cf. Bozay & Borstel 2017, cited in *ibid.*). The concept of ultranationalism takes this complexity into account without losing sight of the central ideological commonality: the emphasis on the unequal worth of human beings (*ibid.*).

A look beyond the Turkish context shows that a similar intertwining of religion and national identity can be observed elsewhere, too. In predominantly Shiite Iran, for instance, both elements are interwoven. Yet there is also clear friction between the two: While the state ideology following the 1979 revolution aims to subordinate national identity to religious principles, the Iranian nation – as expressed, for example,

through language, culture, and historical self-identification – remains a defining frame of reference. It cannot be fully subsumed under religious categories. This causes persistent tensions between the religious and the national identity (see Alinejad 2022).

The United States, with the concept of Christian nationalism, offers another example: an ideology that establishes a close link between national identity and certain forms of Christianity and that seeks to embed religious values more deeply in politics and society. Unlike in Iran, the primary focus here is not on subordinating the nation to religious authority. Rather, the intertwining is reciprocal, with national affiliation and religious identity increasingly linked and, in some cases, equated (see Whitehead 2025; Whitehead & Perry 2022).

In other contexts, too, it is evident that religion can play an important role in national self-conceptions even if no uniform pattern can be identified. In Israel, for instance, the relationship between state, nation, and religion is historically and politically complex. While the state defines itself as a Jewish state, it is also characterized by a pluralistic society comprising diverse religious and secular currents (cf. Ridge 2024).

At the same time, right-wing conservative and religious-nationalist forces in Israel have for years been gaining political influence. They are driving developments that some authors describe as the ethnocratization of the state (cf. authors such as Oren Yiftachel). Other authors also highlight these developments but reject the characterization of Israel as an ethnocracy, relying instead on the concept of „ethnic democracy“ (cf. authors such as Sammy Smooha).

In India, the political and social discourse has repeatedly focused on the relationship between national identity and religious traditions – particularly on the disaccord between secular constitutional principles and majority views shaped by religion (cf. Waha 2020).

These examples illustrate that it is not the specific religion as such that is decisive but rather the specific historical, political, and social constellations in which religion and national identity become intertwined.

Beyond domestic dynamics, transnational influences play a significant role in the intertwining of religion, nationalism, and political mobilization. In recent years, for instance, Turkish political actors have been seen to increasingly intervene in the political and social affairs of people with Turkish migration backgrounds across various EU states, particularly Germany (cf. Aydın 2024). This underscores the relevance of transnational dynamics and forms of influence within the context of diasporic communities.

These various forms and tensions between nation and religion will be examined in greater detail below, with – as mentioned – a focus on Turkish ultranationalism. This will be followed by an analysis of the consequences of such hybrid ideological formations in the German context, particularly with regard to the prevention of extremism, the political assessment, and the challenge of dealing with transnational dynamics of influence.

# Chapter 1

## The Relationship Between Nationalism and Islamism in the Context of Collective Identity



This chapter addresses the terminological and conceptual foundations of the relationship between nationalism and religiously motivated extremism. As previously mentioned, both phenomena are often described as opposing forms of collective identity or indeed analyzed separately: While nationalism is primarily rooted in language, culture, history, and territory, religiously motivated extremist ideologies are more closely aligned with transnational faith communities and religious conceptions of social order (cf. Kuru 2025).

However, this comparison is simplistic. While nationalism has historically often developed in opposition to religious authorities and contributed to the emergence of secular political structures (cf. Kuru 2025), in practice, these two frames of reference can neither be clearly separated nor viewed as mutually exclusive. Rather, both differences and interconnections exist: Ideologies grounded in religion can relativize national boundaries, while, conversely, religion is incorporated into nationalist contexts as an element that fosters identity (cf. Kuru 2025). The intertwining of these two phenomena thus appears to be a recurring feature of modern societies, observable across diverse cultural, religious, and geopolitical contexts (cf. Becker 2025; cf. Kuru 2025).

This context calls for a nuanced view of the historical development of nationalism. In Europe, its emergence often led to conflict with religious authorities – a dynamic frequently seen as having reached its symbolic peak in the French Revolution of 1789. In other regions of the world, this development unfolded on a different timeline and under distinct political conditions. In the Middle East, for example, nation-state structures did not emerge until the early 20th century, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The founding of Turkey in 1923 is regarded by scholars as an early and defining example of this process. Given this background, Europe is often described as the central point of origin for nationalist ideas, though this does not imply a uniform or linear development (cf. Kuru 2025; Smith 1999).

## Turkish Ultranationalism

For an analysis of hybrid ideological formations, Turkish ultranationalism is of particular interest, as it contains elements of both phenomena. There is ongoing debate in both research and practice as to whether it should be classified as part of the Islamist or the far-right spectrum. At the same time, experience from prevention work shows that such categorizations are not always clearly defined (see Müller et al. 2025, 19). In the context of this publication, Islamism is understood as a form of religiously motivated extremism. This means that here, too, a fundamental analytical distinction must be made between Islamism and nationalism. They stem from different historical conditions, rely on distinct inherited patterns of interpretation, and draw on a specific range of codes and emotionally charged narratives (Bologna & van Uffelen 2021, 79).

However, these conceptual dividing lines do not mean that the two phenomena exist in isolation. Rather, both historical and contemporary developments show that religious and nationalist frames of reference repeatedly intersect. They can reinforce one another and – in specific political contexts – merge into hybrid ideological formations. In light of current developments – such as the growing significance of religiously motivated movements and their high potential for recruitment in the sphere of so-called foreign-related extremism – a nuanced analysis appears particularly important (cf. Müller et al. 2025, 9; BfV 2024; Ortner & Kökten 2025, 7).

## The Turkish-Islamic Synthesis

Since the founding of the Republic of Turkey (1923), nationalism has played a central role in the country's politics and society. One element is the so-called "Turkish-Islamic synthesis," which refers to a specific ideological current within Turkish ultranationalism. It conceives of Turkish ethnic identity and Sunni Islamic religiosity not as competing entities but as constitutive elements that are intrinsically linked. In this context, Islam is regarded not primarily as a universal community of faith that transcends national borders but rather as an essential component of the Turkish „national character.“ In this sense, Islam becomes naturally part of Turkishness. This fusion distinguishes the Turkish-Islamic synthesis both from the purely ethnic-secularist variants of Turkish nationalism – such as those rooted in the Kemalist tradition – and from genuinely political Islamism, that, as a matter of principle, subordinates national affiliation to the religious community (Ummah). Within the scope of this text, the term "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis" refers to the current within Turkish ultranationalism in which nationalist and religious frames of reference are structurally intertwined. This current deliberately distances itself from those parts of the movement that follow a strictly secular or primarily ethno-nationalist orientation (Bozay et al. 2024; Bozay 2023; diyalog n.d.).

Authors such as Küpeli (2023) emphasize that, from a historical perspective, this (ideological) connection should not be seen as an abrupt break with earlier nationalist narratives. Rather, the interweaving of religion and national identity builds on state-sanctioned interpretive frameworks dating back to the era of the Young Turks (ibid., 4).<sup>1</sup> The programmatic consolidation of the synthesis took place in the 1970s, when right-wing conservative and nationalist intellectuals – organized institutionally, among other places, in the Aydınlar Ocağı (Home of the Intellectuals) – began to systematically merge Turkish-national and Islamic elements into a coherent worldview (cf. Bilir 2004, 41–71, cited in Küpeli 2023, 4). In the process, the existing "Turkish History Thesis" – which legitimized

Turkish identity through a pre-Islamic history of civilization – was not rejected but amended: Islam was interpreted not as antithetical to the Turkish national character but as its natural religious expression.

The central ideological implication of this synthesis lies, therefore, in the postulated inseparability of Turkish nationality and Islamic religiosity, although it is worth noting that the ideological emphasis placed on religious elements within Turkish ultranationalism is by no means static. Based on the history of the development of the Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP), the core organizational structure of Turkish right-wing nationalism, authors such as Bozay et al. (2024) show that the degree of emphasis placed on Islam as a frame of reference has varied across different phases. Although an ethnically charged, "idealistic" nationalism forms the party's ideological core, recourse to Islamic interpretive frameworks has repeatedly served as a strategic tool: On the one hand, it has helped mobilize conservative-religious segments of the population; on the other, it has acted as a discursive counterpoint to secular, liberal, and pluralistic visions of society. This complex pattern is visible to this day. It is exemplified by the current coalition dynamics between the MHP and the AKP, in which nationalist and Islamist elements are adapted and dynamically intertwined by both parties (ibid.).

The question of the consequences of this synthesis for ethnic and religious minorities is central to understanding its functional logic. In its concrete form, the Turkish-Islamic synthesis shows a cumulatively exclusionary effect: Those who are not considered ethnically Turkish – but are, for example, of Kurdish or Arab origin – and/or do not belong to Sunni Islam but to Alevi or Yazidi faiths, are sometimes doubly marginalized in this interpretative framework. Not least, historical outbreaks of physical violence illustrate how these exclusionary logics can turn into deadly violence: One example is the arson attack on a hotel in Sivas in 1993, in which 35 predominantly Alevi intellectuals were killed, another the assassination of the Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink in 2007.

<sup>1</sup> The Young Turks were an Ottoman reform movement that came to power following the 1908 Revolution and provided the ideological foundation for an ethnically oriented form of Turkish nationalism, which is considered an important precursor to modern ultranationalist currents (see Küpeli 2023).

In this context, the antisemitic currents within Turkish ultranationalism – which are often intertwined with anti-Armenian sentiment – prove to be particularly potent. Buğur (2026) traces how antisemitism in Turkish ultranationalism and its religious-nationalist manifestation is not a marginal historical phenomenon but continues to function as a central mobilizing force to this day. As previously noted, this is particularly evident in the current coalition dynamics between the AKP and the MHP, which have politically reactivated the ideology of the “Turkish-Islamic synthesis.” The West and Israel are portrayed as hostile counter-images, while antisemitic interpretive frameworks are imbued with religious-nationalist meaning, thereby appealing to diverse social milieus (cf. *ibid.*). However, differences emerge between the Turkish context and discourses within the diaspora, particularly in Germany. While antisemitic rhetoric in Turkey is increasingly articulated openly and with state legitimization, it tends to appear in coded and linguistically veiled forms in Germany. Nevertheless, in terms of content, there is a consistent link through anti-Zionist interpretive frameworks, a narrative of national victimhood, and conspiracy-based constructions of enemy stereotypes (see *ibid.*)

The trend towards alliances between religious and nationalist forces is by no means limited to the Islamic context or to predominantly Muslim societies. Examples such as India, where the Hindu-nationalist Hindutva discourse systematically links religious and national identity (Schulz 2021), or Brazil, where evangelical groups and nationalist forces formed a close political alliance under Bolsonaro (see Zilla 2019), show that this is a much broader global phenomenon. The rise of right-wing populist movements and autocratic systems has intensified this trend in many countries, forging even stronger links between religious and nationalist mobilization.

## Christian Nationalism – The Case of the United States

In the context of the United States, so-called Christian nationalism plays a central role for some conservative and ultra-conservative groups when they define their political stance and envision the preferred structure of the social order. The term “Christian nationalism” describes a heterogeneous ideological movement whose adherents seek to establish a close link between certain notions of Christian values, national identity, and state order. At its core lies the idea that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and that both state institutions and citizens bear the responsibility of preserving the country’s Christian character (cf. Miller 2021, cited in Saiya 2025). In this context, belonging to the nation often carries a meaning that goes beyond mere citizenship. It is imbued with cultural, religious, and sometimes ethnic connotations (cf. Whitehead 2025), which allows for parallels to be drawn with other forms of religiously or ethnically based nationalisms, such as Turkish ultranationalism.

Whitehead (2025) identifies five core elements of so-called Christian nationalism in the United States: First, a preference for a social order based on social hierarchies defined by gender, sexual orientation, and family structures; second, a commitment to strict ethno-nationalist boundaries – specifically, the privileging of white and “natural-born” citizens – which stands in clear tension with democratic principles and pluralistic conceptions of society; third, the idealization of free-market capitalism; fourth, the advocacy of authoritarian social control; and fifth, a turn towards populist narratives, a pronounced sense of victimhood, and conspiracy-based thinking. Taken together, these elements make it clear that Christian nationalism is not merely a religiously informed conservative worldview but a comprehensive social and political project that delves deeply into questions of power, belonging, and political legitimacy.

Politically, this current is by no means new. A close alliance between the Christian Right and the Republican Party has been evident since at least the 1980s (cf. Freudenberg 2023, 1). However, with Donald Trump's return to political prominence, the presence of evangelical rhetoric, symbolism, and political agendas has visibly intensified. This is particularly evident in the context of "Project 2025," a policy strategy document presented by the ultra-conservative Heritage Foundation aimed at a comprehensive institutional restructuring of the United States based on conservative and Christian principles (cf. Whitehead 2025; Engel 2025). In this context, the orientation towards "biblical principles" as a framework for political legitimacy is becoming increasingly significant.

These developments are not limited to the programmatic level but are becoming increasingly evident in the public image of political actors. A prime example of this is Pete Hegseth – the US Secretary of Defense appointed by Trump – who stands out for his rhetoric that blends Christian fundamentalist and ultranationalist motifs. His use of symbols, including tattoos of the Jerusalem Cross and the Crusader slogan "Deus vult", draws on iconographic motifs recognized as ideological markers in far-right and Christian-nationalist circles (cf. Koopmann 2024). Hegseth's documented ties to the Christian Reconstructionism movement further illustrate how religious-fundamentalist worldviews can align with authoritarian conceptions of social order (ibid.). This dynamic is also evident in the deliberate sacralization of political leaders, for instance through the circulation of an AI-generated image in April 2026 that portrayed Trump as a Jesus-like figure.

However, in the interest of a nuanced analysis, it is essential to note that Christian nationalism – similar to many other phenomena at the intersection of nationalism and religiously motivated extremism – is not a monolithic or entirely consistent ideology. It encompasses diverse currents that, while sharing certain fundamental assumptions, differ – in some cases significantly – in their theological interpretations, political objectives, and strategic priorities. Common elements often include the rejection of the strict separation of church and state, a preference for Christian-inspired concepts of political governance, con-

servative stances on issues such as abortion, and restrictive attitudes towards immigration. Support for Israel also serves as a unifying element across some of these currents, albeit based on varying theological or geopolitical rationales. At the same time, there are significant differences between specific manifestations of Christian nationalism, particularly in terms of the fundamental theological assumptions and the extent to which religious principles should be translated into state action and social order (see, e.g., Miller 2021, Whitehead 2025; Engel 2025).

## Khomeinism: The Combination of Shiite Islamism and Political Rule in Iran

Iran offers a particularly striking example of the linkage between state and religion. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 established a complex hybrid system, founded ideologically on „Khomeinism“ – an Islamist doctrine of governance based on the religious and political ideas of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic’s first Supreme Leader. Khomeinism structurally merges religious and political authority. At its heart is the concept of the “velayat-e faqih” (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), under which the “rahbar” (Supreme Leader) exercises supreme authority over the state. The rahbar is the representative of the Twelfth Imam – who, in Shiite belief, remains hidden – and thus structurally stands above the elected institutions of the presidency and the parliament (Buchta 2020). He controls not only the judiciary and intelligence services but also the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Pasdaran), which has evolved from its original role of protecting the regime into a central political and economic power broker (ibid.). Thus, in Iran, Shiite Islamic beliefs function not merely as religious practice but as a constitutive principle of state rule: a theocratic order in which religious authority is structurally superordinate to political decision-making processes.

This combination of religious legitimation and political power is not, however, limited to the Iranian nation-state itself but also takes on a transnational dimension. For instance, Shiite-aligned actors and organizations – such as Hezbollah in Lebanon – support corresponding ideological and political structures across the region. To this day, central themes of the Islamic Revolution, including the concept of „exporting“ the Islamic order, shape the regime’s political self-conception and illustrate the extent to which religious and nation-state frameworks can be intertwined (cf. ibid.). As discussed in the introduction, the Iranian regime also employs practices of transnational repression to deliberately intimidate and increasingly threaten dissidents within the German context (Hoffmann 2026).

The religious legitimacy that the Iranian regime uses domestically to secure its power also serves as an ideological tool for transnational power projections, as in the targeted promotion of Shiite-influenced actors and networks far beyond the borders of the Iranian nation-state. There is a growing body of evidence of terrorist attacks in Europe that security policy analyses link to networks affiliated with the Iranian regime. Since March 2026, in particular, the group or network Harakat Ashab al-Yamin al-Islamiya (HAYI, Islamic Movement of the People of the Right Hand) has been active. This group or network has claimed responsibility for more than a dozen arson attacks and acts of sabotage, targeting, in particular, Jewish and Israeli institutions in the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France. These include a Molotov cocktail attack on an Israeli restaurant in Munich in April 2026 (cf. Eikmanns 2026). The group disseminates its claims of responsibility via Telegram channels associated with the Shiite “Axis of Resistance,” especially via networks linked to Iraqi, pro-Iranian militias (cf. ibid.).<sup>2</sup>

The group’s organizational status and its frequent portrayal in the media as an independent terrorist organization remain a subject of analytical debate. Numerous authors and experts point out that the group functions more as an operational front and proxy for the activities of Iranian state agencies, a view supported by the close temporal correlation with official announcements from Tehran regarding the opening of “new fronts” against Israel and the US (see, e.g., Lipowsky 2026; Shtuni 2026; Lanchès 2026).

From a security policy perspective, this shifts the focus of state counterterrorism efforts: Addressing such threats can no longer be done exclusively within the framework of traditional counterterrorism but must increasingly incorporate elements of counterespionage and counter-influence. This interconnection is particularly evident in the case of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which has been listed as a terrorist organization at EU level since 2026. It is therefore also classified as a terrorist organization for security and legal purposes by EU member states, including Germany (see Tagesschau 2026). At the same time, the Revolutionary Guards

<sup>2</sup> The term “Axis of Resistance” refers to the Iran-led alliance of predominantly Shiite militias and terrorist organizations, including Hezbollah and various Iraqi militias, that intertwines religious legitimacy with anti-Western geopolitics (see Eikmanns 2026)

are an official organ of power and security of the Iranian state. It is precisely this dual role that highlights the growing significance of hybrid threat scenarios in which state actors combine terrorist, intelligence, and transnational repressive practices.

As a result, the focus of investigations has shifted beyond traditional terrorist activities by non-state actors to encompass forms of hybrid influence exerted by foreign states – an influence that is spread out systematically through proxy structures, intimidation, transnational repression, and covert operations. The question of how to classify these activities points to a fundamental challenge in dealing with hybrid forms of extremist violence, in which the boundaries between state control, proxy actors, and terrorist violence are becoming increasingly blurred (see, e.g., Lipowsky 2026; Shtuni 2026; Lanchès 2026).

## Chapter 2

# Transnational Influences and Hybrid Identities in Diaspora Communities: Turkish Ultranationalism in Germany



Given the number of adherents, Turkish ultranationalism – along with the PKK's supporter base – represents one of the most significant forms of so-called foreign-related extremism in Germany. This supporter base manifests itself primarily in movements such as the "Grey Wolves" (Ülkücü movement) as well as in clubs and associations, some of which maintain close ties to Turkish state structures and the ruling AKP party (see BfV 2024).

In this context, however, there is a risk that such patterns of behavior could be prematurely interpreted as purely imported phenomena. As a result, the term "foreign-related extremism" is subject to critical debate, as it suggests an ideology introduced from outside (see Bozay et al. 2024).

Shaped primarily by the Offices for the Protection of the Constitution, the expression represents a "collective term for security-threatening and extremist activities by foreign organizations and their structures operating from Germany [...], whose policies, strategies, and actions are decisively determined by the situation in their respective countries of origin" (cf. Bozay et al. 2024; cf. BfV 2024). However, this perspective is too narrow, as it fails to take into account that many individuals associated with Turkish ultranationalism belong to younger generations who were socialized in Germany and often have only limited direct ties to Turkey.

At the same time, however, the term is proof that the traditional categories of extremism have to some extent evolved, because it does not attempt to subsume the respective phenomena exclusively under categories of right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism, or Islamism. Nevertheless, in a post-migrant society such as Germany's, there is a risk of treating these dynamics as external influences and overlooking the fact that they have developed within Germany itself, with specific patterns of mobilization and interpretation. A nuanced analysis therefore requires that Turkish ultranationalism neither be exoticized nor reduced to a supposedly "foreign" origin but rather analyzed as an integral part of contemporary German society (cf. Bozay 2024; Ortner & Kökten 2025, 5).

This requires a historical perspective: While the emergence of Turkish ultranationalist milieus in Germany is indeed closely intertwined with the labor migration that began in the 1960s – a process through which political identities and ideological affiliations already established in Turkey were brought into the German context – it is crucial to recognize that ultranationalist phenomena are not merely a result of ideological transfer. Rather, they were formed through interaction with the specific conditions of the Federal Republic, including experiences of exclusion and integration that gave rise to distinct dynamics of identity politics.

The concept of ethnicity is also central to understanding Turkish ultranationalism. Academic discourse on this subject is marked by controversy, particularly regarding the competition between essentialist and social-constructivist perspectives (Salzborn 2006, 99; see Schmiz 2022, 122ff.). In current social science research, a social-constructivist understanding has largely prevailed (e.g., Hahn 2011, 107), which conceives of ethnicity as a fluid category shaped by self-attributions, attributions by others, and power relations. This understanding is particularly relevant because prevention practice – much like politics, the media, and academia – often operates using ethnic categorizations in the context of Turkish ultranationalism and focuses on groups identified as migrants linked to Turkey.

At the same time, ethnicity functions not merely as an analytical category but also as an instrument of order that serves to "represent, categorize, integrate, and dominate 'the others' – and to legitimize one's own superiority" (Siouti et al. 2022, 14). Precisely here lies a central ideological element of Turkish ultranationalism: Ethnicity serves not as a neutral category of belonging but as a tool for constructing in-groups and out-groups. On this basis, specific narratives emerge that portray religious and national minorities as threats to a nation that is envisioned as homogeneous and Sunni-dominated – narratives often linked to conspiratorial theories (Küveli/Perspektif:a 2023, 20). Real or constructed problems are attributed to the machinations of external and internal enemies. This pattern of interpretation historically dates back to the founding phase of the republic.

In comparison to other forms of extremism, the landscape of prevention efforts regarding Turkish ultranationalism is still underdeveloped. Although the phenomenon has been recognized in political and academic circles for decades, for a long time, only a few civil society projects in Germany have systematically addressed it. However, the field now shows signs of increasing differentiation. Various specialized units and projects are engaged in primary and secondary prevention, while other organizations provide tertiary prevention counseling services.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, as of early 2025, the newly established "Competence Centre on Turkish Right-Wing Extremism" (FaTRex) – run by the BDAJ as part of the nationwide \*KompRex\* cooperation network under the „Demokratie leben!“ (Live Democracy!) program – has expanded the prevention landscape with an important nationwide program. Nevertheless, the challenges involved in addressing Turkish ultranationalism remain substantial. As has been highlighted repeatedly, a fundamental difficulty lies in the precise identification and classification of this specific form of extremism. Added to this is the challenge of reaching relevant target groups without reproducing generalizing or stigmatizing attributions. Finally, engaging the individual's social environment proves to be a central and particularly demanding aspect of prevention work (cf. Buğur and Ohlenforst 2024, 42ff.).

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<sup>3</sup> For a systematic overview of relevant actors in Turkish ultranationalism, as well as approaches to counseling and prevention in the German context (Meilicke & Balakrishnan 2023)

## Conclusion

### The Increasing Intertwining of Extremist Ideologies



In light of the findings described here, it is evident that ideologies are becoming increasingly intertwined across various contexts. It is not any specific religion or ethnicity that drives extremist developments; rather, religious and ethnic or national affiliations are increasingly employed as tools to legitimize exclusionary worldviews. The examples discussed earlier show that religion and ethnicity are integrated into national or ideological projects in various political contexts – whether as cultural markers, resources for mobilization, or sources of state legitimacy.

At the same time, it can also be observed – particularly in authoritarian contexts – that religious structures are employed pragmatically and opportunistically to gain and consolidate power, for instance in the relationship between the state and religious actors in various countries. This suggests that religion should be understood less as an independent cause of extremism and more as a resource that can be flexibly deployed along political and ideological fault lines (see Hoffmann 2018).

For the analysis of extremism, particularly within the context of diaspora communities, this entails a shift in perspective: It is not enough to examine individual ideologies in isolation or to focus exclusively on their religious references. Rather, attention must be paid to the interconnections between nationalism, religion, and collective identity. Especially in diaspora settings, these elements serve as central reference points that provide orientation, structure a sense of belonging, and simultaneously reproduce lines of conflict. Far from being homogeneous entities, diaspora communities are complex social spaces where diverse – and sometimes competing – ideologies converge, evolve, and reconfigure. These processes of identity formation, collective inclusion and exclusion, and individual positioning within society are further intensified by transnational influences and forms of transnational repression (Bozay 2017, 2024).

In conclusion, an overall trend can be identified: Extremist ideologies are increasingly taking on hybrid and fragmented forms that intertwine national, religious, and political elements. In this context, religion does not function as a primary cause but as a flexible instrument for identity-based mobilization and political conflict. This dynamic is particularly relevant for Germany, as it manifests within diaspora communities, linking local and transnational lines of conflict.

## Recommendations

- Analyze extremist dynamics across various phenomena while maintaining specialized expertise: Extremist phenomena should not be viewed exclusively along the lines of isolated ideological categories. Given the observable hybridization, ideological overlaps, and strategic points of connection between different extremist currents, a cross-phenomenon perspective is required.<sup>4</sup>
- Give greater consideration to transnational and diasporic dynamics: Extremist mobilization, ideological radicalization, and political conflict dynamics are increasingly transnational in nature. Prevention and analysis approaches should place greater emphasis on how diaspora contexts, digital spaces, and transnational political identity narratives contribute to mobilization. This requires a perspective that expands upon national security and prevention frameworks to include international and socio-political dimensions.
- Avoid explaining extremism in terms of ethnic or migration-related categories: Framing extremism primarily in ethnic or migration-related terms carries the risk of neglecting causes and dynamics that affect society as a whole. The examples described in this report show that religiously and nationally motivated extremism is linked, among other factors, to the rise of populist and authoritarian political movements. Therefore, it cannot be explained by a single cause based on ethnic attributions.

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<sup>4</sup> The BAG RelEx has long been examining the relevance of cross-phenomenon work in the prevention of extremism and, in this context, has repeatedly discussed both the potential and the limitations of cross-phenomenon approaches (see, e.g., Hamm & Schurbohm 2023).

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## The Authors

**Miriam Uludoğan-Heß** is an advisor in international cooperation and terrorism analysis at BAG RelEx. Previously, she served there as a specialist in religiously motivated extremism. She studied National and International Administration and Policy at the University of Potsdam and Political Science at the University of Hamburg; currently, she is doing her doctorate at the University of Leipzig on security rhetoric and the securitization of terrorism in Germany. She is an Associate Fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) and a member of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's working group on "Internal Security and Terrorism." Her work focuses on terrorism research, extremism prevention, and international security and threat analysis.

**Maida Ganević** has been working as an advisor on interreligious cooperation at BAG RelEx since April 2025. She studied political science, Islamic studies, and sociology in Tübingen and Heidelberg, with a study abroad program in Istanbul. Her work focuses on the intersection of anti-discrimination-oriented prevention, cross-community cooperation, and political education. At BAG RelEx, she is involved in projects such as "SHIELDED" and "wissenschaft:praxisnah."



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Email: [info@kn-ix.de](mailto:info@kn-ix.de)

Web: [www.kn-ix.de](http://www.kn-ix.de)

### **Publisher:**

**BAG RelEx**

Oranienstraße 58

10969 Berlin

### **Contact Person:**

Jamuna Oehlmann

[jamuna.oehlmann@bag-relex.de](mailto:jamuna.oehlmann@bag-relex.de)

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ISSN 3053-626X

Ein Verbund von

**BAG RelEx**

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