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Integration, Prevention, and Social Stability

Societal conflicts in the context of forced displacement, migration, and the prevention of Islamism

Isolated incidents of Islamist-motivated violence committed by individuals with a migration background are fueling an emotionally charged debate about a link between migration and extremism. Yet this perspective is overly simplistic. Radicalization arises from complex social, psychological, and institutional dynamics and cannot be attributed to a single cause. To develop effective prevention strategies that take the societal context into account, a multi-perspective approach is required, as well as close cooperation and knowledge sharing among policymakers, the academic community, civil society, and security agencies. Key elements include: an interdisciplinary dialogue to strengthen societal resilience; a nuanced analysis of extremist phenomena to avoid making premature attributions and disregarding other forms of extremism; and an appropriate contextual assessment of personal histories of forced displacement and migration.

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The debate about a possible link between displacement, migration, and Islamist extremism in Germany is marked by notable complexity and emotional intensity. It plays out in the tension between academic findings, media narratives, and political reactions. Recent tragic events such as the attacks in Solingen (August 2024)[1] and Munich (February 2025)[2] – which were allegedly motivated by Islamist ideology and carried out by individuals with a refugee or migrant background – have reignited this discussion and, at first glance, appear to confirm a direct connection. These individual cases fuel the public perception that Islamist radicalization is increasingly associated with migration, particularly regarding Muslims and people perceived as Muslims.[3]

A Stress Test

This sweeping generalization places a significant **strain on the cohesion of society**. It not only distorts public debates regarding migration, integration, and participation but also risks undermining trust in state institutions and among different groups of the population. The aim of this policy brief is to provide a nuanced and evidence-based foundation for parliamentary debate. The multifaceted factors underlying processes of radicalization must be considered in their entirety. It is crucial to recognize that there is **no monocausal link between a migration or refugee background and an increased risk of Islamist radicalization**. Such oversimplification ignores the complexities of individual life stories, societal dynamics, and extremist ideologies, ultimately leading to misplaced priorities in prevention and security measures.

Polarization and Identity

Scientific analyses of public opinion surveys indicate that the nature of the public debate surrounding immigration, migration, and displacement contributes significantly to the perception of these issues as threats to social cohesion. A key concept in this context is the idea of a "polarized society." Polarization manifests itself not only in differences of substance or ideology – which are, and must remain, a natural part of the deliberative process of a democratic society – but increasingly in a more dangerous form: affective polarization. While substantive polarization describes an extreme stance on a specific issue, affective polarization refers to a division based on group identity. It involves the emotional elevation of one's own group while devaluing and rejecting the "other" group.

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This form of polarization is harmful to social cohesion and, much like profound experiences of exclusion, acts as a powerful driving force behind processes of radicalization.[4] Furthermore, studies show that issues related to migration have created – or at least made visible – a horizontal social divide. This phenomenon can be illuminated through the concept of societal insecurity. Unlike state security, which focuses primarily on sovereignty and territorial integrity, societal security is rooted in intangible aspects such as culture, religion, language, and other identity markers. The fact that Germany is an immigration society corresponds to a reality in which diverse languages, cultures, and ways of life have increasingly become an integral part of the national self-image. Yet certain social groups – those that favor a homogeneous national self-image and exhibit attitudes that reject pluralism – perceive these developments as a threat to their own identity. This perception of being threatened in one's cultural identity can give rise to deep-seated fears and resentments, paving the way for populist narratives and further intensifying affective polarization.[5] The narrative of a "Fortress Europe" or fears of "being overrun by foreigners" are expressions of this social insecurity; they contribute to an atmosphere of mistrust and isolation that undermines social cohesion.

From Evidence to Insight

The question of whether there is a link between forced displacement, migration, and (Islamist) radicalization is the subject of intensive academic research. There have been numerous attempts to shed light on this issue, using evidence-based

approaches and available data. However, the state of research remains fragile and inconclusive, and very few studies provide robust figures capable of demonstrating a direct causal link between a migration background per se and Islamist radicalization.[6]

A commonly used approach is to analyze the demographic characteristics of individuals who became radicalized by Islamist ideology. One example looks at individuals from Germany who traveled to join the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq. The Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA), the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), and the Hessian Information and Competence Center Against Extremism found that 81% of these individuals had a migration background. At the same time, however, 62% held German citizenship. A large majority were born in Germany or spent the majority of their formative years in Germany. These figures are crucial: They show that while a history of migration is often present, German socialization and citizenship play a dominant role. This contradicts the widespread notion that most of these individuals are extremists entering the country from abroad. It suggests that radicalization processes arise within German society and cannot be explained solely by external influences. The mere presence of a migration background is not a sufficient indicator of a risk of radicalization.[7]

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Other academic studies also conclude that no empirical research currently exists that would confirm migration serving as a "Trojan horse"[8] for terrorism. There are instances – such as the 2015 Paris attacks or the attack on the Berlin Christmas market in 2016 – perpetrated by individuals who came to Europe as refugees. However, there is **no evidence** that migration flows are **systematically** infiltrated by terrorist organizations. It appears that **terrorism rarely** is a cause of migration; instead, it is **far more** frequently a consequence of **complex problems in countries of origin**.[9]
Research indicates that, compared to the overall Muslim population in Germany, converts appear more prone to radicalization. There are several possible explanations, such as insufficient religious education and socialization – which can make converts more susceptible to extremist interpretations of Islam – as well as the feeling that they must "prove" their faith in a particular way. This shows that factors other than ethnic background can be decisive in radicalization, including how individuals engage with their faith and their social integration into religious communities. The comparatively higher rate of radicalization among converts underscores the importance of religious education and social integration as preventive factors – without implying that this group is generally at greater risk.[10]

Biographical Factors in Radicalization

One area where there likely exists a stronger link between a migration background and extremism – or radicalization – is **foreign-linked extremism** (as opposed to Islamist extremism. In most of these cases, radicalized individuals have an active connection to the country or region to which their extremism relates. Furthermore, many foreign-related extremist groups offer a haven for individuals with a migration background and can provide them with a sense of belonging.[11]

There are observations and assumptions suggesting that Islamism is frequently equated or confused with foreign-linked extremism.[12] One possible reason why foreign-linked radicalization is frequently equated with Islamist extremism lies in the overlap of cultural, religious, and political references observable in certain contexts. For instance, Islam certainly plays a role in Turkish right-wing extremism – for instance with regard to the so-called "**Turkish-Islamic synthesis**" – but the ideological foundation is primarily nationalist in nature and relates to domestic political developments in Turkey.[13] A similar mix of factors can be observed in the case of extremism related

to Palestine: Although the context is predominantly Muslim and groups such as Hamas are classified as Islamist, the radicalization processes observed in Germany in this milieu are often driven by nationalist political identification with a foreign cause, not primarily by an Islamist ideology based on a strictly religious motivation.

The fact that this distinction is often absent from public discourse is also illustrated by figures from the BKA on crimes related to the Middle East conflict: For the year in question, 70.11% of offenses were classified in the category of "foreign ideology," while only 12.36% were categorized as "religious ideology." This shows that, in such cases, radicalization processes are often driven by transnational political conflicts and ideological loyalties rather than narratives that have their primary origin in religiously motivated extremism.[14] This assessment is supported by practical experience in the field of migration work, where the Middle East conflict and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, in particular, are identified as frequent points of reference for radicalization.[15]

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No Single Cause of Radicalization

As research shows, there are other factors that can contribute to radicalization, including discrimination and experiences of exclusion linked to a migration background. It is not the migration background itself that contributes to radicalization but rather the resulting negative experiences within the majority society. Individuals who repeatedly feel devalued, stigmatized, or excluded are potentially more receptive to narratives promising an alternative to the "system" they perceive as hostile. Such narratives can take the form of extremist ideologies that purportedly offer a sense of identity, belonging, and recognition. At the same time, extremist actors exploit experiences of exclusion to gain followers. Some jihadist influencers go so far as to suggest that without devaluation or discrimination against Muslims in Europe to refer to, it would be difficult to recruit followers.[16]

At the same time, it is crucial not to treat experiences of exclusion as the sole or only factor causing radicalization. While they are indeed a driving force and a significant risk factor, a balance must be struck between "push" factors (such as exclusion and a lack of prospects) and "pull" factors (such as the appeal of extremist ideologies, a sense of community, or charismatic leaders). The problem of Islamism must not be trivialized by reducing its causes exclusively to social ills or feelings of exclusion linked to a migration background.

The Real Challenges remain Extremism and Radicalization – not Migration and Displacement

In the discourse on terrorism and extremism, it is essential to keep in mind that the problem is **not migration but extremism**.[17] The links between migration and extremism are multifaceted and **rarely allow for direct causal – let alone monocausal – conclusions to be drawn** between a migration history and terrorist attacks. Most studies show that radicalization generally is the result of **complex constellations involving a multitude of contributing factors**. Nevertheless, society is faced with a fundamental challenge because social cohesion is coming under pressure, as evidenced by public opinion surveys. The affective polarization mentioned earlier has an impact not only on the social climate but also on people's willingness to participate in processes that foster integration or strengthen democracy. This is where the concept of social capital proves to be useful: "Bridging" describes connections between different social groups and strengthens cohesion, while "bonding" refers to cohesion within homogeneous groups. An exclusive focus on bonding structures, as is often found in radicalized circles, undermines social cohesion.

Extremist actors deliberately exploit the need for belonging and community to recruit new members while simultaneously severing all ties to mainstream society.[18]

Recommendations

In conclusion, it can be said that radicalization clearly cannot be attributed to a single cause – such as flight or migration – no matter how tempting political actors may find such an explanation. Instead, a multi-perspective approach is required to examine the individual, social, and institutional conditions under which radicalization can occur. Nuanced approaches are needed to strengthen protective factors, build bridges between groups, and actively counter polarization. To foster social cohesion, policymakers, the academic community, civil society, and security agencies must work together to develop prevention strategies that are transparent, context-sensitive, and anti-discriminatory.

As a consequence, several areas deserve greater attention:

1: **Interdisciplinary formats are needed to jointly reflect and contextualize relevant scientific findings** based on national and international research – not least to build or strengthen bridges between key stakeholders in the field of Islamism and migration. It is particularly important to incorporate expertise in both the prevention of (Islamist) extremism and the analysis of migration policy and its impacts. Such interdisciplinary and cross-stakeholder collaboration plays a key role in more effectively promoting social cohesion and countering polarization.

2: Radicalization and extremism in the context of migration and displacement experiences should be taken seriously as potential aspects without promoting sweeping generalizations about perpetrators or casting the individuals solely in the role of victims. Rather, **it is important to view migration and refugee experiences as potential influencing factors that interact with other social, political, and psychological conditions, neither overestimating their significance nor disregarding them due to a purely humanistic perspective.**

3: In the context of extremist phenomena, the attribution of specific ideologies always needs to be approached with caution – especially when linking migration and religion. This applies above all to foreign-related extremism, where Islamist motives are often assumed prematurely. Such sweeping categorizations not only lead to inaccurate assessments but also distort public perceptions of the actual prevalence of Islamist ideologies. At the same time, there is a risk that other forms of extremism, if they are not clearly identified and classified as such, will be overlooked.

Endnotes

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BAG RelEx stands for the German Council on Preventing Extremism (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft religiös begründeter Extremismus e. V.). We are a non-profit organization established in November 2016 with the aim of creating a platform for networking, professional exchange, content development, and advocacy for civil society actors in the field of democracy promotion and prevention of religiously motivated extremism. These objectives remain the foundation of our work today. Currently, our primary focus is on preventing Islamist extremism.

As an umbrella organization for around 40 member organizations across Germany, we represent a diverse range of approaches and methods, reflecting the extensive experience within this field.

We see ourselves as a platform for civil society actors and as an interface between civil society, politics, media, and the public.

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