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Balancing Repression and Prevention

The Role of Association Bans in Combating Islamism

With its recent ban on the association "Muslim Interaktiv" in November 2025, Germany's Ministry of the Interior has sent a clear signal regarding its approach to Islamist structures. Yet earlier developments surrounding associations such as "Muslim Interaktiv," "Generation Islam," and "Realität Islam" show that Islamist actors have long since adapted to state interventions. Despite formal dissolutions, their content, narratives, and actor networks have persisted. In some cases, they have even been able to approach new target groups through a more modernized public appearance, youth-oriented aesthetics, and professionalized mobilization. These dynamics show that while association bans are necessary, their effectiveness remains limited if they are viewed solely in the context of repression. To address ideological continuities, capacity to resonate with audiences, and successor formats over the long term, preventive approaches must be closely integrated with repressive instruments.

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In Germany's approach to Islamist structures, association bans play a central role, with the ban on "Muslim Interaktiv" of November 2025 as the most recent example. Banning associations is arguably the most powerful tool available to a democratic state governed by the rule of law when it has to deal with organizations and infrastructures that are hostile to the values of its constitution. They are, therefore, an expression of a democracy that is capable of defending itself. Bans help protect a constitutional order that is based on freedom and democracy. They also serve to dismantle extremist groups[1]: A ban allows for the closure of association premises, the seizure of propaganda material, and the confiscation of assets. Should members of a banned group attempt to continue their activities in a new guise, they face consequences under criminal law. Consequently, the measures associated with such a ban are not merely symbolic but have a tangible impact at the operational level.[2]

Bans on associations also send an important political message. They mark the limits of what a democratic society is prepared to tolerate and thus define legal boundaries. By demonstrating that unconstitutional actions will have clear consequences, they help strengthen the democratic community and raise awareness of the values on which it is based.[3]

Last year's ban on the Islamic Center of Hamburg, for example, shows that targeted and evidence-based bans can weaken anti-democratic organizations and permanently curtail their scope of action. Ideally, following a formal ban, the affected organization's personnel will not be able to transfer its content and networks to a comparable or new structure.

Beyond weakening the association, bans often have tangible economic consequences: The seizure and confiscation of assets deprives the association of important financial resources. Groups that rely on long-term and reliable sources of funding for their activities are particularly affected. House searches conducted in the wake of bans also frequently bring to light additional grounds for suspicion and new insights, such as information regarding specific threats or the true propensity for violence within the respective milieus and structures.[4]

A Question of Impact

In practice, however, it has become apparent that the repressive measure of banning an association can prove limited in its impact, as it does not automatically lead to a permanent weakening of extremist ideologies[5]. Banned groups move towards looser networks and digital platforms, establish ideologically driven successor projects, or deliberately adapt their communication strategies to circumvent the ban on their activities. In other words, while a ban may dismantle existing structures, the underlying ideology persists. To counter this effectively – and, above all, sustainably – requires first a more realistic assessment of the impact of such measures so that they can then be strategically integrated into holistic prevention approaches.

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Despite the dismantling of formal structures, Islamist groups are not only weakened by bans but often undergo a parallel strategic learning process and develop a high degree of adaptability in the face of state repression. In this process, extremist actors closely observe how state agencies react and, based on this experience, develop new forms of organization and communication as well as new distribution strategies and channels. This highlights the fact that while association bans are important interventions, they can also produce unintended side effects and – in some cases – may over time even strengthen extremist structures. This shows that repressive measures alone are insufficient to effectively combat extremist ideologies, groups, and organizations in the long term.[6]

Thus, while bans on associations can certainly have an impact in specific cases, their long-term effectiveness often remains less certain. Consequently, such bans cannot and should not be viewed as a panacea. Although they significantly

curb structures and visible activities, they do little to restrict ideologies, content, and narrative frameworks.

Case Study: Hizb ut Tahrir

These dynamics become particularly evident when actors shift their structures into digital or informal spaces to continue their activities despite a formal ban. The Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT) is a good example. HuT has been banned in Germany since 2003 due to its ideological orientation and anti-democratic activities. While the ban allowed for the seizure of the group's financial assets and property and imposed a general prohibition on its activities, it did not result in the network's permanent dissolution.

Instead, activities increasingly shifted to loose, digital, or transnational structures, particularly through platforms such as "Generation Islam," "Realität Islam," and "Muslim Interaktiv." All three groups specifically targeted young Muslims, focusing primarily on issues such as discrimination, religious identity, and social marginalization. They relied on professionally produced content that appeared moderate on the surface but, in substance, presented a dichotomous worldview.

Germany's Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI) has now responded to this decentralized dissemination of HuT-related content by banning "Muslim Interaktiv." However, the group preempted this most recent ban by extensively restructuring into personalized accounts and uploading content to other channels. As a result, no real impact – whether in terms of personnel, ideology, or content – has been observed so far. This example illustrates the flexibility and strategic adaptability with which Islamist circles operate, and how this can undermine the effectiveness of bans.

These dynamics show that association bans have limitations and must be supplemented by preventive approaches. Only then can the issue of ideological continuities and successor organizations be addressed over time.[7]

A Risk of Stigmatization

Beyond these structural limitations, there is a risk that bans on associations – and the public discourse surrounding them – may have unintended consequences because they can give rise to stigmatization. While debates in the political sphere and the media are directed against organizations threatening the constitutional order, they frequently produce unintended consequences.

This example illustrates the flexibility and strategic adaptability with which Islamist circles operate, and how this can undermine the effectiveness of bans.

The lines between Islamist actors and Muslim life in general often become blurred, giving rise to sweeping generalizations. This can reinforce the impression that Muslims are subject to latent general mistrust. Instead of a nuanced examination of Islamist structures, religious practices and the realities of Muslim life are framed within a security context. This type of representation overlooks the diversity of Muslim communities and contributes to social exclusion. As a result, discourses surrounding association bans can reinforce the perception shared by many Muslims that they are not accepted as an integral part of democratic society, but rather must constantly justify and distance themselves from extremist movements.[8]

Moreover, the nature of these debates reinforces the image of "Islam" as fundamentally ambivalent or even incompatible with the values embodied by Germany's constitution. Repeated demands that Muslims should distance themselves from extremist movements, associations, and actors point to a deeply rooted structural attribution of otherness as well as a fundamental framing of Muslims and Islamic institutions as problematic. Instead of highlighting the diversity of Muslim life and the broad civic engagement of many Muslims, these become the focus of narratives centered on security and integration policies. This one-sided portrayal not only overlooks the religious and political heterogeneity within Muslim communities but also contributes to social exclusion.[9]

Islamist groups for their part instrumentalize the discourses surrounding ban proceedings, particularly when they are conducted in sweeping and generalized terms. These discourses are taken up by Islamist groups, charged up emotionally, and transformed into ideological counter-narratives. This process gives rise to dichotomous worldviews in which the democratic state is portrayed as hostile and the group's own community as under threat. Participation in the extremist group is framed as a "safe space" – a place of refuge. Islamist narratives regarding ban discourses can thus help forge identity and foster a sense of belonging through emotionally charged appeals.[10]

Prevention as Prerequisite for Sustainable Effects

Such dynamics illustrate why it is necessary to systematically complement association bans with preventive measures. While security policy measures aim to identify and curb extremist content and activities, bans – as described above – can cause outlawed groups to shift their activities into digital or informal spaces, thereby preserving their ideological appeal. Furthermore, experiences of discrimination and exclusion often form part of marginalizing processes and create entry points for ideologized narratives that extremist actors exploit to offer a sense of belonging and purpose. Repressive measures alone are therefore insufficient to curb extremist influence in the long term.[11]

Prevention, therefore, is neither a substitute nor a counterpart to security policy measures but rather a necessary complement.

This is precisely where prevention work comes in: It addresses the factors that foster radicalization processes while simultaneously strengthening resilience and social participation. By building trusting relationships and offering low-threshold programs, civil society actors often succeed in reaching people who view state institutions with suspicion.

Prevention work thus creates spaces for recognition, empowerment, and critical engagement, contributing both to addressing experiences of exclusion and to strengthening resilience and social participation. However, this requires long-term resources, institutional support, and a flexible project landscape that can respond to local needs.[12]

Prevention, therefore, is neither a substitute nor a counterpart to security policy measures but rather a necessary complement. Different actors and perspectives must be closely integrated to enable a comprehensive and sustainable strategy against extremist ideologies. While state measures aim to dismantle formal structures, prevention efforts address the individual and societal conditions that enable radicalization processes. Association bans must therefore be embedded in a broader strategy that systematically incorporates preventive approaches. In this context, it is particularly important to ensure that cooperation is based on mutual respect and the recognition of different perspectives and mandates.[13]

Outlook

For a democratic state governed by the rule of law, association bans remain a crucial instrument to curb structures hostile to the constitutional order. However, their effectiveness is limited as long as ideological continuities and the capacity to resonate with audiences in the digital realm remain unaddressed. Long-term containment of extremist content can only be achieved by combining repressive measures with strategically implemented prevention efforts.

To this end, reliable frameworks for cooperation between state and civil society actors are needed, as well as clear communication regarding the objectives and legal basis for banning associations. Only when bans are justified and explained in a comprehensible manner – and when they are not embedded in stigmatizing discourses about Muslim life – can they achieve their intended effect without leading to unintended counter-mobilization or exacerbating social exclusion.

A comprehensive approach of this kind

strengthens democratic participation, increases societal resilience, and makes it possible to counter extremist ideologies in a sustainable manner.

Recommendations

1: Integrate preventive and repressive measures regarding association bans

Since association bans dismantle formal structures while ideological continuities and digital capacity to resonate with audiences often remain intact, security policy interventions must be consistently complemented by robust prevention structures. Prevention efforts address the factors that foster radicalization. They strengthen resilience and participation and create channels of engagement with target groups that view state institutions with mistrust. Germany's federal and state governments should therefore set up institutional safeguards – and provide them with long-term funding – to include prevention as an integral part of their strategies to combat extremist ideologies.

2: Expand intersectoral cooperation to counteract the shift of extremist activities following bans

The shift of extremist activities into digital, informal, or transnational structures to evade association bans shows that isolated perspectives are insufficient to fully grasp the underlying dynamics. Security agencies, the research community, and civil society organizations must work together more closely to quickly identify successor formats, new forms of mobilization, and emerging digital trends. Intersectoral cooperation structures should be systematically strengthened and permanently embedded at all levels.

3: Approach discussions about association bans with sensitivity

Clear communication about the legal basis and the objectives of association bans can contribute to transparency and build trust while counteracting ideological exploitation by extremist actors. Care should be taken to ensure that these debates are conducted in a nuanced, legally sound manner consistent with fundamental democratic values. Otherwise, they may inadvertently reinforce experiences of exclusion among young Muslims – especially if the discourse is one-sided or stigmatizing.

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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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