

Germany's immigrant community calls for better state support

The recent spate of mosque attacks and a rise in hate crime has immigrants in Germany sounding the alarm. Community leaders are calling for more support and understanding from state authorities, including the police.



"I'm really concerned," said Raed Saleh, parliamentary leader for Berlin's Social Democratic Party. "I can see how Islamophobia is being stirred up, to a degree that I never would have thought possible 10 years ago."

Saleh is a practicing Muslim. He's also a role model when it comes to interfaith dialogue. Together with Berlin's Jewish community, he wants to rebuild a synagogue that was destroyed by the Nazis 80 years ago, on the border between the city districts of Kreuzberg and Neukölln.

The recent attacks on mosques, and the anti-Islam comments made by Germany's new interior minister, Horst Seehofer, show how painstaking this dialogue is. "The attacks on the mosques are unacceptable. An attack on a mosque, a synagogue, or a church is always an attack on society as a whole," Saleh told DW.

Hate crimes on the rise

Generally, crime rates are going down in Germany, with the number of criminal violations in many states sinking to a historic low last year. But at the same time, the number of politically motivated crimes is increasing.



Saleh: 'An attack on a mosque, a synagogue, or a church is always an attack on society as a whole'

According to the Interior Ministry, the number of recorded incidents classed as hate crimes increased from 3,770 to 10,751 between 2010 and 2016. The increase is particularly marked in the "religious and foreign ideology" category.

Politically motivated crimes stemming from conflicts abroad also increased in the same time period from 120 to 404 cases. The number of religiously motivated crimes jumped from 248 to 1,516 cases.

Although the final nationwide figures for 2017 haven't been released yet, a look at the data published so far by individual states — including Hesse, Baden-Württemberg, Saxony, Hamburg, Schleswig-Holstein, Berlin and Rhineland Palatinate — shows that this polarizing trend is set to continue.

Religious institutions under police protection

Will mosques and synagogues in Germany need police protection in future? Does the country generally need greater protection to ensure religious freedom? The answer is mixed.

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"It's not possible to station a police officer in front of every mosque or every Turkish cultural center," said Yunus Ulusoy of the Center for Turkish Studies and Integration Research. Resources simply can't stretch to cover the over 2,000 mosques in Germany, he explained.

Experts at the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, which works to combat right-wing

extremism, racism and anti-Semitism, take a similar view. “Given the latest attacks in mosques, I would say that they do need stronger police protection,” said spokesman Robert Lüdecke, adding that police presence alone cannot solve the underlying security problem.

Lüdecke and Ulusoy both stress the need for greater cooperation between the associations that represent immigrants and security officials. “The Islamic associations have made it very clear that they want their voices to be heard, especially given these latest arson attacks,” said Lüdecke, adding that barely anyone has bothered to get in touch and ask the members of these communities if they still feel safe.



Germany in recent years has seen an increase in racism and politically motivated violence

Lack of empathy

Ulusoy said he also frequently hears from immigrants or visible minorities that they feel the police don't take their concerns seriously. “What bothers the community is the lack of empathy from other members of the public,” he said.

“If the kinds of attacks we're seeing on mosques were affecting other groups, there would be a very different discussion happening in Germany,” Ulusoy added. “That's the claim I hear often from the Turkish community.”

Memet Kilic, who serves on the board of the federal council on integration, says he's had exactly that experience. A few years ago, the Green Party politician from Heidelberg and his son began receiving death threats from a former member of the integration council. “The police treated the threats as an internal affair. They advised me to file a private lawsuit for libel, even though I'd been receiving death threats. In that moment, I felt like the state had abandoned me.”

More judges and police

Kilic warned against underestimating the threat of political conflicts within the Turkish community, or the danger of foreign conflicts spilling over into diaspora communities in Germany. "Security officials should not just brush these things off or dismiss them as foreign, and therefore irrelevant. Otherwise, we risk being surprised by developments that we can no longer control."

However, it seems that such warnings are now being heard by politicians at the federal level. The new government's coalition contract stipulates the creation of 2,000 new judgeships at both state and federal courts. Police forces are also slated for a technical and financial upgrade, in addition to the hiring of some 15,000 new police officers.

Nonetheless, Kilic is appealing to the police for neutrality when investigating cases, and to "not be fearful of being branded an Islamophobe."

"As a state governed by the rule of law, we have to set an example and punish those who violate our laws," he said, adding that the liberal associations should also be rewarded.

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