

Germany: Antisemitism, Xenophobia, and Far-Right Extremism

Germany is facing a tipping point.

Germany is Europe's economic and political lynchpin; as such, Germany is positioned to play a leadership role in a number of crises. Between the influx of refugees and financial instability in Europe, Germany must deal with a volatile mix that is fueling the rise of far-right parties and groups fomenting antisemitic and anti-refugee views, all while the country struggles to halt a wave of vicious hate crimes and hold perpetrators accountable.

How it navigates its current crisis is critical for the stability of Europe itself.

As President Obama travels to Germany this week, he should offer the support of the U.S. government to Germany as it grapples with protecting refugees and combating the rise of antisemitism and extremism.

Why the U.S. Government Should Support Germany

It is a critical time for the U.S. government to support Germany in combating extremism, xenophobia, and antisemitism.

The U.S. government should work with Germany to address the root causes of antisemitism and extremism, improve hate crime documentation and accountability, and prevent bias-motivated violence. President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry should support the strengthening of the Organization for Society and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as a vital democratic transatlantic security organization. By supporting Germany's efforts, including in its capacity as the OSCE chair, the U.S. government can improve the situation of vulnerable communities across Europe.

Specifically, the U.S. government should offer technical support to investigate, prosecute, document, and prevent hate crime in Germany. This support should be consistent, evenhanded, and rigorous. The Department of Justice should offer training to their German counterparts in

effective strategies to counter hate violence and promote victim reporting. At a time when most crimes against refugees go unsolved, this support would do a lot to ensure that vulnerable populations in Germany receive the protection they need.

As OSCE chair, Germany has made tolerance and antisemitism a focus of its tenure. President Obama should send senior officials to participate in the OSCE's Human Dimension Implementation Meetings and other key meetings throughout the year. Through its support of German efforts to combat extremism and antisemitism, the U.S. government can demonstrate how OSCE participating states with expertise can offer support along these lines to other participating states.

Germany: The European Union's Lynchpin

Far-right extremist groups in Germany whose members endorse antisemitic and xenophobic views threaten the vision of a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace. This year, Human Rights First will publish a report analyzing the rise of far-right extremism and the manifestations of antisemitism in Germany, based on public information and interviews conducted with a broad range of government officials, civil society representatives, journalists, and academic experts.

Over the last twenty years, Germany has become the economic and political lynchpin of the European Union. Germany's leadership during the economic crisis under Chancellor Merkel epitomizes the state's role as a primary actor arbitrating the interests of the European Union's member states. But this vital role is now under threat as Europe struggles to respond to the refugee crisis. Far-right groups have been emboldened, and their "clash of civilizations" narrative inhibits policymaking, sows fear and societal divisions, and creates permissive conditions for violent hate crimes to occur.

According to the 2014 American Jewish Yearbook, the enlarged Jewish population in Germany today is approximately 250,000 people. The OSCE's annual report

on hate crimes for 2014 indicated that German Jews experience physical assaults and robbery, as well as vandalism of synagogues, desecration of cemeteries and memorial sites, graffiti, and related threats. Some leaders in the Jewish community have recently expressed fear that an increasingly violent, antisemitic far-right coupled with the arrival of refugees—who potentially hold antisemitic views—could endanger Germany's Jews. As one community leader stated, "I thought the time of the packed suitcases was for always over. Now I am considering when we need to pack these suitcases again." In 2015, 200 German Jews reportedly left for Israel.

The Interior Ministry reports that 90 percent of all antisemitic hate crimes recorded in 2015 were committed by the far-right, and 90 percent of attacks on refugee shelters were also committed by far-right supporters. Indeed, several far-right extremist political parties exist in Germany, some with neo-Nazi views, and Germany's actions this year will determine whether they gain further traction.

Refugee Protection

Last month European leaders reached an agreement with Turkey that is aimed at preventing refugees and migrants from reaching Europe's shores. Under the agreement, the E.U. will return migrants and refugees from Greece who do not qualify for asylum, resettle one Syrian refugee from Turkey for every Syrian migrant or refugee who is returned from Greece, and double its humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees in Turkey. The resettlement program is limited to 72,000 Syrian refugees. The effort, which is aimed at deterring refugees and migrants from attempting to travel to Greece, raises deeply troubling issues about violations of non-refoulement and due process violations, and would effectively deny many refugees the right to seek asylum. Returning refugees to Turkey, a country that is blocking Syrian refugees from fleeing across its border, is anathema to the commitments that European states made in the wake of World War II to protect the persecuted. Europe is more than capable of managing these challenges without resorting to strategies that violate refugee protection and human rights law.

As President Obama meets with German officials, he should be publicly supportive of Chancellor Merkel's welcoming approach toward refugees, and refrain from

endorsing any component of the E.U.-Turkey deal. His public remarks should emphasize common principles like shared responsibility, burden sharing, the right to asylum, and non-refoulement.

German civil society has made tremendous efforts to assist refugees with basic needs and to aid them in integrating into German society. President Obama should commit to bolstering U.S. government support for these civil society organizations, which are faced with daunting needs and limited resources.

Far-Right Parties and Movements in Germany

During this volatile time, Human Rights First is monitoring far-right parties and movements in Germany, as there are credible fears that they are gaining strength.

The **National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD)**, a neo-Nazi political party that authorities have described as "racist, antisemitic and revisionist," has almost been banned in Germany several times. About one-quarter of its leadership has been convicted for crimes such as assault and battery, coercion, material damage, violation of the public peace, violation of the assault weapons law, and the creation of criminal and terrorist groups. The party has not yet had any representatives in the German parliament, but it has won certain regional seats.

The **Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)** party, a far-right party which argues that Germany should close its borders to all refugees, is the third most popular party in Germany. It originally gained traction by promoting Euroscepticism and criticism of Germany's handling of the Greek debt crisis, but in recent years the party has made a name for itself by opposing immigration and refugees. In January 2016 AfD's head Frauke Petry stated, "People must stop migrants from crossing illegally from Austria [into Germany]. If necessary, [they] should use firearms." Germany's Finance Minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, denounced these comments as "a disgrace for Germany."

PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West) is a new xenophobic movement that has taken hold in Germany (and beyond) as the refugee crisis has intensified. Drawing many supporters who identify with or are sympathetic to far-right political parties, PEGIDA emerged in 2014 and gained momentum in 2015,

with chapters now active throughout Germany. The Interior Ministry found in December 2015 that far-right organizations, including the NPD, “controlled and influenced” PEGIDA-related demonstrations in at least six German states. The Ministry also noted that some speakers had neo-Nazi background and that some protestors used Nazi symbols and gestures.

PEGIDA appeals to xenophobic fears that Western values and culture would be compromised by the arrival of Muslims who develop so-called “parallel societies” in Europe. Germany’s leaders, including President Joachim Gauck and Chancellor Angela Merkel, have spoken out against PEGIDA, describing it as racist and xenophobic. Yet the movement continues to gain momentum.

Violent Hate Crimes Against Refugees and Minorities

As PEGIDA and other far-right groups have disseminated virulent anti-refugee rhetoric, refugee shelters and hostels in Germany have been subjected to arson attacks, vandalism, and threats. In 2015, the German authorities documented 1,005 registered attacks on shelters—five times the number recorded in the previous year. Of these, authorities concluded that 901 were committed by far-right extremists. The recent arrest of five people alleged to have attacked refugee shelters in and around Dresden is a welcome step, but a wider effort is needed. Overall, very few arrests and prosecutions have been carried out in response to these attacks.

Many fear that extremism against refugees could fuel intolerance and even violence directed against other vulnerable groups, with Germany’s Jews being a likely target. As U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power said in 2014 at the 10th anniversary of the OSCE’s Berlin Conference on Antisemitism, “Rising antisemitism... is often the canary in the coal mine for the degradation of human rights more broadly.” She continued, “We must constantly situate our efforts to defend the human rights of the Jewish people within the struggle to advance universal human rights more broadly.”

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