

# Strengthen, protect, prevent?

## The Role of Prevention of Islamism in Democratic Societies

A holistic approach to the prevention of Islamism must build on actions by both civil society and the security authorities. The role that civil society plays in prevention work is to make society as a whole more resilient by promoting common and democratic values. That is why the logic of interdiction, which appears to be an inherent part of “prevention,” cannot serve as guiding principle for designing civil society infrastructure for the prevention of extremism. In fact, such infrastructure works best in situations where state actors, due to the limits set by law, have little or no scope to act. Civil society prevention work is therefore not a model that competes with other approaches. Rather, the perspectives of all actors complement each other to form a holistic approach in which adherence to and respect for different perspectives is key to success.

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Any time that an annual report such as the police crime statistics<sup>1</sup> or the statistics of politically motivated crimes<sup>2</sup> is published, politics and the press react by calling for more effective prevention and discussing the means. The public debate becomes more intense after serious incidents such as the knife attacks committed in Mannheim in May 2024 and Solingen in August 2024 or, for example, the demonstrations by the Islamist group Muslim Interaktiv in Hamburg. While some observers call for additional resources for the justice system and security authorities, others demand a stronger focus on prevention or even put forward new ideas, such as setting up an academy for prevention and criminal sciences.<sup>3</sup>

While such calls from politicians and the press are understandable, they have in common that they are initially presented in a fairly alarmist manner. Again, the outrage that shapes the reactions to specific incidents is understandable. Yet they largely disregard the measures and institutions that already exist in the field of prevention and of helping people distance themselves from religiously motivated extremism. In addition, there appears to be a misunderstanding over the role that the prevention of extremism plays in the safeguarding and developing of a democratic society. While, in accordance with the initial purpose of prevention, the objective remains to stop extremist violence and propensity towards violence, this goal will primarily be pursued through safeguarding and promoting common (democratic) values.

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In comparison to other actors, civil society prevention work has the advantage that it can establish direct access to target groups.<sup>4</sup> As non-state actors, civil society institutions are inherently more trusted than, for example, the security authorities. This is particularly true for people in an extremist context, who tend to be

skeptical of any cooperation with state actors. It is a strength of civil society actors that they are able to work in areas that are not related to security. Accordingly, they do not pursue danger or threat prevention as their primary motivation. The offers they bring to the table are largely based on democracy education and pedagogical and intercultural education approaches. These form an essential complement to security-specific approaches in the field of building and maintaining democratic societies.

### **Where Prevention of Extremism Starts and How It Works**

In summary, prevention in the context of internal security means to safeguard and promote common (democratic) values. It follows its own approach, which is not dominated by security policy. Its goal is to create a strong common sense of fundamental values that will stabilize and safeguard social relations and thereby contribute to a resilient democratic society.

Prevention approaches and programs are generally classified as primary, secondary, or tertiary prevention approaches.<sup>5</sup> Frequently, people also use the terms universal, selective, or indicated prevention. In the case of universal or primary prevention, measures and programs are mainly aimed at young people. They seek to prevent collective or individual radicalization processes by strengthening young people's democratic skills and awareness of the importance of human rights. Secondary prevention or selective prevention refers to measures related to early detection and to working with individuals or groups at risk. There, the focus is on informing and educating people in specific social contexts in which there is a higher risk of extremism due to incidents in the community. This involves raising awareness and strengthening democratic skills and resilience.<sup>6</sup>

Tertiary prevention in the context of radicalization and extremism is referred to as exit work. Projects in this field are primarily aimed at people who are already engaged in a process of radicalization. Projects and measures aimed at reversing that process

are also referred to as deradicalization and distancing programs. In this context, distancing primarily describes a type of “habitual distancing,” which implies foregoing the use of violence without renouncing violence-affirming ideologies.

At this point, “deradicalization” becomes relevant. Deradicalization should be understood to mean “cognitive distancing,” which goes beyond the “habitual distancing” that was just described. Both areas, distancing and deradicalization, need to be considered at the same time to define the approach to tertiary prevention. That is why in tertiary prevention programs, it is essential for the person in question to be willing to engage in a fundamental “rethink” of themselves and to

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themselves and to accept appropriate external impulses. The long-term goal of tertiary prevention is to have the target group turn away from the extremist scene and reintegrate into democratic society.

An important component of tertiary prevention consists of counseling for relatives, i.e. advising people whose relatives have become radicalized.<sup>7</sup> While counter-terrorism measures and strategies are primarily security-oriented, the prevention of (violent) extremism relies on holistic approaches. Based on the standards and approaches of political education and social work, such prevention programs also take other dimensions into account, including health, pedagogical or sociological aspects such as education and social structures as well as economic and legal aspects.

### **Relationship and Approaches of Civil Society and Security Authority Prevention Work**

Following this logic, civil society prevention is more than a simple concept of “prevention edu-

education” aimed at avoiding and interdicting extremism. Instead, it seeks to strengthen the personal and democratic skills of its target groups. **Civil society prevention work therefore tends to take the perspective of “endangered youth,” while prevention work by the security authorities operates from the perspective of “dangerous youth.”<sup>8</sup>**

**Nevertheless, civil society prevention work is not a model that competes with prevention by the security authorities.** Both perspectives are complementary and together form a holistic approach to addressing extremism. It is necessary to respect the different perspectives as well as the roles and standards involved in working in either area. Only then can educational work, for instance, avoid being shaped by a repressive, police, or intelligence service character.

Accordingly, a clear understanding and mutual acceptance of the respective tasks, roles, areas of work, and boundaries are essential. Where civil society work comes up against limits because of security aspects, the work of security authorities comes into play. Both models operate in their own fields and roles which complement each other but are also clearly separate from each other. This establishes civil society prevention as a key component in a successful and long-term strategy to address extremism. As a result, it must be seen as an indispensable pillar of internal security without turning into a tool or a measure of security policy.

At the same time, it is important to ensure that security policy perspectives and concerns do not engender a deficit-oriented view and cause specific groups of the population to be stigmatized. In this context, the concept of security should not be limited to defending against danger, a concept, in which the perspective of the security risks that people pose would be dominant.<sup>9</sup> Rather, it is about the stability and stabilization of a society which builds a common understanding of values and the world, such as Germany’s constitution and the recognition of universal human rights. Many actors in this field believe that the prevention of extremism should be seen as a way of promoting democracy. Their objective is to

prevent stigmatization and ensure that people who take part in prevention measures, programs, and support, are not perceived as a dangers and threats.<sup>15</sup>

This analysis of developments, actors, and perspectives in Germany's prevention landscape serves to clarify one main point: The interests and requirements for successful prevention, while often perceived as fundamentally different, are essentially the same. As funding structures expand and develop and lead to changes in the departments involved, it is only the approaches and strategies that have changed,<sup>11</sup> and this should not be seen as a weakness, but as a strength.

### **Prevention Starts Where the Law Cannot Intervene**

A debate, in which prevention is seen as the opposite of repressive measures against violent extremism, frequently uses yet another argument without thinking it through: the idea that extremist violence must be met with "the full force of the law." Although such calls are understandable in view of frustration, shock, and a sometimes polarizing social discourse, they ignore the fact that an extremist attitude in itself is not punishable by law. This is especially true in the field of religious extremism as compared to right-wing extremism.

On right-wing extremism, the law is much more specific. Given Germany's history, the state has had every reason to equip the justice system and the police with the necessary tools to fight against right-wing extremism. Islamist extremism, in contrast, is a relatively new phenomenon for Germany. Even after the attacks of September 11, 2001, first put the spotlight on Islamist extremism, it took the fact that extremists were traveling to Syria and Iraq to join the so-called Islamic State and that there were attacks linked to them to bring religious extremism (back) into the focus of German domestic policy.

Also, in political terms, Islamist extremism seems

seems to be regarded as a problem that primarily concerns migrants or people without German citizenship. This is clear from the public debate provoked by a knife attack in Mannheim in May 2024, which was committed by a man who had entered Germany as a refugee from Afghanistan in 2014, and a knife attack in Solingen in August 2024. In both cases, the discussion mainly focused on resuming deportations to Afghanistan and Syria.<sup>12</sup>

The same applies to the debate about social media posts glorifying the knife attacks in Mannheim. The Ministry of the Interior has submitted a legal proposal to make it possible to revoke a person's residence permit if that individual makes positive or supportive comments about terrorist attacks or content.<sup>13</sup> The idea is that a person can be deported if they react positively to a post with a terrorist motive in the form of a "like."

In all of these examples, the acts committed by extremists were immediately linked to repercussions for Germany's residence laws. As the perpetrators of the knife attacks in Mannheim and Solingen were of Afghan respective Syrian origin, authorities immediately tried to revive plans to resume deportations to Afghanistan and Syria. Regarding the proposed legislation to combat hate speech on the internet, the reaction again was to seek faster and more direct ways for deporting individuals. This transforms the phenomenon of Islamist extremism and terrorism into a problem that affects people without German citizenship and that can be addressed by measures taken under the residence law.

What seems to get ignored in all of this is the need to take a closer look at problematic content on the internet. Radical content on the internet appears to have played a role for example in the case of the knife attack.<sup>14</sup> As mentioned earlier, legislation in the field of right-wing extremism tends to be much more detailed and precise. Yet instead of specifying the kind of content that will be considered radical and extremist and therefore punishable with regard to Islamist extremism, new legislative proposals and plans are linked to dimensions of residence law. This is problematic

because it does not tackle the causes, namely extremism in social media, but only deals with the symptoms of radicalization. As a result, it does not become any easier for civil society and security authorities to work towards preventing Islamist extremism, as there are no clear definitions of which kind of content should be considered punishable and unconstitutional.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, this illustrates the enormous relevance of civil society prevention,<sup>14</sup> which makes it possible to work with affected individuals, particularly in areas where the state cannot and may not (yet) intervene. In this way, civil society prevention can make a significant contribution to internal security. This is particularly true in cases where civil society approaches complement other perspectives and state actors and where (case-related) information is exchanged. If the respective roles and areas of activity are clearly defined, the perspectives complement each other and result in productive cooperation.

While there is an inherent “interdiction logic” that shapes the landscape of civil society prevention, it does not constitute the only or even the dominant approach because prevention is also<sup>15</sup> about promoting democratic values and thus social cohesion. Many institutions therefore prefer to use, as described earlier, the term “democracy promotion.” In addition, institutions in the field of preventing and combating extremism are always confronted with the difficulty of proving the effectiveness of what they do. This is because in the prevention of extremism and radicalization, “success” lies in “preventing” these very same phenomena by promoting a shared understanding of values, as described above. If an attack takes place nevertheless, it will be considered in some quarters as proof of the ineffectiveness of prevention work (in this case by security authorities and civil society actors). At the same time, it is almost impossible to understand or assess what the situation would look like in the complete absence of all prevention measures.

## Recommendations:

Looking to the future, it is essential to

**1:** Understand that **civil society structures, as they exist today, are part of the core concepts of internal security** and to think about them accordingly in the long term and institutionally. A new interpretation of the funding structure should aim for the consolidation of existing actors, projects, and networks. This would also help promote and support transparency and quality management and establish points of contact beyond the regional level. It is equally important to recognize that extremist ideologies often interact with each other and can sometimes be mutually enabling and reinforcing. It is therefore necessary to observe these phenomena continuously and comprehensively to ensure that prevention work can address extremist ideologies in all their complexity.

**2:** Instead of concentrating on more restrictive residence laws, the focus should be on defining and differentiating content more precisely, based on the criteria laid down in constitutional law. Just as in the field of right-wing extremism, **the prevention of religious extremism must also be operationalized in terms of content. This requires expertise from civil society, academic institutions, and security authority sectors. A clear legal basis must be created** that defines the line between anti-constitutional content and freedom of expression.

**3:** Given the current situation, in which recent developments and dynamics appear to be intensifying with regard to extremism of all kinds, further professionalization of existing structures is essential. This applies in particular to dealing with extremist content in the digital space. **To prevail against Islamist propaganda online requires sustainable and comprehensive prevention approaches and joint strategies.** Here, too, cooperation between relevant state actors and civil society organizations is essential to expand and multiply approaches and opportunities for action.



## Endnotes

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- <sup>4</sup> Target groups differ depending on the subject area and project approach. However, target groups are generally made up of families, young people, and young adults. There is often a particular focus on reaching people from a structurally disadvantaged background or those affected by discrimination (cf. Weiberg, et al. (2023). Zielgruppenorientierung und. DeZIM, Berlin. Accessed through [https://www.dezim-institut.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Demo\\_FIS/publikation\\_pdf/FA-5342.pdf](https://www.dezim-institut.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Demo_FIS/publikation_pdf/FA-5342.pdf).
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BAG ReEx 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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