

# Addressing Root Causes, Not Just Symptoms

## The Impact of the Middle East Conflict on the Prevention of Islamism

The attacks by the Islamist terrorist organization Hamas on October 7, 2023, and the resulting war between Israel and Hamas have led to a significant rise in anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism in Germany. As both phenomena represent key elements of Islamist extremism, they are of particular relevance in a prevention context: On the one hand, anti-Semitism – also in the shape of Israel-related anti-Semitism – is a core component of Islamist ideology; on the other hand, anti-Muslim racism is an important pull factor for Islamist propaganda and radicalization. Efforts to promote democracy, in order to effectively prevent Islamism, must be targeted at both anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism and address both phenomena jointly rather than separately.

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The attacks by the Islamist terrorist organization Hamas and the subsequent war between the State of Israel and Hamas mark a new climax in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the attacks and the war in Gaza have serious consequences for the people in the region, effects are also visible in Germany. There is clear evidence of a sharp and, above all, simultaneous rise in anti-Muslim racism and anti-Semitism since October 7, 2023.<sup>1</sup> Especially in schools, universities, and the media, the Middle East conflict has become a hot topic of discussions that frequently have anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim overtones. With solidarity demonstrations and protests taking place, the conflict is also highly visible in civil society and has a significant influence on the social climate.

***There is clear evidence of a sharp and simultaneous rise in anti-Muslim racism and anti-Semitism since October 7, 2023***



Developments in the Middle East are a strong catalyst for racism and anti-Semitism as well as radicalization and an increased threat of terrorism. As a result, they pose a particular challenge for civil society, regulatory structures, and security authorities. Institutions involved in the promotion of democracy and the prevention of extremism are under great pressure to maintain or, in some places, restore social cohesion, as was the case at the height of fears of the so-called Islamic State (IS).<sup>2</sup>

### **The particular challenges posed by the Middle East conflict**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict poses a particular challenge because of the emotions it evokes and the polarization it causes. It also appears to provide an unparalleled surface onto which people project their feelings and reactions to the political and historical conflict between Jewish and Muslim communities.

As a result, the Middle East conflict fuels both anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism. The main

reason is that political and religious identities are often mixed up: When Israel and Palestine are identified and equated with the religions of Judaism and Islam, enemy stereotypes and prejudices are reinforced. Criticism of Israeli policy is generalized to all Jews, which reinforces anti-Semitic stereotypes. At the same time, Muslims are often associated with extremist groups or with terrorism, which leads to anti-Muslim incitement and discrimination. The conflict polarizes both sides and deepens their prejudices by emphasizing stereotypes and exacerbating tensions.<sup>3</sup>

Various factors, such as the use of differing definitions, influence attitudes when working with individuals, groups, or communities affected by the conflict. As a result, there is a risk of losing sight of the realities of life of the people affected. For example, public discussions may be shaped by selective empathy, so that only the suffering on the Palestinian side or only on the Israeli side is emphasized, or only one perspective is discussed in detail. It is this kind of selective empathy that makes it difficult to deal with the effects of the Middle East conflict in Germany, especially in the field of Islamism prevention.

### **Anti-Semitism und anti-Muslim racism pose simultaneous challenges**

Both anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism are particularly relevant to the field of Islamism prevention: Anti-Semitism is an essential element of Islamist ideologies, which often spread conspiracy theories about the global power of Jews in order to legitimize hatred and violence. At the same time, anti-Muslim racism leads to the exclusion and stigmatization of Muslims, which reinforces their feeling of being marginalized and disadvantaged. This, in turn, makes radical ideologies more attractive. As a result, both phenomena contribute to the polarization of society and exacerbate mistrust between different groups.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, anti-Semitism describes hatred, discrimination, or prejudice against Jews or Jewish life. Conspiracy theories or negative stereotypes about Jewish religion, culture, or history frequen-

frequently play a key role.<sup>5</sup>

Conversely, Anti-Muslim racism describes discrimination against people who are perceived as Muslims. It is based on prejudices about Islam, which is often seen as related to violence, terrorism, or backwardness.<sup>6</sup> Both attitudes, although they are directed against different groups, lead to exclusion, polarization, and discrimination.

However, there is a particularity that stands out when comparing the two phenomena: While (anti-Muslim) racism is often based on devaluation, anti-Semitism assumes that Jews are superior. They are seen as powerful and wealthy, and it is assumed that their community engages in conspiracies to influence politics and the economy. This is why many conspiracy theories find points of reference in anti-Semitism, as secret circles are often held responsible for grievances, which resonates with anti-Semitic ideas.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of these differences, both anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism are expressions of group-focused enmity. Both phenomena are based on prejudice, exclusion, and conspiracy theories that endanger social cohesion. Preventive approaches focusing on democracy, tolerance, and human rights can counter both forms of discrimination effectively by fostering sensitization and raising awareness of the dangers of extremist ideologies.

In the field of the prevention of Islamism, it is often more effective to consider anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism jointly than to engage in tailor-made strategies focusing on only one of the two. Both phenomena represent key elements of Islamist extremism. Institutions promoting democracy must therefore address both anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism to effectively prevent Islamism – not just as separate phenomena, but also together. Having said that, it is also clear that approaches that are only dedicated to one phenomenon will not become obsolete.

## Recommendations

To prevent Islamism, one must engage in democracy promotion and focus on both anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism at the same time. In the Middle East conflict, anti-Semitism is often seen as a factor in the suffering of the Jewish side, while anti-Muslim racism is seen as a factor in the suffering of the Palestinian side. Nevertheless, these phenomena are not to be viewed in isolation. Any analysis of the conflict must focus on the whole in order to understand and overcome the complex and reciprocal dynamics of prejudice, exclusion, and violence.

To be able to deal with the challenges appropriately and effectively:

**1: Systematic efforts are needed to enable public service structures such as the education system** to counter the impact of the Middle East conflict. This requires training and further education. At the same time, public service structures need to **engage with qualified civil society institutions** that offer support in crisis situations. It must be recognized that **teachers and other actors in democracy promotion cannot address all the challenges alone**, and that each institution involved fulfills a specific role.

This includes prevention work carried out by the security authorities, which is a central part of a holistic approach to the prevention of Islamism.

**2: Dialogue between Jewish and Muslim communities must be actively promoted and strengthened.** Given the impact of the Middle East conflict, **partnerships between religious communities**, which have been talked about for years, **need to be implemented now.** These partnerships help the prevention of Islamism by providing role models and figures of respect and authority, who can strongly influence their communities. Such **initiatives help to reduce tensions, build trust, and break down stereotypes on the ground.** A parti-

cular focus should be on **working together to address the Middle East conflict** and its influence on German society.

**3:** The experience of the Middle East conflict must lead to a **holistic approach to the prevention of Islamism, in which the roles and responsibilities of the actors become more clearly defined.** Instead of playing blame games or debating responsibilities, **different actors must work more closely to together.** This requires **close cooperation between educational institutions, civil society organizations, religious communities, and security authorities** to provide an effective response to the challenges linked to the conflict and to safeguard social cohesion.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Amadeu Antonio Stiftung. (no date). Antimuslimischer Rassismus - Was ist das? Accessed through <https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/gruppenbezogene-menschenfeindlichkeit/antimuslimischer-rassismus/>.
- <sup>2</sup> BAG RelEx e.V. (July 22, 2024). „Der Nahostkonflikt als Katalysator“ – Rückblick zum Fachtag. Accessed through <https://www.bag-relex.de/fachtag-2024-rueckblick/>.
- <sup>3</sup> Federal Government Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Antisemitism. (2024). Was ist Antisemitismus? Accessed through <https://www.antisemitismusbeauftragter.de/Webs/BAS/DE/bekaempfung-antisemitismus/was-ist-antisemitismus/was-ist-antisemitismus-node.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> Bertelsmann Stiftung. (2023). Anti-Semitism, racism and social cohesion. Accessed through <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/anti-semitism-racism-and-social-cohesion-en>.
- <sup>5</sup> BKA. (May 21, 2024). Politisch motivierte Kriminalität in Deutschland erreicht neuen Höchststand. Accessed through [https://www.bka.de/DE/Presse/Listenseite\\_Pressemitteilungen/2024/Presse2024/240521\\_PM\\_Fallzahlen\\_PMK2023.htm](https://www.bka.de/DE/Presse/Listenseite_Pressemitteilungen/2024/Presse2024/240521_PM_Fallzahlen_PMK2023.htm)
- <sup>6</sup> CLAIM. (June 24, 2024). Pressemitteilung - Antimuslimische Übergriffe und Diskriminierung in Deutschland 2023: Mehr als fünf antimuslimische Vorfälle pro Tag. Accessed through: <https://www.claim-allianz.de/aktuelles/news/pressemitteilung-antimuslimische-uebergriffe-und-diskriminierung-in-deutschland-2023-mehr-als-fuenf-antimuslimische-vorfaelle-pro-tag/>
- <sup>7</sup> Mendel, M. (2020). Antisemitismus und Rassismus. Unterrichtsimpulse. (F. A. Zeitung, publisher). Accessed through: <https://www.bs-anne-frank.de/mediathek/publikationen/unterrichtsimpulse-antisemitismus-und-rassismus>



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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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