

Political Discourse, Islamophobia and Public Perception

In October 2025, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz paid an inaugural visit to the state of Brandenburg. During a press conference, he commented on migration policy:

"In terms of migration, we have come a long way. In this federal government we have reduced the numbers - August 2024 compared to August 2025 - by 60%. But, of course, we still have this problem in the cityscape, and that is why the Federal Minister of the Interior is working to enable and carry out large-scale deportations. This must continue; it is agreed upon within the coalition."

Merz's statement came in response to a journalist referencing a remark he had made in 2018, when he declared that he wished to "halve the AfD vote share". In contrast, the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) now polls at over 30 percent in some areas. The Chancellor's phrase "problem in the cityscape" immediately sparked widespread criticism and protests across German cities. Civil-society groups, migrant organisations, and Muslim associations accused him of implicitly defining people with migrant or visibly non-European backgrounds as an urban disturbance, a phrasing reminiscent of "othering" discourses identified in right-wing populist rhetoric (see Foroutan 2022; El-Menouar 2019).

Public Backlash and Experiences of Everyday Discrimination

Following Merz's comments, social media was flooded with testimonies from Germans of migrant descent recounting their experiences of racial profiling and everyday exclusion. Police officers with Turkish or Arab heritage described being subjected to random identity checks while off duty, whereas their white colleagues remained unbothered. Such accounts mirror findings from the FRA EU-MIDIS II survey (2017) and subsequent German studies, which indicate that one in two Muslims in Germany has faced discrimination within the previous twelve months, often in public spaces or in interactions with law enforcement (FRA 2020).

Although Merz later sought to clarify that he had referred exclusively to irregular migrants involved in crime, the damage to public perception had been done. Political scientist Yasemin El-Menouar (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2023) observed that such language, even if unintended, legitimises suspicion toward entire communities by linking "migration" and "problems" visually through references to the "cityscape." Research on political framing shows that metaphors associating migration with disorder or threat systematically increase negative attitudes toward minorities (Bleich & van Oostendorp 2021).

The controversy intensified when Steffen Bilger, parliamentary managing director of the CDU/CSU faction, stated only days later that women wearing face veils were a "disturbance" he was no longer willing to tolerate. *"I really ask myself,"* he said, *"whether someone who goes through life fully veiled is truly in the right place in our country."* Bilger framed this as a consequence of a "failed migration policy" that should be "consistently corrected".

While the Chancellor later insisted that he was referring to irregular migrants with a criminal background, his fellow party member Bilger uses the very same statement and context to talk about Muslim women who stand out visually because of their religious attire - regardless of their residence status or police record. Together these remarks reveal a pattern: visible expressions of Muslim identity and especially women's clothing are repeatedly invoked as symbols of social dysfunction. Sociolinguistic analyses have demonstrated that such symbolic politics construct Muslim women as carriers of cultural deviation, reducing them to markers of an alleged incompatibility with German norms (Korteweg & Yurdakul 2014). Even when presented as "concerns about integration," the cumulative effect is a discursive linkage between Muslim visibility and societal decline.

Precedents in CDU/CSU Rhetoric

The Merz and Bilger statements were not isolated incidents. In 2022, CDU local politician Marc Böhm delivered a speech at a fair in Bad König (Hesse), where he referred to Muslim women as “*Kopftuchgeschwader*” (literally “headscarf squadrons”) and claimed that “*four out of five headscarf women have a roast in the oven*”. The remark, greeted with applause from sections of the audience, drew condemnation from anti-discrimination advocates and was widely reported in national media (FAZ 19 Sept 2022).

Similarly, in 2023, the CSU parliamentary group in Bavaria reopened the debate over headscarves, portraying them as “*symbols of patriarchal oppression*”. Although framed as a defense of women’s rights, such rhetoric tends to conflate personal religious expression with political ideology, implicitly questioning Muslim women’s autonomy. Studies of German media discourse show that references to the headscarf frequently serve as shorthand for contested national identity, particularly in conservative political communication (Scharf & Roth 2021).

The Broader Impact on Public Attitudes

Over the past decade, survey data have demonstrated how elite discourse shapes mass opinion. The Leipzig Authoritarianism Study (2022) found that 46 percent of Germans agreed with the statement that “*Islam is not part of Germany*”. Peaks in such sentiment typically coincide with periods of politicised debate over migration and integration. The German Islamophobia Index (Bielefeld University 2023) noted a direct correlation between negative political framing and increased acceptance of discriminatory stereotypes, such as the idea that Muslims are unwilling to integrate or pose a security risk.

Social-psychological research confirms that repeated exposure to problem-oriented migration rhetoric amplifies perceived threat and justifies exclusionary behaviour (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart 2009). When leading politicians describe visible minorities as a “problem,” this not only normalises prejudice but can also embolden hate-motivated actors. The Bundeskriminalamt’s annual report on politically motivated crime shows that anti-Muslim hate incidents in Germany rose by 17 percent between 2023 and 2024, a pattern that watchdog organisations such as CLAIM and the Alliance Against Islamophobia attribute partly to polarising political language.

Consequences for Muslim Communities

Beyond physical attacks, the sociological effects are profound. Muslims report heightened feelings of insecurity, social distancing, and diminished trust in state institutions. Qualitative interviews conducted by the DeZIM Institute (2024) reveal that many young Muslims and particularly those in professional sectors are considering emigration due to cumulative experiences of symbolic exclusion and stalled career advancement. The framing of Muslim identity as “incompatible” with modern Germany thus risks a “brain drain” of qualified citizens, undermining both social cohesion and economic diversity.

Educational and workplace discrimination also appear to increase during periods of politicised debate. A 2023 field experiment by the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB) found that identical job applications received 19 percent fewer callbacks when the applicant’s name was recognisably Muslim. Public controversy over the headscarf correlates with spikes in reported harassment of visibly Muslim women in public transport and service-sector jobs (Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes 2024).

The Normalisation of Stigmatising Language

Linguistically, phrases such as “*problem in the cityscape*” or “*disturbance*” reproduce a semiotic chain linking Muslim presence to disorder, congestion, and threat. These associations echo what critical-discourse scholars call the “securitisation of difference” (Huysmans 2006), where cultural visibility becomes framed as a matter of public order rather than of pluralism. Even if unintended, such framings blur the line between policy critique and identity politics, shifting the focus from behaviour to being.

While Merz’s later clarification sought to distinguish irregular migrants from lawful residents, the initial message had already circulated widely through mainstream and social media. Communication

research shows that retractions rarely neutralise first impressions; instead, they can reinforce the initial association through repetition (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). The controversy thus reinforced a sense among many Muslims that their belonging remains conditional.

Returning to the 2018 remark that prompted Merz's recent statement, it appears that while he remains intent on reducing the AfD's electoral share, he seeks to do so primarily by appropriating right-wing rhetoric on migration rather than by offering a substantive alternative to it.

That this strategy is failing becomes evident when looking at recent polling data: while the AfD secured 20.8% of the vote in the February 2025 federal election, it now polls at 25–26%, placing it on par with the CDU/CSU, which had emerged as the winner of that election with 28.5%. In the local elections in North Rhine-Westphalia the AfD tripled its election results compared to the last election - despite declining asylum numbers and a halving of first-time registrations compared to the previous year.

Germany's Uneven Application of Justice: Pro-Palestinian Repression and Reluctance to Investigate Alleged Israeli War Crimes

In September 2025, the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), together with Palestinian partner organisations Al Haq, Al Mezan and the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, filed a 130-page criminal complaint before the German Federal Public Prosecutor. The case concerns Daniel G., a German national from Munich and alleged member of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), accused of executing unarmed Palestinian civilians in Gaza while serving as a sniper.

Video footage purportedly showing the killings circulated widely online and was verified in part by investigative teams from ZDF and Der Spiegel, which identified several of the victims. Israeli media reported that Daniel G., still officially registered as a resident of Munich, relocated to Israel shortly after the publication of these allegations.

This case follows earlier reports from autumn 2024, when a former IDF comrade publicly described similar acts in an interview, prompting a citizen complaint to German authorities. The Federal Public Prosecutor's Office then subsequently terminated the investigation against G. for lack of sufficient initial suspicion", despite acknowledging the suspect's German citizenship and the gravity of the alleged offenses.

The ECCHR's renewed filing places the case within the scope of Germany's Code of Crimes against International Law (VStGB), which allows national authorities to prosecute genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity even when committed abroad, provided there is a "connection to Germany" or the suspect is present on German territory. Yet, according to both NGOs and legal scholars, this jurisdictional framework is applied inconsistently, revealing a pattern of selective engagement.

Patterns of Reluctance and Political Sensitivity

Over the past year, complaints have reportedly been filed in Germany against at least five IDF soldiers holding German citizenship or residency, all alleging serious violations of international humanitarian law in Gaza. None of these cases has yet resulted in formal charges. Critics, including Jan van Aken, chair of the party Die Linke and a long-time advocate of international justice, have warned the German government of placing political caution above the rule of law, warning that "*diplomatic restraint must not take precedence over accountability*".

Under German law, the Federal Ministry of Justice possesses a right of instruction (Weisungsrecht) over the Federal Public Prosecutor and may intervene in sensitive cases, particularly those with foreign-policy implications. Ministry officials have denied exercising this prerogative in the Daniel G. case. Nevertheless, international lawyers point out that Germany has an affirmative legal duty under the Geneva Conventions and the Rome Statute to prosecute alleged war crimes when the suspect falls under its jurisdiction, regardless of political sensitivities (see Rome Statute, Art. 17; German VStGB, § 1 ff.).

Observers argue that a combination of diplomatic caution, limited prosecutorial capacity, and evidentiary challenges has produced a pattern of inertia. Prosecutors cite difficulties in verifying battlefield evidence, interviewing witnesses within Gaza, and obtaining cooperation from Israeli authorities. However, human-rights organisations counter that these obstacles have not prevented Germany from pursuing Syrian, Afghan, and Iraqi suspects in past universal-jurisdiction cases, raising questions about double standards when potential perpetrators are connected to Israel which is a close security and intelligence ally.

International and Domestic Criticism

The United Nations reacted swiftly. A spokesperson for Secretary-General António Guterres described the allegations as “deeply disturbing” and called on Germany to ensure full compliance with its international obligations to investigate and, where appropriate, prosecute war crimes. Similar concerns were voiced by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O’Flaherty, who has repeatedly urged German authorities to uphold principles of non-discrimination and equal application of the law.

In his human-rights assessment on Germany, O’Flaherty noted increasingly harsh measures against pro-Palestinian expression and protest.

He noted that in Germany as elsewhere, the distinction between legitimate criticism of Israel and antisemitic hate speech has become increasingly blurred, including due to misapplication of the IHRA working definition of antisemitism, leading to undue restrictions of the right to freedom of expression. The Commissioner further warned that excessive policing of demonstrations, particularly those linked to Gaza, undermines fundamental rights. Referring to Berlin protests dispersed in early 2025, he emphasised that force should only be used as a last resort and that restrictions on assembly must comply with principles of necessity, proportionality and non-discrimination. (Council of Europe, Statement 6 June 2025).

This assessment aligns with reports from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, both of which have documented systematic bans on Palestinian solidarity rallies in German cities and surveillance of activists and journalists expressing criticism of Israeli policy. Amnesty’s Germany 2025 Report states that “authorities increasingly equate political dissent regarding Israel with antisemitism, producing a chilling effect on academic and civil-society discourse.”

Contradictory Enforcement Landscape

Germany’s dual posture - stringent domestic policing of pro-Palestinian expression versus hesitancy toward prosecuting alleged Israeli war crimes - reveals a structural contradiction in the country’s post-Holocaust legal culture. On the domestic front, federal and state authorities invoke “zero tolerance for antisemitism” as justification for restricting assembly and expression, including the cancellation of conferences, academic events, and cultural programs involving Palestinian speakers. The Working Definition of Antisemitism adopted from the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) in 2017 has often been interpreted expansively, allowing criticism of Israel’s military actions to be classified as hate speech.

International monitors, including the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, have warned that this approach risks eroding Germany’s commitment to pluralism while undermining its credibility as a champion of international human rights. Meanwhile, Germany continues to supply arms and military technology to Israel, a practice defended by officials as consistent with Israel’s right to self-defense. Critics argue that this policy deepens perceptions of bias when German prosecutors decline to act on allegations of war crimes involving German nationals serving in Israeli forces.

This concern is amplified by concurrent policy proposals aimed at restricting naturalisation for individuals expressing pro-Palestinian views, who are likely to be predominantly Muslim. Media reports indicate that statements such as *“From the River to the Sea”* may be treated as negative factors in citizenship applications. In spring 2025, the CDU/CSU parliamentary group introduced a

draft law proposing that German dual nationals who are deemed “antisemitic” (under the IHRA working definition), “supporters of terrorism,” or “extremists” could have their German citizenship revoked even without a conviction for a specific criminal offense.

Simultaneously, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O’Flaherty, highlighted growing concern over Islamophobia in Germany, urging authorities to address this phenomenon effectively in his human-rights assessment. However, the current developments described suggest that state institutions and political actors may, intentionally or inadvertently, contribute to the reinforcement of anti-Muslim sentiments, rather than mitigating them.