

# THE CONVERSATION

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## Germany faces one of its greatest political challenges since World War II

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EPA/Sven Hoppe

Within the space of a week a teenager seriously injured three people on a train in Würzburg before being shot dead by police and another shot and killed nine people in a Munich shopping centre. A Syrian man was also arrested in the city of Reutlingen after a woman died in a knife attack, and another Syrian man is dead and several injured after he set off a bomb in Ansbach.

Four events, one seeming similarity. The attackers were all either asylum seekers or Germans from an immigrant background. They seemed to be people bringing terror from war-torn places to the pristine streets of German towns and cities. This is certainly the conclusion that the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, Alternative for Germany) promotes. Curiously, it is also one that has coloured news reports of these incidents outside Germany.

Before the facts were known, the BBC wheeled out various counter-terrorism experts to comment on Munich and CNN reported that Muslim fundamentalists were thought to be on the loose before any such knowledge was clear. French president François Hollande was calling Munich a terrorist incident before the facts were available.

For many Germans, for many around the world, Islamic State (IS) – and even Islam itself – provide good placeholders while we gather specific knowledge about what is going on. We must have someone to blame as soon as possible.

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Admirably, the German government and its agencies have done their best not to fuel the flames. Munich police reacted forcefully against rumours and speculation. And the general response by police and other security agencies has been exemplary.

And the response by the Bavarian and federal governments to the attack in Ansbach was muted. They say there is no pattern and that it's far too early to draw conclusions. All cases are different, and no structural failings of the intelligence services have come to light as yet.

It is true that the Ansbach attacker was a rejected asylum seeker from Syria. A video has emerged in which he appears to link himself to IS. It's also true that IS has claimed responsibility for the attack in Ansbach (as it did for Würzburg). Yet it is far from certain what conclusions to draw from this. IS is hardly a reliable source of information. The Ansbach attacker also had a history of mental illness, and he had entered Germany two years ago via Austria and Bulgaria, before the recent wave of mass migration.

## **Forgetting violence**

What is really at stake here goes much deeper. Western European societies, spoiled by virtually more than six decades of peace, have unlearned how to cope with violence.

This is especially the case for Germany. Security has been one of its guiding values. It emerged over the course of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s as a response to the experience of mass violence after two world wars. And despite their reputation, Germans have a libertarian streak, evidenced by their suspicion towards surveillance. Security has therefore also meant security from the state.

This security arrangement now appears under existential threat as a result of these violent attacks. And it is symbolic that the attacks have occurred in the areas of southern Germany that have a reputation as the most affluent, secure and pristine incarnations of that German post-war dream of peace after mass violence.



Merkel reacts to the shootings in Munich. EPA/Michael Kappeler

But German security has always been more a dream than a reality. It explained violence away by asking for its causes rather than accepting that all human beings are capable of violence. The strength of the West German state in producing economic and social security has allowed Germans to forget the safe conditions that made this development possible.

And as Stefan Mayer, an MP for the Bavarian Christian Democrats (CSU), pointed out, the German government was not prepared for the logistical and administrative challenges that the recent influx of refugees has meant for governing Germany.

He doesn't mean that the government has been negligent – violent crime is no more widespread among asylum seekers in Germany than in other sections of the population. The problem is one of sheer capacity. How can the welfare state provide support to those without a firm place in its fold? How can it care for the psychological traumas and physical challenges that those seeking refuge have brought with them from a world of violence and war? How can open borders be made safe borders? How can citizens be protected? And how can the German state mediate between the interests and needs of different religious and ethnic groups?

While some predicted the end of statehood in the face of globalisation, it is clear that the state is needed more than ever: to guarantee peaceful social relations, and to enable them.

But the challenges Germany faces are of a new kind. Old recipes are unlikely to work. It is also clear that complete security is not possible in a free and democratic society. The decision of Angela Merkel's government to allow asylum seekers in their millions into the country has been a gigantic social experiment.

What is required now is a political experiment to match it. How this will look is by no means clear, but what matters now is that we move away from speculation and accept the challenge.

At stake for Merkel is more than the majority for her party at the next elections, as the AfD will seek to offer a right-wing populist alternative to Merkel's CDU. At stake is no less than the foundation of German politics, statehood and civil society.



Security Violence Germany Angela Merkel Germany and refugees