

# Countering the Islamic State in Germany and Abroad: German–American Policy Options

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**In Brief:** With the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) inspiring, encouraging, and directing attacks across the country in 2016, Germany faces its most serious threat from transnational terrorism groups since the 1970s. Close German–American cooperation is essential to countering this threat. The United States has an interest in this cooperation, as Americans and American installations in Germany are targets for terrorists, as is transatlantic air travel, and Germany could contribute a great deal more than it currently does to global counterterrorism efforts. For its part, Germany should centralize its fragmented security architecture under the central government and strengthen its intelligence and police services. European cooperation on Schengen border controls and between intelligence and police services is also essential. Germany should also support an international diplomatic, financial, and military campaign to roll back IS.

Germany faces a threat from transnational terrorist groups it has not seen since the heyday of the Red Army Faction's attacks on West German public institutions in the 1970s. Over the course of 2016, Germany suffered five attacks, in Hanover, Essen, Würzburg, Ansbach, and Berlin, with at least one larger attack by a cell of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) thwarted by German authorities. The December 2016 attack on the Christmas Market at Breitscheidplatz in Berlin left 12 dead and 48 injured. None of the attackers in Germany appear to have received specialized training in Syria, but there is a clear link between their attacks and IS, which inspires their heinous acts against German civilians by its online propaganda and encourages them through direct contact. With the possible exception of the small cell in Essen, all the terrorists were in contact with handlers who motivated them and gave them operational advice.

A successful German effort to prevent future attacks will require both a domestic and a foreign dimension. Domestically, Germany needs to strengthen and reform its police and intelligence to address the new threat. And it must do so quickly. Within Europe, Germany must reinvigorate efforts to strengthen Schengen border controls while pushing for overall improved cooperation between European intelligence and police services in addition to other measures. Across the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond, Germany needs to energetically support an international diplomatic, financial, and military campaign to roll back IS where it has been successful and deprive it of its appeal within Germany. The election of Donald Trump as U.S. president has only increased the pressure on Berlin to intensify its counterterrorism effort.



Both at home and overseas, close German–American cooperation will be essential to Germany’s ability to achieve these objectives. For its part, the United States cannot afford to see Germany — or any of its key European allies — continue to suffer the strain of terrorism, if only because there are many potential American targets in Europe and because a growing terrorist scene in Europe threatens transatlantic air travel — as underscored by the recently introduced restrictions on laptops and other personal devices.

## The Threat

At its peak in late 2014, the Islamic State and its affiliates controlled 100,000 km<sup>2</sup> of territory and some 12 million people around the world. From its base in Raqqa, Syria, the group expanded eastward into Iraq to Mosul and the outskirts of Baghdad and westward across Syria, and gaining a foothold in several parts of Syria’s northwest. From this stronghold, it proclaimed a global caliphate. Over the course of 2015, it set up “provinces” (wilayat) in Libya, Egypt, Nigeria, and Afghanistan. In the process, several other Islamist groups pledged allegiance to its leadership. Some of IS’s affiliates were more lethal than others — the Libyan province was particularly effective in its campaign to destabilize the region, conducting three significant attacks in Tunisia that took the lives of dozens. IS also claimed responsibility for attacks worldwide, including in Turkey, Australia, Denmark, and Russia. The most dramatic of these attacks took place in France on November 13, 2015, when fighters trained by IS in Syria carried out multiple coordinated attacks in and around Paris that cost the lives of 130 civilians. Attacks continued in 2016 in Belgium, the United States, and Germany, with further attacks in the United Kingdom and Sweden in 2017.

The growth of IS has not been inexorable, however. Beginning in 2014, the United States commenced an air campaign with several NATO allies and partners from the region to contain and eventually roll back IS gains. Initially the United States focused on relieving the imminent threat to Baghdad and reversing IS gains in Iraq, but it has also conducted airstrikes against targets

in Syria, including extensive strikes against Raqqa. In Iraq, the United States deployed special forces in growing numbers and at lower levels of the force to support the Iraqi Army as it sought to retake its territory. In Syria, the United States attempted, but then abandoned an effort to train and equip Syrian rebel forces. The United States, France, the United Kingdom, and other countries also intervened against several of the IS provinces, combining airpower with small numbers of special forces, to suitable effect in Libya, Nigeria, and Afghanistan. Efforts were also made to counter IS on several other fronts, including by cutting off its finances, providing assistance to the YPG (People’s Protection Units, a Kurdish militia) in Syria despite Turkish opposition, and countering its online messaging and recruitment efforts.

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Over the course of 2016, these operations — with some help from other actors, such as Russia and Iran — brought about a gradual rollback of the gains IS had seen in 2014 and 2015. Over the course of 2016, IS lost approximately half its territory and half of the population it controlled in Iraq and Syria, for example. It also lost a significant amount of territory and population in Egypt, Libya, Afghanistan, and Nigeria. Polling data meanwhile began to show declining support for IS in Muslim countries worldwide (which, in any case, was never high).<sup>1</sup>

These setbacks indicate that IS is not invincible. Far from it — even a limited commitment of airpower and small numbers of American boots on the ground have been successful against it militarily — at least in certain areas. But IS remains a substantial threat, with several “formal” provinces, several more informal provinces, and a demonstrated ability to support, guide and/or inspire

<sup>1</sup> See S. G. Jones, J. Dobbins, D. Byman, C. S. Chivvis, B. Connable, J. Martini, E. Robinson, and N. Chandler, *Rolling Back the Islamic State* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1912.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1912.html).

people across the globe. As it loses territory in Iraq and Syria, it is likely to go to ground and increase the effort that it puts into its clandestine campaign, potentially involving a higher number of terrorist attacks.

IS poses the most imminent jihadist threat both due to the sheer size of the territory it controls and the proven effectiveness of its concrete promise of realizing the caliphate in this lifetime. However, Al-Qaeda, from which IS split, continues to pose a threat, even if on a somewhat lesser scale. After a decade and a half of operations targeted against it, Al-Qaeda is no longer the organization that carried out the 9/11, Madrid, or London attacks. Nevertheless, its affiliates continue to thrive in several parts of the world including Yemen, Somalia, the Sahara and the Sahel, Afghanistan, and Syria. These groups may not have the resources of Osama bin Laden, but they continue to hew to his ideology and have proven more resilient than many experts predicted. Only a few years ago, for example, the demise of Al-Qaeda's African branches was widely anticipated, but both Al-Shabab in Somalia and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have returned in force, pushing back against efforts to contain them in recent months. Even if these groups are not responsible for attacks in Germany, Europe, or America, they continue to support a broader culture of jihadism that is ultimately conducive to and can serve as a foundation for IS when it comes to the establishment of illicit networks, jihadist foot soldiers, and the spread of jihadist ideology. Meanwhile, beyond Al-Qaeda many other unaligned Islamist groups — in Syria, Libya, Mali, and elsewhere — continue to threaten local populations and offer opportunities for IS expansion, both through the damage that they do to local institutions and the culture of jihadism they establish.

In the United States, there have always been individuals who doubt the severity of the threat posed by groups like IS. These critics point to the relatively low number of deaths due to terrorism in the United States — arguing, in one case for example, that death by drowning in a bathtub is more likely than death from a terrorist act. However, such arguments are too simplistic in their focus on numbers and probabilities. They fail to account for the large psychological and political impact that

terrorist attacks can have or the damage they do to the multiethnic fabric of American society. They also ignore the fact that the relative security America enjoys from terrorist acts today is in large part due to the far-reaching efforts America has made since 9/11 to strengthen domestic law enforcement while dismantling terrorist threats overseas. Without these efforts, the United States would be far more vulnerable to attacks, and likely would have suffered many more than it has. Even when they differ on the specifics of how to deal with it, most experts accept that IS is one of the chief threats to international and U.S. security.

In Germany, as in the United States, some view the threat posed by IS as exaggerated and see in it a justification for more repressive government policies at home and more aggressive military interventions abroad. This view is widespread not only among the far left, but — often in a somewhat milder form — among many left-of-center German politicians and in the media. As a result, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) checks the federal government in Berlin from pursuing more robust counterterrorism measures. In the *Länder* or states, the SPD, the Greens, and the Left Party do the same. Among conservative politicians and some other parts of the public, the upsurge in terrorist activity 2016, however, has increased pressure for more far-reaching counterterrorism measures. There is a growing consensus among security specialists that the mass influx of Middle Eastern, North African, and South Asian refugees which culminated in the refugee crisis of 2015 has escalated the threat posed by IS terrorists — a hypothesis supported by the fact that most jihadist plotters in Germany in 2016 were North African and Syrian refugees. Among some 20 plotters in 2016, there was one Afghan, one Moroccan-German, and one or

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two Turkish-Germans. The rest were Syrians and North African migrants (though not necessarily from the most recent wave). This has put pressure on Chancellor Angela Merkel, who took the decision to admit the refugees into the country in September 2015. Many more conservative voters lost confidence in the Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and decided to vote for the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) in several state elections, generating concern the party could advance in the 2017 federal elections — especially if Germany suffers more terrorist attacks.

## Counterterrorism in Germany

Counterterrorism cooperation between Germany and the United States is very good, although extremely asymmetric, with Germany the main beneficiary of information generated by American security authorities. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and National Security Agency (NSA) have strong working relationships with their German counterparts, which functioned smoothly even during times of crisis, e.g. from 2002, when divisions between Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and President George W. Bush over the Iraq war damaged bilateral political relations. For historical and other reasons, German security services have not developed extensive collection platforms, and instead rely heavily on signals intelligence provided by the United States.

To some extent, this asymmetric relationship is not exceptional. As the sole remaining superpower, the United States has unparalleled counterterrorism capabilities. The NSA and CIA have supported global counterterrorism operations, and strengthened bilateral relations with partner services in many key U.S. allies, not just Germany.

However, Germany is still a special case, because of the immense discrepancy between Germany's economic might and leadership role in the European Union and its weak and fragmented domestic security architecture. Other European countries such as France and the United Kingdom have far more extensive intelligence collection capabilities for counterterrorism. This system is partly a

result of structures imposed by the Allies during the occupation of West Germany after 1945. The best example is perhaps the Federal Intelligence Service (*Bundesnachrichtendienst*, BND), the German foreign and military intelligence service, which was built under the auspices of the CIA. When the Cold War ended, subsequent German governments reduced the BND's budget, hampering recruitment of a new generation of talent. After 9/11, policymakers realized the importance of foreign and military intelligence.

But they had a long way to go to rebuild many parts of the organization.

Another relic of German history is the deep distrust of strong and unified security authorities that many Germans developed as a reaction to the two German dictatorships of the 20th century, and specifically the cunning and brutality of the Gestapo secret police and the Stasi intelligence services. This has first resulted in a pronounced fragmentation of the German security architecture, where 38 different institutions compete and cooperate in fighting terrorists. Furthermore, the 16 *Länder* (and not the federal government) are primarily responsible for domestic security, with the result that security standards differ from state to state, with Bavaria, for instance, fielding relatively strong security authorities and favoring a more aggressive approach, and intentionally weaker services in Berlin and North Rhine-Westphalia. With this fragmentation come numerous legal restrictions that further curtail the surveillance capabilities of all German counterterrorism institutions.

In the age of transnational terrorism, this security architecture could only survive because Germany effectively outsourced an important part of domestic

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counterterrorism to the United States by relying on signals intelligence from the NSA. In most cases when major terrorist plots were foiled by German security authorities after 2001, initial information about terrorist communications was provided by the NSA. This was, for example, the case when the famous Sauerland cell planned attacks on American targets in 2007 and when Al-Qaeda ordered the Düsseldorf cell to perpetrate mass-casualty attacks in 2010. Recently, it was the United States again that provided initial intelligence about the Syrian IS-member Jaber al-Bakr, who is believed to have planned an attack on Berlin's Tegel airport and was arrested in Leipzig in October 2016.

The inherent weaknesses in the German security architecture should make it obvious that Germany must cooperate with the United States. From a U.S. perspective, reducing cooperation might force the German government to take on a greater burden for its own security, but the United States has a vested interest in cooperation with Germany, too. Americans and American installations in Germany have been targets for terrorists for decades and this has not changed with the advent of the jihadists in Europe. Especially the U.S. airbase at Ramstein in Rhineland-Palatinate, which is the biggest of its kind in Europe, may have been the target of the Sauerland cell in 2007 already, and has likely been high on the (virtual) list of potential targets for a jihadist attack more recently. There are scores more potential American targets in Germany, so that the United States depends on the work of the German police in order to protect its citizens and installations.

Secondly, some of the most serious terrorist plots in recent years have targeted transatlantic air travel between Europe and the United States. In 2009 and 2010, Yemen's Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) made multiple attempts to detonate explosives on airliners headed to the United States. In the most dangerous plot, the Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to ignite a bomb in his underwear when his plane approached Detroit airport on Christmas Day in 2009. Al-Qaeda has not given up on its plans to attack transatlantic air traffic and it is more than possible targeted flights could originate from Europe.

Preventing this through close counterterrorism cooperation is a mutual interest.

Thirdly, however powerful, U.S. intelligence is not omniscient and Germany could also contribute a great deal more than it currently does to global counterterrorism efforts. Terrorist threat vectors across the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and Europe continue to increase the overall intelligence requirement. In France, Belgium, and Germany since 2014, plotters appear to have established communication lines with IS in Syria without early detection, and plots that might have been foiled on the basis of signals intelligence went ahead. Whether the reason for this failure is the increased amount of electronic communication, the use of encryption by the terrorists or other reasons, the United States can use every reliable partner to improve intelligence — especially with on the ground surveillance and detection. The financial resources of the German government make it a particularly strong candidate for closer cooperation.

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## Germany's Policy Needs and Challenges

Germany should thus seek to develop its native surveillance capabilities. Moreover, the case of the Berlin attacker Anis Amri, who had been known to German authorities as a possible perpetrator of a terrorist attack for months showed the breadth of the challenge Germany faces if it is to strengthen its counterterrorism capabilities. This fact was already evident to wider public in 2011, when the terrorist cell named the National Socialist Underground (NSU) was discovered. This small group of right-wing extremist terrorists had gone underground in 1998 and subsequently killed eight Turkish-Germans, one Greek migrant, and a policewoman — until the two

male terrorists of the group committed suicide fearing imminent arrest after a bank robbery in 2011. In all these years, the German police and intelligence services did not even investigate the murders as terrorist attacks, instead preferring theories about turf wars between Turkish organized crime groups. In general, German counterterrorism efforts since 2001 have underperformed in the face of rising threats.

This diagnosis points to the need for a rethink of the German counterterrorism structure, starting with a decision by German policymakers to push for more aggressive counterterrorism approaches and invest accordingly.

First and foremost, Germany will have to centralize its fragmented security architecture under the federal government. This is especially urgent with regard to the domestic intelligence services of the states, the “State Offices for the Protection of the Constitution,” some of which have shown serious capability gaps in recent years. Although federal interior ministers have demanded such centralizing steps for years, state governments and especially their powerful interior ministries are resisting any centralization.

Secondly, intelligence and police services need qualified personnel and technology to cope with the rising technological sophistication of terrorist groups. In addition, although German services will not develop capabilities on a scale like those of the NSA, they could focus their activities on countries where Germany has special interests and German police and intelligence have special capabilities.

Thirdly, European cooperation will be an important part of any domestic reforms. It is important not to overestimate the potential of increased cooperation as long as many European states do not strengthen their domestic security authorities, but improved coordination is a must, not least because terrorists can move freely in the Schengen area — in many cases far more freely than information about them can. Cooperation is especially important with France and Britain, the countries with the highest numbers of jihadists and the strongest security

authorities, but there are several smaller states which lack the resources of the big three but have witnessed rising jihadist radicalization in recent years. Belgium, Austria, and Denmark are cases in point, but hardly the only ones.

Unfortunately, it is not very likely that any German government will have the strength to push through these or similar reforms in the near future. It will be the job of its partners and allies to convince Germany that it will have to do more to strengthen not only its domestic security.

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## The Global Challenge

Germany cannot be safe at home, however, unless progress is made against IS overseas. According to reports in the press, for example, the December attack in Berlin was linked to IS in Libya — a fact that led Barack Obama to authorize extensive bombing against an IS camp south of Sirte, Libya in the final hours of his presidency.<sup>2</sup> There are at least three broad strategies that have been debated for reducing the global threat posed by IS to an acceptable level and eventually defeating it.

The first of these is direct intervention. This strategy would involve the large scale deployment of U.S., allied, and partner boots on the ground in conjunction with heavy airpower and potentially naval deployments with the objective of rapidly taking back territory currently held by IS in Iraq and Syria as well as in Libya and potentially Nigeria, Afghanistan, and other areas where IS has thrived.

Such a strategy has a high potential to dismantle IS or potentially other groups that attempt to control territory or fight with conventional tactics that require massing forces of any significant size. Even moderate numbers

2 R. Burns, “US bombers strike 2 Islamic State camps in Libya,” Associated Press, January 19, 2017, <https://apnews.com/fad983e2715f479cb67a35cc667204be/us-bombers-strike-islamic-state-camps-libya>.

of U.S. boots on the ground can be very effective against insurgent groups like IS, which are far inferior in terms of intelligence, experience, resources, firepower, and other capabilities.

At the same time, however, the costs of such a strategy are enormous, not just in financial, but also in human terms. Clearly, once forces have been deployed on the ground, it will likely be difficult to withdraw them quickly. In addition, there is a risk that large numbers of troops on the ground could engender more resentment from not only the local population, but also in Muslim countries around the world. If this is the case, the initial success of the intervention strategy could prove short-lived — or even counter-productive.

An alternative strategy is containment, which would involve eschewing direct military action against the Islamic State in favor of efforts to reduce the damage that it does and prevent it from spreading further. In the short term, containment is clearly the lower cost option. It may also be a default outcome if key allies and partners are unwilling to pursue more aggressive options.

As a strategy, however, containment has several shortcomings. To begin with, it is unclear how the costs will work out over time, even if they are lower in the short run. A burn-out of IS could take a long time — it works at all. In the interim, IS would continue to plot and inspire attacks around the world, including in Europe — and Germany. And it should be noted that real containment is different from a “do-nothing” strategy in that it requires active efforts and hence resources to work. It does not relieve the pressures on border security, the need to track the outflow of potential terrorists from IS-controlled territory. For this reason it may increase

the need for domestic law enforcement measures, and potentially the pressure to trade civil liberties for security at home.

A third possible strategy is a light footprint strategy that aims to roll back IS over time. This strategy relies on special forces acting in conjunction with precision airpower and local partners to gradually push IS out of the territory it holds. Follow-on forces would then support reconstruction and reconciliation to help ameliorate local grievances that so often open the door to IS in the first place.

Like a more straightforward intervention strategy, this strategy also risks anti-Western blowback. Moreover, it is ultimately only as effective as its partners, who are often uncertain operationally and politically. In Libya, the United States found partners that fought with unexpected courage to oust IS from Sirte. It has had less success in Syria and several other parts of the world.

Nevertheless, the light footprint strategy represents something of a golden mean, and absent a silver bullet that no-one has found to disarm IS, appears the best strategy for the foreseeable future. It offers the opportunity to make meaningful progress against the threat and thereby defeat the narrative of IS’s inexorable ascendance, but to do so without deploying large numbers of boots on the ground. As Germany seeks to strengthen its armed forces in the face of growing regional insecurity, it should seriously consider deploying forces in support of this strategy — in Syria, Iraq, Libya, or elsewhere.

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