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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Prevent, Promote, and Govern: Rationalities of Islamism Prevention as Democracy Promotion in Germany

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Abstract

This article examines the intertwined political rationalities of "Islamism prevention" and democracy promotion in state-led programs in Germany. Drawing on critical scholarship on prevention, democracy promotion, and securitization, the article pursues two interrelated arguments. First, it shows that the politics of distinction between "Islam" and "Islamism" is not merely epistemological but constitutes a governing tool. Such distinctions racialize Muslim minorities by measuring them against unmarked standards of "proper" religion. Second, the article argues that democracy promotion programs tied to preventive rationalities depoliticize democracy by framing it as a stable order to be upheld instead of as a contested political project. This displaces deeper exclusions embedded in the modern nation-state and its racialized borders into individualized ideals like resilience, tolerance, or civic virtue.

Keywords: democracy promotion; governmentality; Islamism prevention; politics of distinction; racialization; securitization

Introduction

Throughout the last two decades preventive measures against "Islamism" have gradually expanded across Europe and in conjunction with the US-led global war on terror. Due to the impulse to identify, redirect, and immunize signs of Islamism or radicalization "in advance," the scope of prevention, the authorities and players called into action as well as the financial resources distributed have continually enlarged (Fadil et al. 2019; Qasem 2020; Said and Fouad 2018: 4). Notions like "primary" or "universal" prevention, common in prevention work, point to this proliferation, and so do spatial metaphors such as "Salafist milieu," "Islamist scene," "front area," "Islamist surroundings," or "informal milieu" (see Hummel et al. 2016: 8). In short, an elusive notion of "Islamism" has brought about invasive measures to prevent it.

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Some scholars have welcomed this "multi-agency approach" (Said and Fouad 2018: 9) as a counterbalance to the one-sided focus of security agencies and as a necessary step toward the inclusion of Muslim actors into programs of prevention (see, for example, Figlestahler and Katja 2019: 17). Scholars attentive to the discursive terrain in which Islamism is situated, have been more critical. They have argued that through its accumulated circulation, "Islamist radicalization" and its prevention became "hegemonized" to the extent that its wide-ranging, intrusive, and securitizing operations became normalized (Ellefsen 2021; Fadil et al. 2019; Kundnani 2015; Marquard and Sindyan 2022; Thal 2024). In this view, "multi-agency" is rather understood as "plural policing" (Ellefsen 2021). These works have been crucial in redirecting attention from *Islamism* as a substantive object of research to the discursive and institutional conditions that render the field of prevention seemingly urgent and intelligible. Building on these interventions and focusing on the German context this article follows up on and advances the discussions in three ways.

First, I argue that preventive rationalities do not simply respond to an already defined problem but actively constitute the domain of intervention. They do so by marking particular actors and practices as potentially dangerous while leaving unexamined the normative assumptions that authorize such markings. This perspective foregrounds the productive dimension of prevention and the ways in which it normalizes its necessity and operations.

Moving to the domain of "Islamism" prevention, next I show that these underlying standards hinge on hegemonized conceptions of "proper" or "acceptable" religion, which structure the definitional boundary between Islam and Islamism. These conceptions both do the work of categorization and simultaneously function as normative yardsticks for civic inclusion in that they shape expectations about appropriate religiosity for participation in the democratic public sphere. I agree with existing scholarship that prevention contributes to the securitized construction of the figure of the dangerous Muslim. However, I advance this scholarship further by arguing that largely unmarked religious normativities are at work in these processes and therefore merit closer scrutiny.

Third, I examine democracy promotion as a particularly revealing site where these dynamics intersect. Democracy promotion programs illuminate the tension between generalized suspicion and the cultivation of specific democratic virtues. Subjects positioned as potentially problematic are simultaneously encouraged to internalize idealized understandings of liberal democracy as inherently tolerant, peaceful, and inclusive. Engaging with critical analyses of the depoliticized conceptions of democracy prevalent in such programs (Bürgin 2021; Höhne 2022; Thal 2024), I bring this scholarship into conversation with the governance of religion in prevention. I argue that the narrow conception of democracy at work in these initiatives mirrors the underlying differentiation between acceptable and unacceptable forms of religion. It thereby delimits what counts as legitimate political agency for racialized religious minorities within liberal-secular nation-state frameworks.

As such, both Islamism prevention and democracy promotion can be understood as techniques of governmentality in the Foucauldian sense. They do not operate primarily through sanction or coercion. Instead, they regulate religious life by shaping

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norms and sensibilities. And they govern by orienting subjects toward governing themselves in accordance with liberal-secular democratic expectations. However, I simultaneously follow the scholarship that has cautioned against interpreting the dispersed character of governmental power as evidence for the retreat of state sovereignty (Brown 2006; Butler 2006; Dean 2001). The diffusion of preventive practices across civil society and the Muslim mileu does not diminish the state's role but rather rearticulates sovereign authority through pedagogical and other enabling forms of power.

I therefore mobilize the notions of "security dispositive" and "security apparatus" not as analytically opposed models of power, but to capture the co-implication of governmental and sovereign rationalities within contemporary prevention regimes. The dispositive designates the heterogeneous ensemble of discourses, institutions, and practices through which "Islamism" becomes intelligible and actionable. In turn, the apparatus foregrounds the anchoring of these dispersed techniques in state-sanctioned security logics. These terms signal that preventive governance operates neither beyond the state nor simply through it, but through their entanglement.

My analysis draws on state-led initiatives such as *Demokratie leben!* ("Living Democracy"), launched in 2015 by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs as the successor to earlier federal democracy promotion programs initiated in 2011 (called "*Demokratie stärken!*," *"Strengthening Democracy!")*. It currently provides the most significant federal funding for civil-society initiatives in this field and is primarily oriented toward young people. I do not approach these programs as objects of detailed empirical evaluation, nor do I offer an assessment of their implementation practices. Julika Bürgin (2021) and Leonie Thal (2024) have conducted excellent analyses of these initiatives. Instead, I treat such programs as analytically revealing sites through which broader rationalities of prevention and democracy promotion become visible.

Methodologically, I deploy a governmentality-inspired analysis of policy rationalities and programmatic grammars through which they are articulated. I examine how definitions of problems and normative assumptions are articulated within prevention and democracy-promotion frameworks. State-led prevention programs thus serve as empirically grounded entry points through which I ask a theoretical question situated at the intersection of democratic theory and the governance of religious plurality in liberal-secular nation-state contexts: what is at stake when racialized religious minorities are simultaneously framed as religiously suspect and democratically deficient on the basis of unmarked, hegemonic norms of "proper religion" and "proper democracy"?

By addressing this central question, my article contributes to broader debates in democratic theory by examining how practices of prevention and democracy promotion shape conceptions of legitimate political subjecthood. While I do not systematically engage with the scholarship on democratic theory, my article gestures toward agonistic approaches (cf. Mouffe 2000) and analyses of the tensions between democracy and securitization (cf. Brown 2006; Feldman 2011), as well as toward decolonial critiques that highlight racialized hierarchies within prevailing conceptions of democratic subjectivity (cf. Allen 2016; Coulthard 2014; Santos 2014). In the conclusion I explicitly take up these debates by indicating how a decolonial perspective

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could reframe approaches to democratic agency and the engagement of marginalized religious minorities beyond suspicion and normalization.

The grammar of prevention

"Prevention" derives from the Latin term *pre-venire* (precluding, anticipating, pre-empting). It means that measures and actions are taken prior to a certain event or to a certain condition, or it implies minimizing the expected damage of a calculated danger. Prevention was first implemented in the health sector within the threefold scheme of "primary" or "universal" prevention (reduction of new diseases), "secondary prevention" (shortening the duration and preventing chronic processes), and "tertiary prevention" (prevention or limitation of consequential damage) (see Caplan 1964).

This model, along with the medical vocabulary attached to it, has gradually seeped into other domains of social and political life (Bröckling 2008). It is also prevalent in the field of Islamism prevention: "primary," or "universal" prevention shall prevent the rise of Islamism prior to any risk; "secondary" prevention shall start when signs of "radicalization" are tangible. Tertiary prevention is to prevent targeted actors from causing damage or cure them from Islamism, as prevalent, for example, in programs for dropouts (see Glaser and Carmen 2016). As I will show later, democracy promotion is usually located in primary or universal prevention.

Prevention is extensive because risks, threats and dangers lurk everywhere: climate change, natural disasters, pandemics, wars, or terrorism (Bröckling 2008: 40). Moreover, prevention enjoys wide support because of the consensus that preventing damage is better than curing it. However, especially in the domain of social interactions and human behavior, danger is not an objective category but also discursively constructed. The discourse on the threat of (violent) Islamism, for example, has been significantly more present in the German public sphere and elsewhere in Europe in recent decades than, say the threat of racism or that of neo-fascism (cf. Thal 2024: chap. 3; Atali-Timmer and Mecheril 2022). As the scholarship on securitization has amply shown, danger can be performatively enacted to justify measures that may exceed the normal and even infringe upon fundamental rights (e.g., Bigo and Tsoukala 2008; Buzan et al. 1998; Huysmans 2006).

Policymakers signal their intent to intervene pre-emptively, and thus in a timely manner, to maintain or restore order. This temporal structure is central to the logic of prevention, as preventive measures rely on suspicion and on the anticipation of future harm that must be averted. Yet, paradoxically, such measures are often enacted in response to acute events, making prevention appear effective only in retrospect (Thal 2024: 112). A risk factor may include anything that deviates from the target norm. At the same time, the very distinction between norm and deviation is constitutive of what Ulrich Bröckling has termed "norms of normality" ("Normalitätsnormen," Bröckling 2008: 44). Because these norms are inherently flexible, this introduces another temporal dimension: the indefiniteness of prevention, which Bröckling succinctly captures: "Whoever seeks to prevent must never stop"[1] (ibid).

In the case of prevention of "political extremism," for example, "norms of normality" are constructed in dominant metaphors and spatial imaginaries such as the horseshoe

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or the circle, relying on vertical and horizontal distinctions (above–below, inside–outside, left–center–right) (see Bürgin 2021: 17, 43, 48). What is labeled extremist is determined by a predefined positive norm, which, however, is not objective or stable but the "result of a political option" (Fülberth 1997: 1213, quoted in Bürgin 2021: 16). Recalling that the "center-vs.-periphery extremism typology" emerged in the nineteenth century Europe with the rise of bourgeois society (i.e., the "center"), Thomas Höhne argues that the metaphor of the center is historically contingent (Höhne 2022: 73). As demonstrated by the middle class's willing support of Nazi rule, the center itself can become extremist (ibid). In a similar vein, "center" parties in Germany (and in other parts of Europe) have recently adopted and normalized far-right rhetoric and measures from restrictive border regimes to Islamophobic politics, simultaneously holding up the rhetoric to maintain the "dam" against the extreme far right (Strick 2025).

The unmarked norm as the positive counterpart to extremism thus ultimately determines which phenomena are considered extremist and in need of being prevented. For instance, as Julika Bürgin reminds, "market extremism" or "Christian extremism" (Bürgin 2021: 17)—and, I would add, extremism deriving from state institutions—do not figure in such categorizations, nor are they part of preventive politics. Ideally, prevention should not create but impede something. However, precisely because the domain of prevention must be defined beforehand, prevention is simultaneously a designing, curating and intervening force. This can culminate in the paradoxical construction of the "perpetrator without action" (Bröckling 2008: 38).[2]

Islamism prevention and the politics of distinction

If we translate these general remarks to Islamism prevention, we first need to note that precisely the programs in this field have been drafted as part of a larger security dispositive. Prevention can therefore, at any time, turn into repression (Höhne 2022: 78). This linkage is structurally embedded, even if prevention programs designed for civil society organizations explicitly distance themselves from state security agencies and their executive powers (see, for example, Oehlmann 2025: 38). Because of the close entanglement between state agencies and civil society organizations, both federal criminal offices and secret services have been engaged in joint prevention activities from schools to educational youth work to prisons (IMAG 2018: 16, quoted in Marquard 2024: 13). More importantly, the secret service also claims preventive functions by mapping and classifying organizations or movements as "hostile to the constitution" ("verfassungsfeindlich").[3]

Since 9/11 The *Office for the Protection of the Constitution* (Verfassungsschutz) has, in its annual reports, expanded the category of "Islamism" to the point where this term encompasses movements whose connections to Islam are limited, or entirely absent. The Berlin report from 2023, for example, refers to student movements who protested on university campuses in solidarity with Palestine. Their alleged proximity to "Islamism" is based on what the intelligence service describes as "supporters of anti-constitutional groups, particularly from the anti-Israel boycott spectrum and the far-left extremist scene" (Senate Department for the Interior and Sport Berlin 2024, 30). Such performative constructions of danger raise democratic-theoretical concerns.

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They recast political dissent into the register of technocratic classification and security management and thereby limit the space of democratic contestation.

Despite their expansive use of the notion of Islamism, security agencies and funding bodies refrain from explicitly placing the entire Muslim population under general suspicion. Doing so would openly violate constitutional principles of non-discrimination and risk undermining their own democratic legitimacy. They even tirelessly emphasize the importance of distinguishing between Islam and Islamism. In one of their brochures from 2018, *Demokratie Leben!,* for example, acknowledges "the particular challenge" for Islamism prevention practitioners "to navigate the relationship between *legitimate* religious practice and the *ideological instrumentalization* of Islam."[4]

However, the numerous definitions of "Islamism" or "religious extremism" invoked to support this distinction are often as broad and vague as prevailing definitions of "radicalization" (cf. Kundnani 2012; Thal 2024, chap. 3.1) and typologies of "radicalization cycles" (Marquard and Sindyan 2022: 28; see also Ceylan and Kiefer 2018). In reference to what he aptly terms "security knowledge," Werner Schiffauer (Schiffauer 2015a: 226) notes that even security agencies have made efforts to differentiate between suspicious and legitimate interpretations of Islam. While these definitions have undergone continual refinement, the categories themselves remain, in Schiffauer's words, "too cumbersome" and "inherently rigid" (ibid.).

More importantly, distinctions between Islam and Islamism underlie the performative reproduction of normality and deviation, central for prevention. It is performative because it contributes to the construction of the very boundaries it claims to neutrally "describe." Pedagogical guidelines, administrative categorizations, and security reporting thereby insert religious practices into classificatory schemes that differentiate between legitimate religion and suspicious politicization.

Despite ongoing efforts to draw distinctions, Islamism prevention relies on a shared premise: Islamism begins where Islam transcends the bounds of "legitimate religion" and thereby becomes pathological. Yet what exactly is meant by "legitimate religion" and "ideological instrumentalization" and from which perspective such separational assumptions are articulated, remains curiously ill-defined. As a result, prevention policies based on these definitions, however refined they are, ultimately place all Muslims under suspicion, especially those who do not conform to an ever-shifting normality norm. It falls to the interpretive authority and definitional power—state agents, experts or prevention practitioners—to determine when the threshold is reached.

In this vein, Carmen Figlestahler and Katja Schau argue in their evaluation of prevention initiatives against "anti-democratic Islamism" in Germany that the logic of prevention "always entails a certain degree of dramatization, which simultaneously contributes to the (re)production of problem groups through the very necessity of defining such groups" (Figlestahler and Katja 2019: 127). They conclude that "the practitioners adapt the risk and problem attributions of the same addressees depending on the perceived (situational, local) dramatization" (Figlestahler and Katja 2019: 135).

A particularly telling example of such a "dramatization" is the report *Advisory and Documentation Center for Confrontational Religious Expression* (*Anlauf- und Dokumentationsstelle konfrontative Religionsbekundung*), produced by the civil society organization DEVI e.V. (Association for Democracy and Diversity in Schools

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and Vocational Education), based in Berlin-*Neukölln* and funded through the federal program *Demokratie leben!*

I want to pause at DEVI e.V. for a moment not because it is representative of all civil society actors involved in prevention work. Indeed, it has been criticized for its racializing approach to Islamism (e.g., Nordbruch 2022).[5] However, its report explicitly makes tangible the normative boundaries teachers draw around "confrontational" religious practices. This renders DEVI a particularly illustrative case for how in-built assumptions about "normal" and "deviant" religion shape preventive interventions. Furthermore, DEVI is pivotal in that it explicitly frames educational settings as sites which require securitization. In cooperation with political authorities like the Mayor of *Neukölln* (Martin Hikel, *Social Democratic Party*), the association was to lay the groundwork for an official registry office in which cases of "confrontational religious expression" would be recorded—an endeavor which has not been realized to date.

DEVI's assessment is based on 15 interviews conducted with teachers in Berlin-*Neukölln*, a district with a comparatively high proportion of Muslim residents. Drawing on these interviews and a model developed within the Berlin State Program for the Prevention of Radicalization (*Berliner Landesprogramm Radikalisierungsprävention*), DEVI suggests that Islamism develops through six successive stages (DEVI 2021b: 27).[6] This step-by-step model shall serve as a practical guide for teachers to intervene early enough. In the interview section, DEVI quotes teachers who consider a "confrontational intent," when students "quickly gather for a group prayer in a busy, central place in the school to draw public attention to their religious practice" (DEVI 2021b: 17). In another section, a teacher is alert when "not even boys want to shower naked with boys" (DEVI 2021a: 16).

If Islamism is understood as the result of a gradual, ideologized and politicized transgression of "mere religion," then we must critically interrogate the epistemic foundations that underpin such an understanding. Even when Islamic religiosity is not dramatized, as in DEVI's example, the framework of Islamism prevention presupposes that Islam belongs to the delineable sphere of "religion" and should not intermingle with other domains—politics or ideology. Incidentally, approaches that either downplay the role of Islam altogether or seek to mobilize it as a positive resource for preventing Islamism (e.g., Kiefer 2020; Langner 2020) also rely on conventionalized understandings of religion as fulfilling particular social functions.

Dramatization (or de-dramatization for that matter) is not merely the outcome of situationally bound subjective perceptions. Rather, it is structurally enabled by the very framework of Islamism prevention and by hegemonized understandings of "religion."

In the previous sections, I have shown that the distinction between Islam and Islamism is not a neutral analytic clarification. Instead, it functions as a regulatory device that allows state actors to simultaneously disavow generalized suspicion and continuously define thresholds of acceptable religiosity. To highlight the hegemonic closures of acceptable "religion" in the following sections, I first turn to Michael Bergunder's seminal article *What is Religion?* (2011) and then argue for a genealogical reading of the sedimented knowledge that divides proper from improper religion.

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Genealogies of (proper) religion

Bergunder observes that religious studies feature a large range of often contradictory definitions of religion, most of which rely on a "general but unexplained understanding of religion" (ibid.: 12). He distinguishes between Religion 1—referring to explicit academic definitions—and Religion 2, denoting everyday understandings. Crucially, he argues that Religion 1 is built on the largely "unexplored, consensual and undisputed" assumptions of Religion 2 (ibid.: 13).

This distinction is relevant not only for the academic field of religious studies but also for the domain of Islamism prevention, where seemingly neutral and technical conceptions of Islam (Religion 1) are often implicitly shaped by everyday assumptions about what counts as "normal," "inconspicuous," or "privatized" religion (Religion 2). Because the discursive framework that defines these boundaries remains unexamined, a wide range of interventions becomes possible which are legitimized by assumptions that resonate with the hegemonic, yet unacknowledged, background of Religion 2. In this sense, we may speak of a "successful sedimentation" of knowledge in Laclau's terms (1990: 34), where contested and contingent notions of religion are stabilized into seemingly objective categories within prevention discourse.

Sedimented knowledge is both drawn upon and reproduced, when teachers claim to be alarmed by students who publicly perform Islamic practices in schools, as in the example of DEVI. Such reactions reveal how tacit knowledge repertoires about "appropriate religious practice" (Religion 2) can be mobilized in prevention work to classify behaviors as deviant. In this context, sedimented norms about "normal" (i.e., secularized, non-visible) religion implicitly structure what is deemed problematic.

I therefore suggest pushing Bergunder's reflections on the performative power of everyday understandings of religion (Religion 2) further. Sedimented knowledge stocks are often embodied. They do not only operate at a cognitive level but through affective and corporeal dispositions. In the case of DEVI, for example, embodied understandings of religion gain their hegemonic force through sedimented reiteration and everyday practices, rather than from any principled assessment of whether praying in the schoolyard or refusing to shower naked is right or wrong.

As scholars of critical secular studies have shown, secular affects and embodied norms also shape the regulatory frameworks of state institutions such as schools (Amir-Moazami 2016; Mahmood 2015; Scheer et al. 2019). When certain Islamic practices are inserted into a "ladder" of extremism, such assessments both draw on and reproduce these affective secular dispositions. Prevention frameworks can thus be understood as sites in which "secularity," as conceptualized by Saba Mahmood is enacted. These frameworks foreground "the epistemological and cultural ground on the basis of which religious claims can be authorized and validated" (Mahmood 2015: 206). They thereby actively enact normative distinctions between acceptable and suspect forms of religiosity.

Religion and its others

Taking Bergunder's suggestion one step further, the question arises how Religion 2 can be analyzed if it is largely inscribed and habituated within everyday life and state institutions. From his genealogical analysis, Bergunder concludes that "today's global

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use of 'religion' can be traced back with some plausibility to the late 19th and early 20th centuries" (ibid.: 54). What Bergunder leaves underexplored, however, are the effects of this formation for the governance of religious minorities and for the imperial entanglements of European nation-states.

As scholars like Theodore Vial, Tomoko Mazusawa, and Gil Anidjar have shown, this historical juncture witnessed the simultaneous invention of "good" and "bad" religion and of "good" and "bad" races, with Christianity as either the explicit or implicit frame of reference (Anidjar 2008; Masuzawa 2005; Vial 2016). While the theological underpinnings of these formations can be traced back to the early Middle Ages (Carr 2010; Moore 2007), the concept of "religion" acquired clearer contours in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, precisely when race became a structuring principle of modern national and colonial states and their instruments of knowledge production and governance of populations.

In her seminal study on the invention of "world religions," Mazusawa demonstrates that these constructions were fundamentally shaped by racial and linguistic classification schemes. Religious scholars and philologists forged alliances between a purportedly "Christian-Aryan" religion and Buddhism, while grouping Muslims and Jews together as "Semites" (see also Anidjar 2008). Christianity and its Buddhist counterparts were thereby granted a claim to universality, whereas Judaism was stripped of such aspirations and redefined as "diaspora," "minority," or "race." Islam, in turn, was cast as the immovable and inherently political opposite of Christianity—idealized as tamed and secularized. Islam thereby turned into an object in need of civilizing intervention.

It is within this context that European discourses on "political Islam" as a deviation from "mere religion" took shape (Salvatore 1999). The term "Islamism" emerged during the period of European imperial expansion, initially circulating among Enlightenment thinkers and philologists before being taken up by Orientalist scholarship (Mozaffari 2007 Salvatore 1999). In this understanding, Christianity, and particularly Protestantism, was declared to have internalized the rules of the Enlightenment through rationalization and self-criticism (Salvatore 1999, chap. 2; Batnitzky 2011).

This classificatory logic resonates with what Mahmood Mamdani has famously described as the distinction between "good" and "bad" Muslims in the context of the global War on Terror (Mamdani 2004). Germany should therefore not be understood as an exceptional case, but as one iteration of a wider transnational pattern. The genealogy, traced here, however, suggests that such distinctions predate 9/11 and are rooted in longer histories of defining "proper" religion within secular modernity.

In one way or another, genealogical works reveal a series of tensions that continue to resonate in different forms today: the modern understanding of religion, in its "primary baptism" (Bergunder 2011: 39), was predominantly made up of the ingredients of Christian, primarily Protestant theology. At the same time, disciplines like comparative religion and sociology claimed universality and generalizability. This generalizability also prominently features today in the field of Islamism prevention.

Genealogical perspectives are thus not merely exercises in intellectual history. They illuminate why Islam continues to appear as the paradigmatic case of religion exceeding its proper boundaries and why prevention frameworks treat it as particularly prone

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to politicization. Crucially, they help disentangle the pathologization of Islamic practices from both the internal logic of prevention and from more recent narratives of Muslim immigration. The tendency to frame such practices as signs of excessive piety, deviance, or early markers of "political Islam," and hence as precursors to violence, is then not simply a response to the perceived challenge of a so-called immigrant religion. It rather reflects a historically embedded pattern within modern secular nation-states to regulate and monitor religious minorities by defining their proper place vis-à-vis politics (see Asad 2003; Batnitzky 2011; Mahmood 2015).

The disproportionate scrutiny and exceptionalization of Islam as overtly or excessively "political" stand in stark contrast to the banalization of dominant religious traditions. The unmarked, normalized presence of Christianity in European public and political life is rarely framed as "political" or in need of closer scrutiny (Oliphant 2021). In Germany, this asymmetry is particularly pronounced: the state collects church taxes on behalf of recognized Christian churches, and Christian welfare organizations play a central role in the provision of social and educational services. Such forms of institutional entanglement are, however, rarely framed as "ideological" or as instances of "political religion" (Lewicki 2021; Rommelspacher 2017). Christianity is largely unmarked, precisely because its tacit inscription into the political sphere has been rendered invisible (Anidjar 2015; Lauwers 2022).

The involvement of Christian actors in (post)colonial violence (Jennings 2011) or Christian-Zionist movements that justify massive violations of international law vis-à-vis Palestinians with biblical claims to land (e.g., Maslalha 2007; Sharif 1983) has not generated comparable classificatory knowledge, nor has it been treated as a potential threat to the constitutional order. Even when forms of religiously legitimized violence or repression associated with the *Christian Right* are occasionally problematized in the German public sphere, Islam remains the exclusive focus of "religious extremism" in prevention programs. Not all religious traditions enjoy the privilege of appearing politically irrelevant. Some remain beyond political, public, pedagogical, or academic scrutiny, while others are continuously incited into hypervisibility, framed as suspect, and subjected to ongoing monitoring.

To conclude this section, by concealing the contingency of "religion" and its Christian inscriptions and by focusing exclusively on "Islamism," prevention programs are part of the discursive and institutional governance of racialized minorities' participation in liberal democratic societies. They both regulate religion and delimit the conditions under which democratic agency can be recognized.

It is in this sense that normative conceptions of religion underpinning Islamism prevention echo longstanding concerns in participatory democratic theory (e.g., Pateman 1970) that democratic inclusion presupposes and shapes particular kinds of subjectivities and civic comportment. In the context of Islamism prevention, this translates into presumptions about proper religiosity. As a result, some groups (in this context Muslims) are structurally rendered less legitimate participants in democratic will-formation.

Democracy promotion provides a particularly well-suited example to illustrate these structural exclusions of preventive governance. Framed as enhancing civic participation, these programs are nonetheless embedded within a preventive apparatus that casts certain groups as democratically suspect, potentially carrying undemocratic

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values and at risk of drifting into "abnormal" religiosity. It is this tension between democratic empowerment and racialized surveillance that I explore next. As I will show, democracy promotion reproduces the very classificatory distinctions that confine democratic participation to subjects who already conform to hegemonic norms of religiosity, civility, and political legitimacy.

Promoting democracy to prevent Islamism

Civil society initiatives for political education and youth engagement have existed in Germany since the 1970s. In the late 1990s, state programs explicitly aimed at promoting democracy and preventing right-wing extremism were established in response to racist attacks and extremist violence against immigrants. Following 9/11, their scope expanded to include the prevention of Islamist radicalization. This led to the gradual formation of a broad and complex network of federal and local initiatives (cf. Thal 2024: 63f). To date, such initiatives claim to address these phenomena jointly, despite fundamental differences: while "right-wing extremism" especially in its racist components cannot be understood as entirely external to the state.[7] "Islamism" has largely emerged from racialized groups positioned at the margins of state and society.[8]

Much could be said regarding the legacies and rationalities of such couplings and the methods deployed across different fields. However, in what follows, I focus on democracy promotion as a critical site in which the contradictions of preventive governance become legible. Framed as enhancing civic participation, these programs are nonetheless situated within a preventive apparatus that casts certain groups as democratically suspect. I therefore focus on two interrelated points. First, I examine the tensions inherent in the logics of prevention, promotion, and intervention, as they shape and are shaped by underlying conceptions of democracy. Second, I explore the implications of these tensions when racialized groups (i.e., Muslims) are simultaneously positioned as candidates for democratic empowerment and as subjects of surveillance. In both steps I highlight the broader theoretical stakes for understanding democracy in securitized contexts.

Promoting, preventing, and shaping

Prevention programs operating under the banner of democracy promotion are shaped by divergent and at times contradictory logics. While prevention aims to avert perceived threats (in our case, "Islamism"), democracy promotion is oriented toward cultivating specific democratic principles and civic virtues (see Benedikt 2024: 387; Figlestahler and Katja 2019: 132). These conflicting rationalities are well encapsulated in the often-repeated slogan "Promoting democracy. Shaping diversity. Preventing extremism."[9] They are also articulated in the funding guidelines of programs like *Demokratie Leben!*:

> The liberal democratic constitutional state also depends on civil society engagement that *promotes* peaceful and respectful coexistence and *opposes* phenomena hostile to humanity and democracy. Enabling and supporting such engagement is the aim of the federal program 'Demokratie leben!' and reflects the state's responsibility to actively uphold the liberal democratic order as part of its

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> concept of a militant democracy ('wehrhafte Demokratie'). (*Demokratie leben*, Förderrichtlinie 2024: 9, emphasis added).

Democracy promotion coupled with prevention thus pertains both to the protection of democratic institutions and the pedagogical functions of laws, programs, and regulatory mechanisms of governing populations. This variety is also translated into a wide range of projects and practices promoted by state democracy programs tied to prevention. Mostly located in the field of so-called primary or universal prevention these include activities ranging from leisure programs like theater workshops and sports activities to education of democratic rights and civic values. Democracy promotion in educational settings can take forms such as the "policing of teachers," "values-instilling police force," or "prevention work oriented toward critical approaches to racism." (Marquardt 2020: 153; Oehlmann 2025: 39). As generally mirrored in preventive rationalities, the alignment of democracy promotion and security logics is not incidental, but structural (Krüger 2020: 174).

Turning to the central question of how state agencies engaged in democracy promotion understand the very concept they seek to promote, it becomes apparent that "democracy" often remains caught in empty rhetoric. The programs are saturated with virtues like "tolerance," "respect," "peaceful coexistence," and "shaping diversity"—empty signifiers in the sense of Laclau (Laclau 1996). Such signifiers play a central role in the construction of hegemonic discourse by masking antagonisms, in-built exclusions and by instead performatively evoking equality and social cohesion.

Through this ideological self-exaltation of democracy, liberal-democratic ideals are conflated with institutional reality and enact the self-image of society as bound by "our democratic values—freedom and social cohesion" (Oehlmann 2025: 35). Democracy is not treated as a contested and dynamic project, but as a stable and already achieved condition, a bureaucratic consensus, whose boundaries must merely be protected. Precisely because democracy promotion is designed to protect the political and social order from "undemocratic" currents, democracy is narrowed down to something to be "upheld" (*Demokratie leben!*) rather than understood as a dynamic field of political struggle (Bürgin 2021). In this vein, Julika Bürgin has argued that by placing strong emphasis on the respect for the rule of law and loyalty to the democratic order, prevention programs instill state obedience rather than critique of state power (Bürgin 2021).

The related security ambitions are well spelled out in the concept of "militant democracy" (*wehrhafte Demokratie*) that evokes the security apparatus rather than the democratic participation of marginalized groups. This rationale could not be spelled out more succinctly than in the notion of a "democratic security architecture" (quoted in Bürgin 2021: 829), as described by Clemens Stolzenberg, then *Coordinator of Evaluation Projects on Crime and Extremism Prevention through Political Education* at the Federal Ministry of the Interior.

While the programs are infused with generic democratic ideals, they simultaneously construct their target groups as potentially deficient in these very values or even as latent threats to democracy (Benedikt 2024; Gill and Achour 2020). The proclaimed goal is to dissuade society, or rather, segments of the population ("target groups") from engaging in politically motivated acts of violence. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it is

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obvious that the objective is not merely to prevent crime, but also to educate targeted groups according to liberal ideals of the democratic citizen so that they embody specific kinds of subjectivities.

In the field of democracy promotion as a strategy to prevent Islamism, repression and sanction, deterrence and permanent control have therefore been supplemented with appeals to self-responsibility, ambiguity tolerance or resilience training (Bürgin 2021; Höhne 2022; Thal 2024). On the one hand, target groups are to be rendered resilient against extremism (or Islamism for that matter) on the other, they are expected to withstand the lived realities of social exclusion and racial discrimination. The subject at risk for radicalization is thus encouraged to cultivate self-confidence, self-reflexivity, ambiguity tolerance, and resilience. These qualities are meant to function not only as a shield against radical groups or preachers. They are also framed as necessary for coping with a dominant society that may cast doubt on their very belonging to the social fabric of the nation.

This dual function mirrors the broader immunological rationalities of prevention politics, which I highlighted in the first part of this article: democracy promotion shall immunize individuals and communities against ideological threats—rendering them "resilient." This medicalized framing reinforces the view of democracy as a pregiven norm. As Höhne puts it: "The effect of this transfer of disease metaphors into the political realm is the normalization of ideas about a 'healthy democracy', or conversely, the evocation of associations with a diseased, infected, and ultimately pathological democracy which must either be cured or, better yet, made future-proof and resilient through preventive measures." (Höhne 2022: 82).

It is important to add that the framing of political contestation as pathological deviance is not evenly distributed across all spectrums of "extremism" but disproportionately targets racialized groups. This dynamic has been widely documented by the scholarship on the immunological and medicalized logics of contemporary security regimes. These works have shown that "risk," "infection," or "dysfunction" are systematically projected onto Muslim and other racialized communities (cf. Puar 2017; Volpp 2002).

Strengthening civil society to promote democracy

Islamism is thus framed as a form of religious pathology, whereas democracy is represented as a neutral and fixed order, endangered only by ideologies considered external to the democratic system. But what role is assigned to civil society when the state addresses its actors as intermediaries tasked with transmitting a state-sanctioned understanding of democracy, to preemptively delegitimize or even actively reshape milieus deemed deviant or dangerous? Prevention programs and their practitioners frequently emphasize the clear-cut distinction between democracy promotion and the security apparatus (Oehlmann 2025: 38). Yet, this distinction rests on a normative ideal of separate and autonomous spheres that has never fully corresponded to the historical entanglements of state institutions and civil society. Rather than existing as independent realms, both have long been co-constituted. The close and often opaque entanglement between state institutions and civil society therefore raises questions

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not about a loss of autonomy, but about how this interdependence shapes the latter's function within a democratic framework.

The liberal democratic theories underpinning initiatives like *Demokratie leben!* conceptualize civil society as a critical counterweight to extremism, as a space that challenges authority, defends pluralism, resists racism, and advances social justice. In practice, however, state-organized democracy promotion institutionalizes structural dependencies. Civil society organizations operate within frameworks largely defined by the state, which constrains their capacity to critically engage with existing power relations. At the same time, by relegating "anti-democratic" currents to "society," state agencies externalize these dynamics and reintroduce a functional distinction between state and society that obscures their mutual entanglement.

This ambivalence between proximity and detachment is reinforced by funding structures. Although the budgets for the program *Demokratie leben!* have been steadily increased, especially for the field of Islamism prevention,[10] the funding process itself is characterized by vague application criteria, strict financial oversight, and opaque impact (cf. Bürgin 2021). This creates a competitive environment in which civil society actors are incentivized to align their work with government-defined priorities and narratives (Bürgin 2021; Thal 2024: 85 f.). Bürgin argues that these actors are only the "ultimate recipients of funding" without shaping the allocation or design of the funding processes: "Only in exceptional cases is their action political in the sense of a public debate about the political aims of their educational work" (Bürgin 2021: 10).

In addition to Bürgin's important observations, I want to emphasize that the scarcity of funding and resources is not accidental but in-built as a mechanism of control. It may reinforce the surveillance of vulnerable populations instead of critically examining how securitization undermines democratic principles. State agents thereby not only monitor civil society practices but also govern them through rewarding or punishing via (de)funding. This tension becomes tangible in concrete cases. In 2016, for example, the German Ministry for Family Affairs cut off funding for the *Federation of Islamic Associations in Hessen* (*Deutsch-Islamischer Vereinsverband Rhein-Main*), after the domestic *Office for the Protection of the Constitution* agency raised concerns about alleged links to the *Muslim Brotherhood*.[11] The problem with such accusations is that the *Office for the Protection of the Constitution* usually does not disclose what role the Muslim Brotherhood precisely played or why this affiliation would, by definition, undermine Germany's democracy (see Schiffauer 2015b).[12]

Patterns of conditionality where access to funding is tied to political alignment can also be observed in more recent developments. Following the Hamas attack in southern Israel on 7 October 2023, the German government significantly expanded funding streams aimed at combating "Israel-related antisemitism," while explicitly linking it to "Islamism." At the same time, civil society organizations that foregrounded Israeli occupation, ethnic cleansing or framed Israel's atrocity crimes as genocide have faced defunding, and intense public discreditation.[13] In a similar pattern of reward and sanction, the current *Minister of Education*, Karin Prien, announced plans to reform the *Demokratie leben!* program, claiming that one could not fight against "rightwing extremism by funding leftwing activists."[14]

A further example of political pressures on certain civil society organizations is a "Written Request" (*Kleine Anfrage*) submitted by the CDU/CSU parliamentary group.

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It questioned the "political neutrality" of several publicly funded organizations, including investigative journalism platforms, journalist networks with migrant backgrounds, *Greenpeace, Attac*, or the grassroots initiative *Omas gegen Rechts* ("Grannies Against the Far Right").[15] In this way, both civil actors and targeted groups are drawn into a cycle of loyalty that renders them legible to the state and thereby increases the state's capacities to surveil and monitor.

Sanitizing structural racism

Upon closer scrutiny, the seemingly opposing logics of promoting and preventing therefore converge. They are grounded in ideals of the liberal-democratic order and the model citizen who understands and accepts the separation of religion and politics and who internalizes a prescribed set of democratic virtues, while refraining from foregrounding the exclusionary structures in-built into state institutions. Democracy promotion programs are thus governmental technologies that cultivate desirable forms of civic behavior while marginalizing those deemed incompatible with liberal-democratic norms according to dominant rationalities of rule. In a Foucauldian sense, this kind of governance of populations does not primarily rest on coercion, but on subtle practices of classification, normalization, and guidance. Most importantly, it is aimed at molding conduct.

Yet, as Islamism prevention most clearly shows, not all populations are addressed equally. Specific groups are singled out as particularly suspicious and interrogated as being in need of particular intervention. This conundrum inscribed into "universal prevention" becomes especially salient regarding the target group "Muslims." While programs like *Demokratie Leben!* added prevention of "hostility toward Islam" or Muslims (*Islamfeindlichkeit*/*Muslimfeindlichkeit*) to its agenda, they still structurally intertwined it with Islamism prevention. Civil society organizations are thereby effectively compelled to frame initiatives that address anti-Muslim racism within the logic of Islamism prevention to secure state funding. Since anti-Muslim racism is both more pervasive and institutionally deeply embedded, it has become an open secret that organizations often rebrand anti-racism initiatives as Islamism prevention to secure funding (Qasem 2020; Thal 2024). The structural dependencies in this field further tie anti-racism work into logics of surveillance and loyalty and render systemic critique difficult, if not impossible.

At the same time, "hostility toward Islam" or Muslims is still predominantly framed as individual prejudice rather than as structural racism. The final evaluation report of the projects funded by *Demokratie leben!* confirms this tendency. Project actors describe structural forms of anti-Muslim racism as a central societal phenomenon. They highlight exclusionary institutional structures, limited access to the public sphere for racialized groups, and mainstream society's homogenizing gaze towards Muslims (cf. Aue et al. 2024: 65). Yet, these diagnoses remain largely contextual observations of practitioners instead of priorities that guide the program's interventions. The program continues to focus on individual attitudes, competencies, and behavioral change. More importantly, it omits engagement with structural power relations or with racism rooted in state institutions, including those responsible for administering democracy promotion and extremism prevention programs.

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Racism is thereby recast as a form of "extremism" and positioned as a pathological deviation from an otherwise intact democratic order. Its recognition is limited to its presumed role as a driver of Islamist radicalization (Qasem 2019) and not as a systemic and historically embedded structure that long predates the post-migration presence of Muslims in Europe. This raises the basic theoretical question of how a racialized group that remains structurally marginalized from democratic processes, and sometimes even excluded from full political membership, can be called upon to embody democratic virtues defined by institutions that are themselves implicated in these very exclusions.

This tension points to a deeper problem rarely addressed in democracy promotion and prevention itself or in their critical assessments: modern liberal democracies are organized as nation-states and therefore always simultaneously *racial states* as conceptualized by Theo Goldberg (Goldberg 2002). They govern democratic belonging not only through external and internal borders, but also through uneven distributions of citizenship rights and conditional inclusion based on flexible ideals of loyalty (cf. Amir-Moazami 2022). Debates over Islam's place in Germany, restrictive citizenship rules, and recurring debates and legal rulings over veiling, circumcision, or public prayer reveal the extent to which Muslims have become the central marker of the nation-state's boundaries. They are repeatedly interrogated and portrayed as the main challenge, if not a threat, to liberal values and democracy itself (cf. Amir-Moazami 2022; Cornelia 2019).

Democracy promotion obscures these bordering technologies and hierarchizations of "ways of life" that are in-built within the nation-state form. Instead, it translates these structural inequalities into questions of civic attitude, tolerance or resilience. This leads to displacement. Structural questions of redistribution, racial hierarchy, and equal participation in democratic will-formation are recast as pedagogical problems which position Muslims as subjects in need of democratic education. Building on my earlier analysis of implicit normative notions of religion in prevention programs, a central contradiction emerges. Singling out Muslims for prevention against "religious extremism" is not only discriminatory within a liberal-democratic framework committed to equality, but also potentially reinforces the very exclusions it claims to address. Democracy promotion as prevention against Islamism does not innocently foster democratic participation but instead functions to immunize democracy against the very populations it continuously racializes.

Conclusion

In this article, I developed two interrelated arguments. First, I showed that the distinction between Islam and Islamism, central to prevention politics, is not merely epistemological. It functions as a tool of governance that enables wide-ranging forms of state intervention. Democracy promotion is one such intervention. It operates through classificatory logics that define, approach, and govern subjects in ways aligned with broader security norms. Second, I argued that state-led democracy promotion implicitly prescribes a specific model of democratic participation which prioritizes liberal tolerance and self-reflection and sidelines structural critique. This mirrors the logic of Islamism prevention, where attention is directed toward individual attitudes instead of

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the (geo)political and socio-economic conditions that shape exclusion, marginalization, and ultimately violence (cf. De Koning 2012; Fadil et al. 2019; Kundnani 2015; Qasem 2019).

Bringing these discussions together, I argued that both Islamism prevention and democracy promotion operate as governmental techniques of subject formation. They depoliticize both religion and democracy by pre-emptively conditioning Muslim engagement in public life according to predefined ideals. A preventive approach that claims to be genuinely universal would have to take *context* seriously in the broadest sense: the postcolonial repercussions of global inequalities, geopolitical entanglements, political economies as much as the curtailed democratic participation of groups collectively marked as suspicious.

A more radical approach to democracy requires moving beyond securitized logics and liberal frameworks that leave intact the disciplinary and exclusionary powers of the nation-state. This entails examining state institutions including schools, the police or intelligence services not as autonomous guardians of democracy but as actors complicit in racializing hierarchies and undemocratic currents. It further requires interrogating the secular state's role in producing compliant forms of religion by determining whose (religious) lives are securitized and whose remain outside the radar or even receive additional state support. This differential scrutiny of certain religious groups echoes debates on the differential valuation of lives in liberal democracies (cf. Butler 2009). Above all, we would need to foreground power asymmetries and challenge the false presumption of equal starting points for democratic deliberation and religious plurality.

Rethinking democracy beyond security aspirations ultimately requires a shift from governing subjects through pre-emptive classification toward opening possibilities for democratic agency unburdened by suspicion and the epistemic prerequisites of hegemonic models of religion. For the field examined here, this implies cultivating a democratic ethos that is attentive to the political aspirations of marginalized groups. An ethos that listens carefully and engages with Muslim voices as contributors to a project of democracy that is dynamic and contested.

While this article has not developed explicitly in this direction, my analysis gestures toward debates in decolonial democratic theory that question who is recognized as a democratic subject and how democratic norms are historically shaped through racializing and civilizational hierarchies (cf. Allen 2016; Coulthard 2014; Santos 2014). Taking these debates seriously for my field of inquiry would open possibilities for reimagining democracy not as a pre-given order into which marginalized (religious) minorities must be squeezed, but as a political field that can be transformed through their claims, practices, and repertoires of knowledge. It calls for opening spaces that engage Muslim subjectivities as political interlocutors that shape democratic concepts and practices, instead of treating them as objects to be evaluated against preformatted liberal-democratic norms, security concerns and norms of religiosity. This move redirects us toward a more relational understanding of democracy that is *co*-produced through contestation over the very terms of the conversation.

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Notes

1. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

2. A recent example for preventive intervention in the name of security in Germany are the closures of Shi'a centers based on allegations that these held ties to the Islamic Republic of Iran and to Hezbollah (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/16/german-police-raid-islamic-organisation-over-alleged-ties-to-hezbollah). Another example are the numerous pre-emptive prohibitions of Palestine solidarity protests before and more so after the Hamas attacks in the South of Israel on 7 of October 2023, justified with recurrence to security risks and "incitement to antisemitic hatred" (see Nauman 2023).

3. See https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/EN/about-us/mission-and-working-methods/protecting-the-constitution/protecting-the-constitution. For a critical assessment of the wide stretch of the label "hostile to the constitution" and the effects for Islamic organizations and individuals, see Schiffauer 2015a, 2015b.

4. https://www.bmbfsfj.bund.de/resource/blob/128550/0af653aa41e6aeac845393731154b0cd/projekte-zur-praevention-rechtsradikaler-radikalisierung-data.pdf, emphasis added).

5. See also the public statement, signed by civil society organizations and scholars and https://www.neue-deutsche-organisationen.de/blogbeitrag/stellungnahme-zum-neukoellner-projekt-anlauf-und-dokumentationsstelle-konfrontative-religionsbekundung.

6. "Stage 1: A particular interest in Islamist content, cultures, groups, or individuals, characterized by openness.

Stage 2: Initial active participation in Islamist activities: online chats, personal meetings, reading materials, etc.

Stage 3: Continuous participation and the development of personal relationships.

Stage 4: New identity: accelerated adoption of Islamist content and behaviors; severing of previous personal relationships.

Stage 5: Complete identification with and consolidation of Islamist lifestyles; assumption of functions or roles.

Stage 6: A range extending from the commission of criminal offenses to imprisonment or living underground."

7. A striking example is the so-called *NSU complex* (National Socialist Underground), a series of racist murders and bomb attacks carried out between 2000 and 2007. For over a decade, police and intelligence agencies consistently failed to recognize the crimes as racist violence, instead criminalizing the victims' families and communities. Later investigations revealed extensive failures, cover-ups, and the destruction of intelligence files. They exposed deep entanglements between far-right networks and components of the security apparatus (cf. Ayata 2015).

8. Fatoş Atali-Timmer and Paul Mecheril cite figures from 2020 which show that under the category of "politically motivated crime," 22,537 cases were classified as "right-wing," whereas 409 fell under "religious-ideological" (BMI 2021: 25, cited in Atali-Timmer and Mecheril 2022: 123). Yet prevention programs recurrently equate and partly even link the different kinds of extremisms together.

9. See Demokratie Leben!: https://www.demokratie-leben.de/dl/programm/ueber-demokratie-leben).

10. From 2015 to 2019 the funding volume was increased from €40.5 million in 2015 to €115.5 million in 2019 (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2024: 2). In 2021, the funding amount was increased to €150.5 million (BMFSFJ: no p.)."

11. https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/bundesprogramm-islamisten-101.html.

12. The logic of "guilt by association" has increasingly functioned as a mechanism to delegitimize Islamic organizations. As Werner Schiffauer notes, inclusion in intelligence service reports on such grounds can have

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far-reaching consequences by effectively marginalizing organizations and restricting their public legitimacy (Schiffauer 2020).

13. https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/erst-antisemitismusvorwurfe-nun-unregelmassigkeiten-berliner-senat-verhangt-forderstopp-fur-frieda-frauenzentrum–das-kundigt-seine-madchenprojekte-11879036.html; https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/streit-um-foerdergelder-in-berlin-wie-antisemitisch-ist-der-100.html.

14. https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/man-kann-rechtsextremismus-nicht-ueber-linke-aktivisten-bekaempfen-prien-kuendigt-ueberpruefung-von–100.html.

15. https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/150/2015035.pdf.

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