



December 2023

# Anti-Semitism, racism and social cohesion

## A look at Germany in times of escalating conflict in the Middle East

The current war in the Middle East following the terrorist attack on Israel by Hamas on October 7 is having an impact in Germany – and revealing cracks in German society. One cause of concern is the anti-Semitism which is being expressed more and more openly, and not only on the country's streets, where Hamas's actions are celebrated. It can also be seen in the dramatic increase in anti-Semitic attacks. In particular, anti-Semitism among the Muslim population has once again become the focus of public debate. At the same time, Muslims are also experiencing a high degree of hostility. An atmosphere of incivility has developed in which more and more people are even expressing discriminatory and hateful attitudes both online and in public.

How can we prevent such prejudices and hate speech directed against certain communities from intensifying during the current political crisis?

How can we ensure social cohesion in the present situation? And how can we successfully counter all types of inhumane attitudes, including anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim beliefs?

Against the background of these pressing questions, this publication offers initial insights into the findings from an ongoing Bertelsmann Stiftung study on anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim attitudes in Germany. The basis for the study is the 2023 Religion Monitor, which provides international comparative data. Data for the Religion Monitor were collected before the current escalation of the Middle East conflict, but shed light on important underlying factors. The complete report on this subject will be published at a later date.

### Religion Monitor: Methodology in brief

Data for the 2023 Religion Monitor were collected by the infas Institute for Applied Social Science on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. In Germany, the survey was based on a sample selected from the country's official register of residents, supplemented by a sample based on an online access panel; weighting procedures were used to link the two samples. The data for Germany were further supplemented by responses from a total of 717 Muslim individuals from various countries of origin, allowing a more precise analysis of Germany's largest religious minority. For analyses of the overall population, answers from these respondents were downweighted to 8 percent to reflect the actual share of the Muslim population in German society. The 2023 Religion Monitor continues the surveys of previous years – 2009, 2013 and 2017 – which query individuals in Germany 16 years or older.

Surveys were also conducted in France, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, the UK and the US based on online access panels. The statistical population for the international modules was comprised of individuals 16 or older living in each country and having Internet access – without additional data from Muslim respondents.

The total dataset is comprised of 10,657 respondents distributed as follows: Germany = 4,363 respondents (of which 717 were Muslim), France = 1,065, Netherlands = 1,051, Spain = 1,046, Poland = 1,046, UK = 1,045, US = 1,041. The surveys took place in June and July 2022.

### Anti-Semitic attitudes are widespread

For several years now – and even more so since the terrorist attack by Hamas – Jews in Germany have been subject to increased hostility and attacks. These, in turn, have allowed various strains of anti-Semitism to become evident. In addition to deeply rooted anti-Semitic beliefs, which are spreading more and more openly from the right-wing fringes of society to all segments of the population, anti-Semitism directed towards Israel is acquiring a new dimension. Here, the state of Israel takes the place of Jews collectively and serves as a screen onto which anti-Semitic prejudices can be projected. In some cases, this is expressed by comparing Israel to National Socialism, in that the situation of Palestinians today is equated with what Jews in Nazi Germany experienced. In addition to traditional and Israel-related anti-Semitism, a third form is so-called secondary anti-Semitism, which relativizes the Holocaust and reverses the victim-perpetrator role, for example by calling for Germany to finally “draw a line” and put its past behind it.

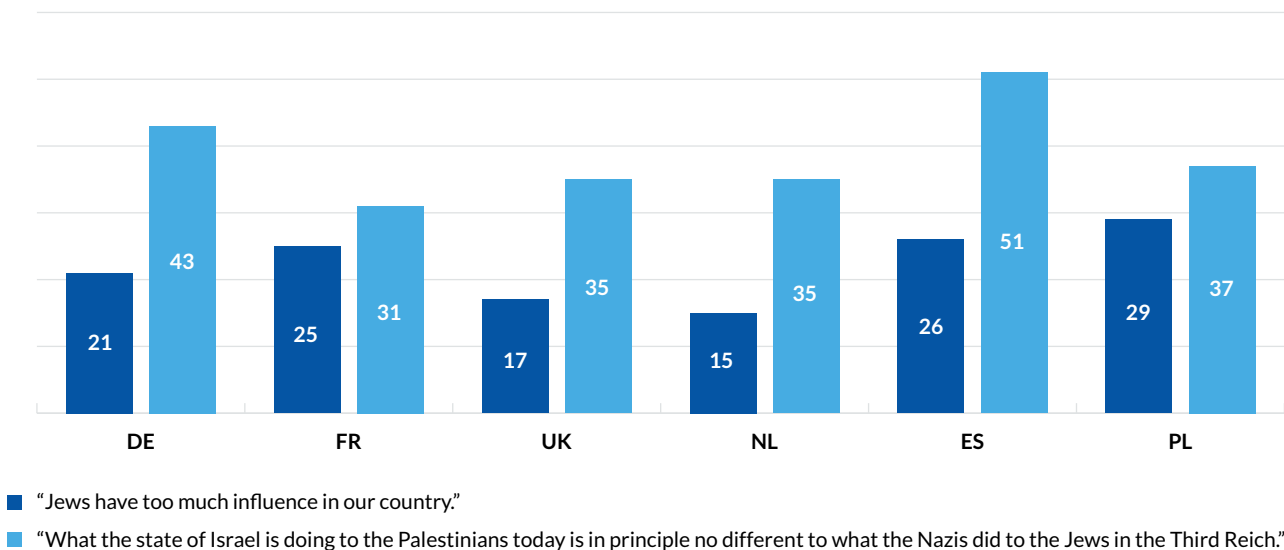
Anti-Semitism is a cause of concern and a threat – and not only to the approximately 225,000 Jews living in Germany. It also subverts the basic beliefs underpinning democracy in the Federal Republic, for which the lessons of the Holocaust and its preceding history of discrimination and social exclusion play a crucial role. Some forms of anti-Semitism often seen on the extreme right of the political spectrum dangerously combine traditional animosity towards Jews and pseudo-scientific racism to form an all-encompassing conspiracy theory. Today, however, anti-Semitism is not limited to the right-wing fringe, but can be found throughout German society. In recent weeks, for example, attention has focused on the anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism among leftist and Muslim groups that has sometimes been unreservedly expressed during the current conflict. The different actors emphasize different aspects of anti-Semitism; what they have in common, however, is the assertion of a “global Jewish conspiracy,” i.e. that Jews – and, in parallel, Israel – control world events, including the media, judiciary and political parties.

The current Religion Monitor empirically examines two manifestations of anti-Semitism: on the one hand, “classic” anti-Semitism, which advances conspiracy narratives in which Jews are especially influential and powerful; and, on the other, criticism of Israeli politics, to the extent the criticism takes on anti-Semitic traits or generalizes and defames in an “anti-Jewish” manner.

The Religion Monitor surveys show that anti-Semitic attitudes are found not only in Germany, but are

widespread in large sections of the European population. For example, about a third to half of the respondents in the European countries surveyed agree with the statement “What the state of Israel is doing to the Palestinians today is in principle no different to what the Nazis did to the Jews in the Third Reich.” In Germany, 43 percent of respondents agree with this statement, a significantly higher figure than the average (38 percent) in the seven countries that were surveyed.

FIGURE 1 Agreement with anti-Semitic statements in European countries (in %)



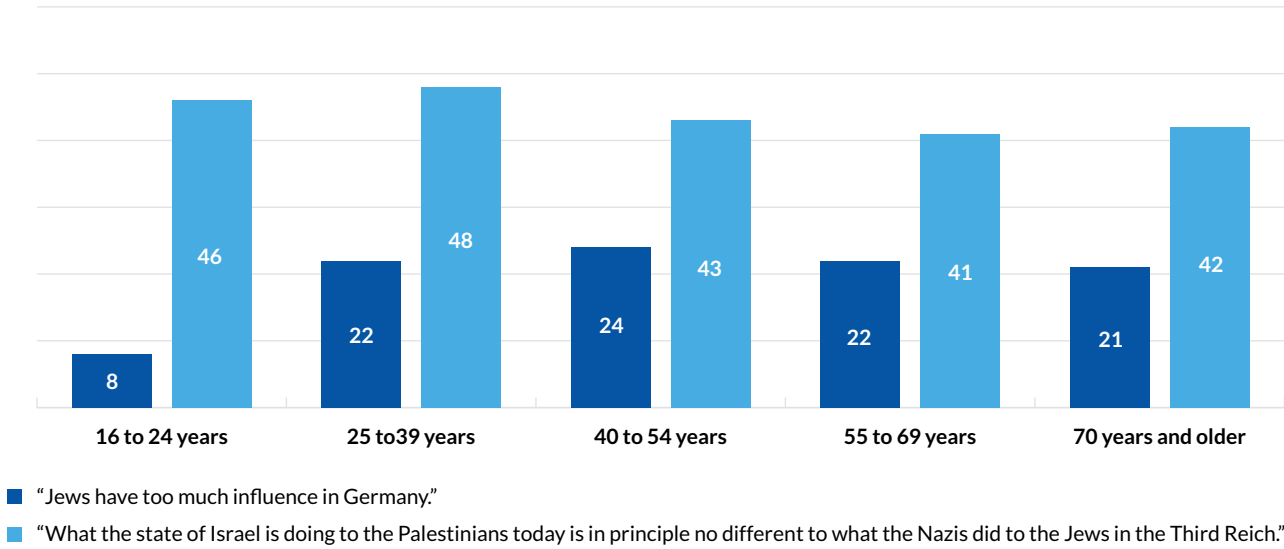
Source: Religion Monitor 2023; Basis: population in each country 16 years or older, weighted

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The classic anti-Semitic assertion that Jews have too much influence is supported by between 15 percent (Netherlands) and 29 percent (Poland) of respondents in the countries surveyed. In Germany, one person in five holds this opinion (21 percent).

A closer look at the situation in Germany reveals differences among the country’s various age groups.

FIGURE 2 Agreement with anti-Semitic statements in Germany by age group (in %)



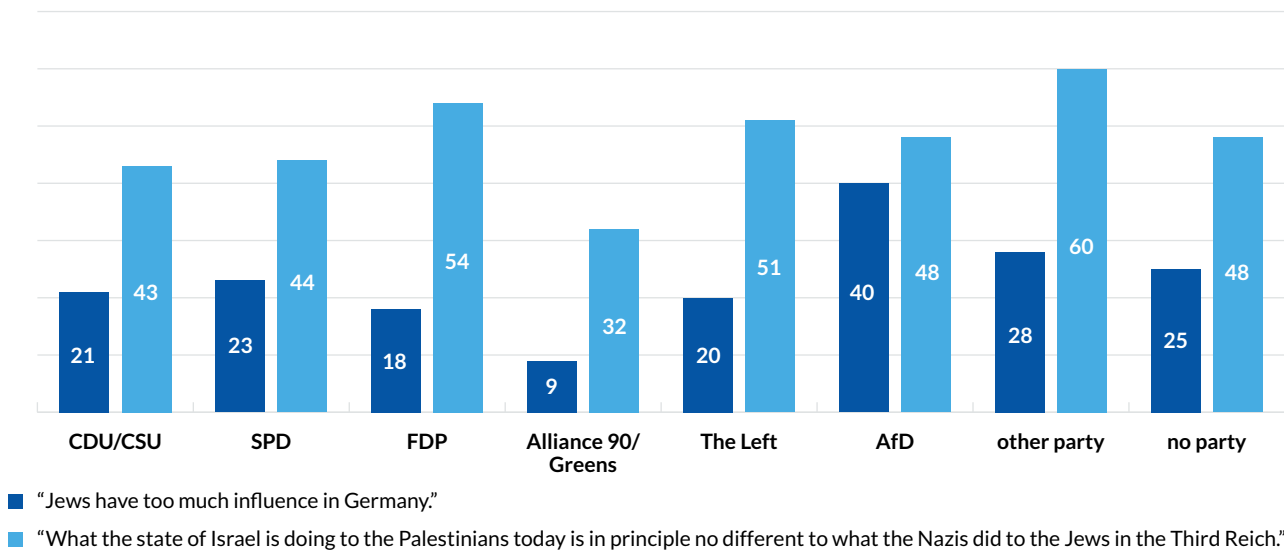
Source: Religion Monitor 2023; Basis: German population (n=4,363), weighted

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Among people under the age of 25, only a minority of 8 percent have classically anti-Semitic attitudes ("too much influence"); among older cohorts, agreement ranges from over a fifth to a quarter. This, however, is not proof that anti-Semitic beliefs have little

resonance among young people. Rather, we see a shift here towards Israel-related anti-Semitic attitudes, which are held by almost one person in two in Germany between the ages of 16 and 24.

FIGURE 3 Agreement with anti-Semitic statements by party affiliation (in %)



Source: Religion Monitor 2023; Basis: German population (n=4,363), weighted

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Party affiliation also plays a role when it comes to anti-Semitic attitudes among respondents. Unsurprisingly, classically anti-Semitic beliefs are held primarily by supporters of the right-wing AfD party (40 percent). Empirical data from the Religion Monitor reveal, however, that anti-Semitic beliefs are found well beyond the extreme right – and extend all the way to the middle of the political spectrum. For example, 43 and 44 percent of CDU/CSU and SPD supporters, respectively, hold Israel-related anti-Semitic beliefs. The figure is even higher among FDP supporters, at 54 percent. The classic anti-Semitic belief that Jews have too much influence in Germany can be found among approximately one-fifth of the supporters of each of these three traditional parties. Anti-Semitic attitudes are just as common in the Left party. Such attitudes are least widespread among supporters of the Greens; relatively speaking, this segment of the political spectrum seems to be the most immune to anti-Semitic attitudes.

### Anti-Semitism in the Muslim community

Public debate in Germany is currently focusing on the anti-Semitism that is sometimes aggressively expressed by the country’s Muslim community. The Religion Monitor surveys, which were conducted

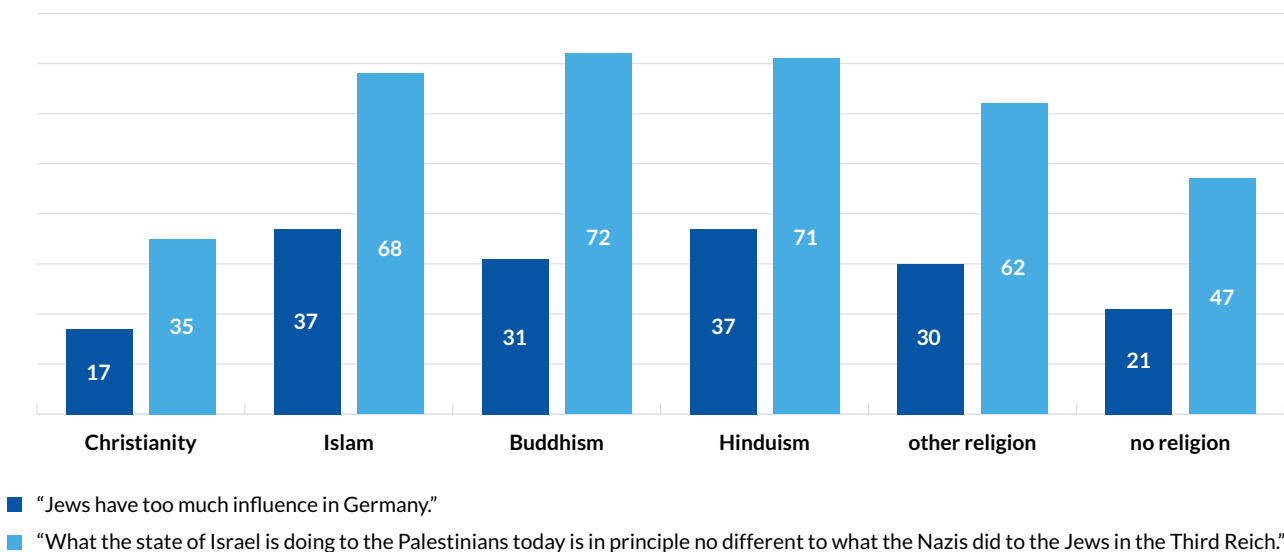
before the current escalation of the Middle East conflict, show that anti-Semitic prejudice is more widespread in Germany’s Muslim population than in German society as a whole.

For example, 68 percent of Muslims in Germany equate the treatment of Palestinians by Israel with what the Nazis did to the Jews. The figure for the German population as a whole is 43 percent. Moreover, 37 percent of Muslims believe that Jews have too much influence in Germany (overall population: 21 percent).

Similarly high levels of agreement can also be found among Buddhist and Hindu respondents. In all three cases, these are religious communities that have become established in Germany as a result of global migration flows. This could therefore indicate that being an immigrant in Germany and/or having a background as an immigrant are relevant factors for holding such beliefs. This could apply in particular to those whose religious affiliation is openly visible, for example due to head coverings that are perceived as religious.

The 2017 report by Germany’s Independent Expert Commission on Anti-Semitism notes that the situation of being a minority in Germany can foster “victimization competition.” The latter is seen as a socio-psychological

FIGURE 4 Agreement with anti-Semitic statements in Germany by religious affiliation (in %)

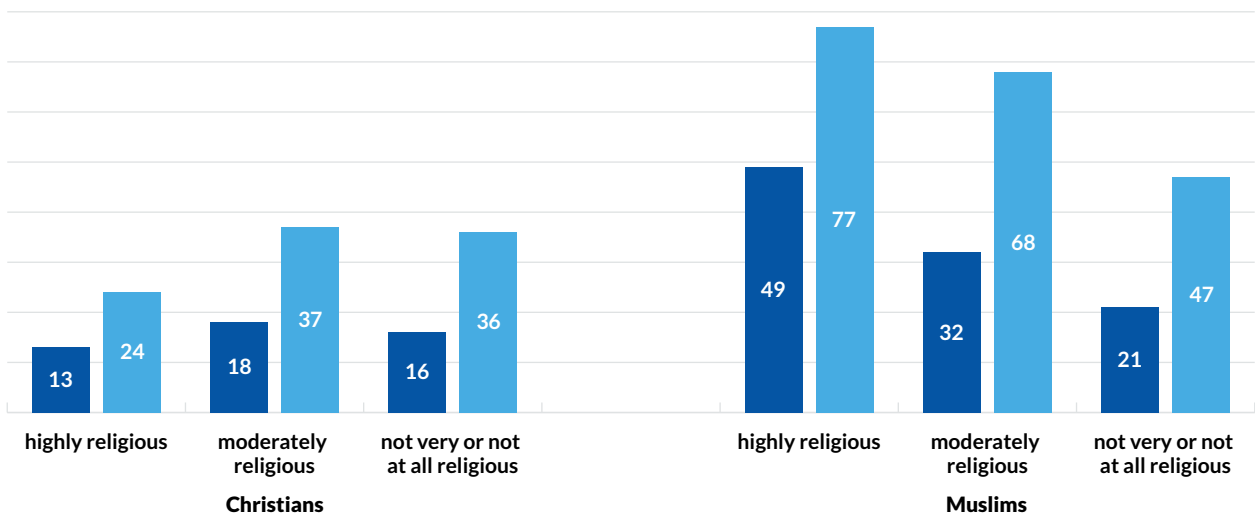


Source: Religion Monitor 2023; Basis: German population (n=4,363), weighted

factor that could, alongside other religious and political aspects, favor anti-Semitic attitudes in the Muslim population. A project conducted in schools in 2019 by the Federal Agency for Civic Education produced a similar finding, namely that many Muslims feel the anti-Muslim hostility widespread in society receives too little attention, while there is considerable awareness of anti-Semitism. Efforts to gain greater recognition of this situation and the frustration that ensues when those efforts are not successful can then promote anti-Semitic resentment. This could also apply to other minorities.

It is also revealing that differences to the general population diminish considerably when we look at Muslims who have little or no religious affiliation. The anti-Semitic attitudes in this group hardly differ from society as a whole. In contrast, anti-Semitic views are much more prevalent among Muslims who are moderately or highly religious. This suggests the influence of religious factors.

FIGURE 5 Agreement with anti-Semitic statements by religiosity\* (in %)

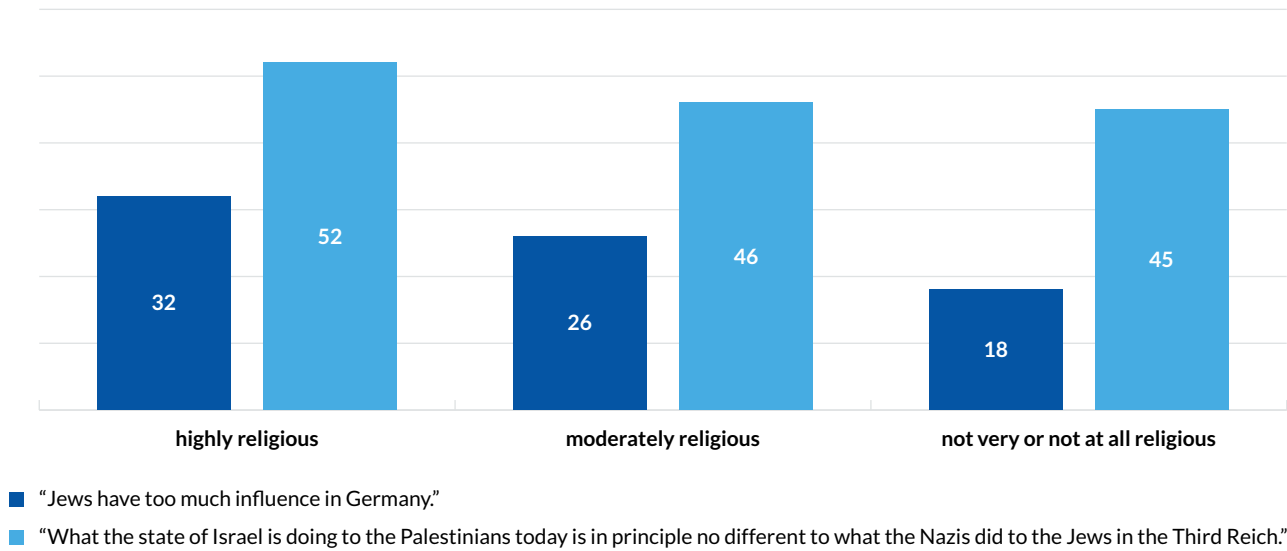


- "Jews have too much influence in Germany."
- "What the state of Israel is doing to the Palestinians today is in principle no different to what the Nazis did to the Jews in the Third Reich."

\*The basis for the assessment of religiosity is the so-called centrality index, which aggregates various dimensions of religious expression and experience, such as religious upbringing, belief in God, frequency of prayer and attendance at religious services.

Source: Religion Monitor 2023; Basis: Christian and Muslim population in Germany, weighted

FIGURE 6 Agreement with anti-Semitic statements among immigrant Christians (in %)



Source: Religion Monitor 2023; Basis: immigrant Christian population in Germany, weighted

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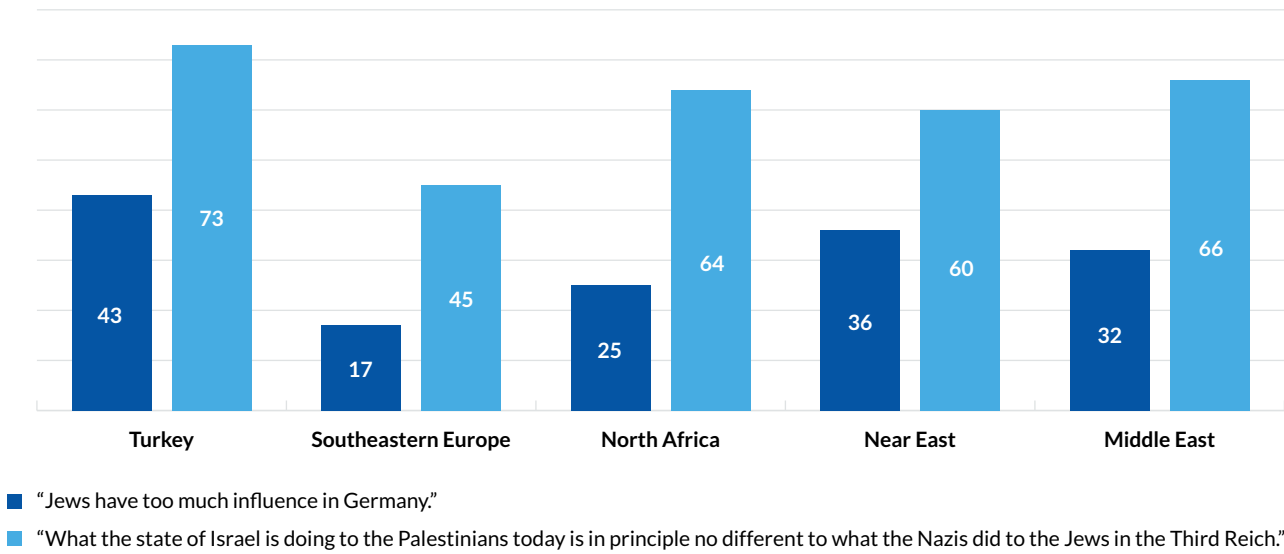
It is striking that anti-Semitic attitudes are significantly less widespread among highly religious Christians than among Christians who are less religious. Presumably this has to do with efforts by the churches in Germany after the Holocaust to critically confront their centuries-long history of hostility towards the Jews and their role in the persecution of the Jews, efforts that have shaped the identity of their members. However, when we look specifically at Christians who immigrated to Germany and were not socialized by the country’s churches to the same degree, we also see a correlation between greater religiosity and more pronounced anti-Semitic beliefs.

This shows the ambivalence of religion in general, which can have the potential to both unify and divide – in Islam and Christianity, as well as in other denominations. Particularly problematic are those interpretations of Islam that assert a historic enmity between Muslims and Jews, as is the case in some authoritarian countries in the Middle East in which anti-Zionism has become state doctrine. When devout Muslims feel little at home in Germany as adherents of their religion,

the connection to their country of origin and the religious interpretations prevailing there can become all the more important to them. This can, in turn, foster anti-Semitic prejudices. In our opinion, breaking this self-reinforcing cycle is a key task for ensuring peaceful coexistence and social cohesion in Germany as a country of immigration.

Differences in the anti-Semitic attitudes of Muslims depending on their country of origin attest to the importance of this correlation. Among Muslims with roots in Southeastern Europe, for example, 17 percent agree with the classic anti-Semitic view that Jews have too much influence in Germany, a lower share than among the general population. At 45 percent, Israel-related anti-Semitic views correspond to the level found in German society at large. In contrast, anti-Semitic views – especially those related to Israel – are much more widespread among Muslims with family ties to Turkey or the Middle East, areas where the Middle East conflict and the religious interpretation it often receives are prominent topics.

FIGURE 7 Agreement with anti-Semitic statements by country or region of origin (in %)

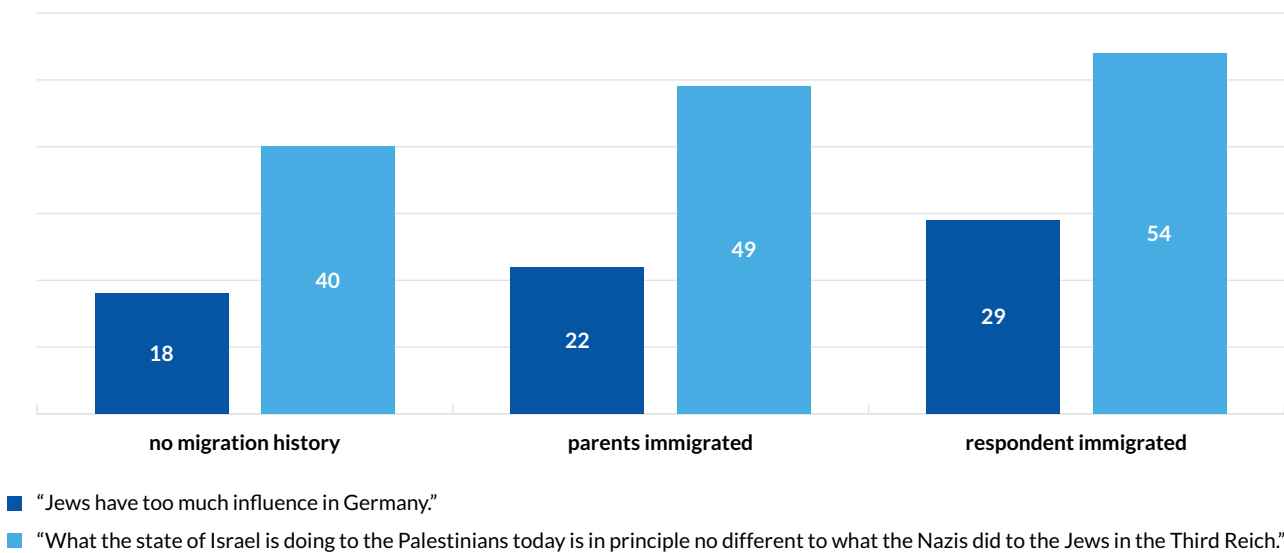


Source: Religion Monitor 2023; Basis: Muslim population in Germany, weighted

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An analysis of the data by migration background or lack thereof also shows that anti-Semitic attitudes are more prevalent among people who grew up and were socialized outside of Germany.

FIGURE 8 Agreement with anti-Semitic statements by migration history (in %)



Source: Religion Monitor 2023; Basis: German population (n=4,363), weighted

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Correspondingly, anti-Semitic attitudes are significantly more widespread among first-generation immigrants than they are among respondents whose families immigrated but who were themselves born and raised in Germany. For example, 29 percent of first-generation immigrants believe that Jews have too much influence in Germany; this figure drops to 22 percent among second-generation immigrants and to 18 percent among individuals without a migration background. The figures also show, however, that anti-Semitic attitudes are more prevalent among the second generation than they are among the majority of society (those without a migration background). Awareness of anti-Semitism thus increases as individuals are socialized in Germany – albeit slowly. This shows that family background plays a significant role in anti-Semitic attitudes, but is not the sole determining factor.

### Anti-Muslim prejudices shared by the majority of the population

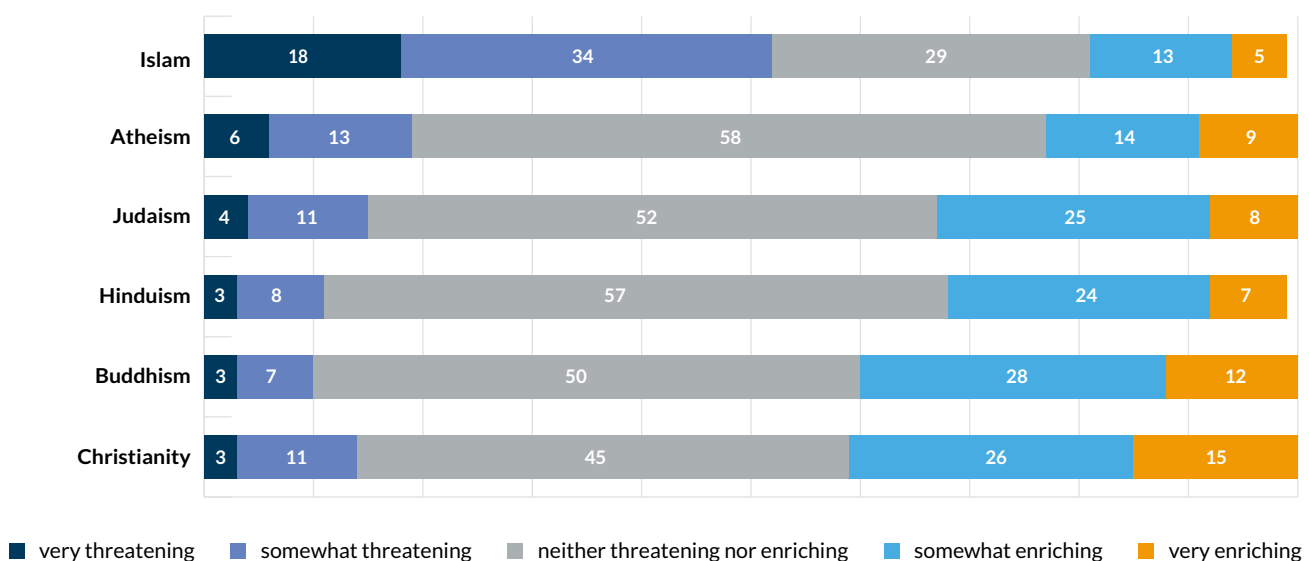
In addition to the drastic increase in anti-Semitic attacks, considerable animosity towards Muslims has also become apparent in Germany. Many Muslims experience discrimination and even open hostility and physical aggression – a trend that has increased in recent weeks. Both anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim

attitudes are widespread in Germany and encourage social discrimination and exclusion.

The prejudicial structures at work here differ: While anti-Semitism borrows from conspiracy theories to exaggerate the influence of Jews, hostility towards Muslims often derives from a generalized assumption that people perceived to be Muslim are backward and a threat. The report published in summer 2023 by the Independent Expert Commission on Animosity towards Muslims states that this assumption can lead people to construe, consciously or unconsciously, a “foreignness” or a hostility on the part of Muslims. According to the commission, this can give rise to multi-layered processes of exclusion and discrimination that can even result in violence.

Over the last decade, we have been collecting data for the Religion Monitor on how widespread people’s reservations are about Islam, Judaism and other religions. Our findings show that the unfavorable image Islam has in Germany has become entrenched: At 52 percent, more than half of the German population continues to view Islam as (“very” or “somewhat”) threatening. The other religions present in Germany are not seen nearly as negatively. What is also clear is that this negative perception can also be found in other Western European countries.

FIGURE 9 How different religions and world views are perceived in Germany (in %)



Source: Religion Monitor 2023; Basis: German population (n=4,363), weighted

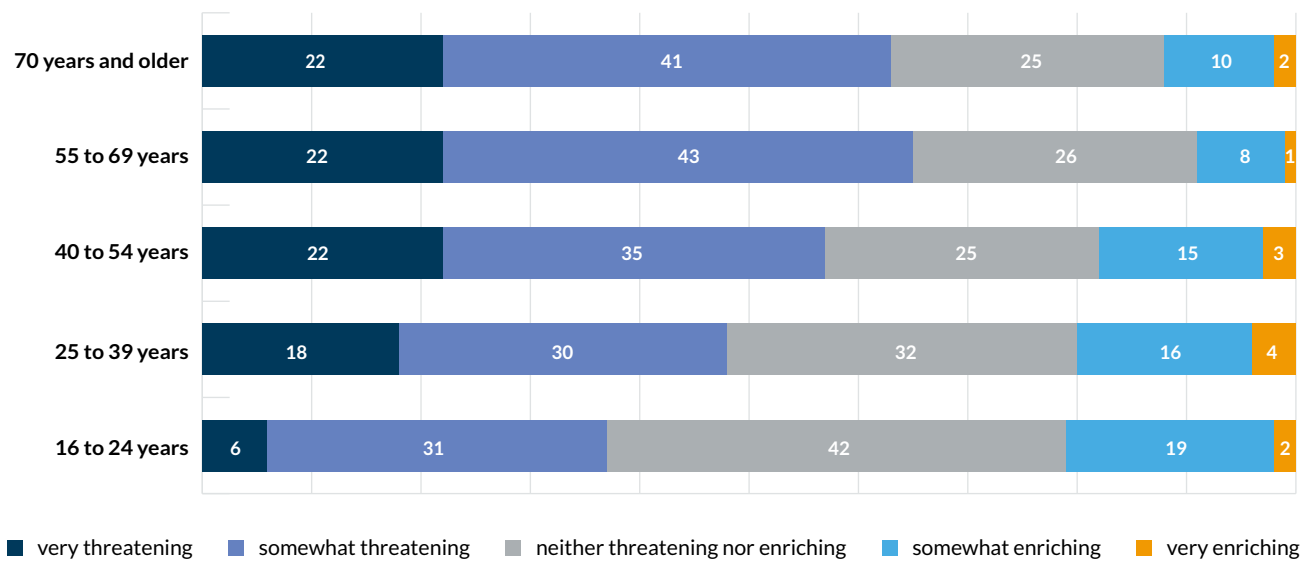
The following examines several socio-demographic factors associated with anti-Muslim sentiment. Responses given by Muslim participants in the survey are not included in the data presented here so as not to distort the results.

A comparison of western and eastern Germany shows that the negative image of Islam is somewhat more prevalent in the east, at 59 percent. The level of education has at best a dampening effect, since 48 percent of individuals who have qualified to study at university also perceive Islam to be a threat. Statistically, age differences are a more relevant factor.

The older respondents are, the more negative their perceptions of Islam tend to be: Among respondents 70 years or older, 63 percent view Islam as a threat. Among younger people, the situation is much different:

Only around one-third of 16- to 24-year-olds believe Islam to be a threat. One explanation here could be that young people – in school, at university, during training – are more likely to grow up in a diverse environment and experience interfaith relationships as normal, and therefore not threatening. Another Religion Monitor finding points in the same direction, since Islam is perceived more positively if people with a migration background live in the respondent’s own neighborhood. These results are further confirmation of the so-called contact hypothesis, namely that personal interactions can reduce prejudice. At the same time, this leads to the conclusion that the generalized perception of Islam as a threat is usually not based on personal experience. This perception can more likely be traced back to public discourse and media reports that largely associate Islam with Islamist violence.

FIGURE 10 How Islam is perceived by age group (in %)



Source: Religion Monitor 2023; Basis: German population without Muslims, weighted

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This is confirmed if one takes a closer look at the widespread prejudices against Islam’s adherents in Germany. We are currently conducting a comprehensive study to investigate this issue. A few key findings can be outlined here. According to the study, Islam is closely associated with Islamism, and Muslims are perceived to live in a “parallel society.” Over half of the survey’s

respondents (54 percent) view Islam as “primarily” a political ideology, while 57 percent believe it incites violence. Moreover, 58 percent of non-Muslim Germans agree with the statement that Islamist terrorists enjoy strong support among Muslims. In addition, the majority of Germans feel Muslim life is at odds with modern Western society and its values.

## Conclusions for combatting prejudice and discrimination

Freedom of religion is guaranteed in Germany's Basic Law. Equal treatment and the protection of minorities is a fundamental principle of the rule of law. Moreover, combatting every form of anti-Semitism has a heightened importance for Germany in light of its historical responsibility. Recognizing and accepting this is a prerequisite for peaceful coexistence within German society and applies to both long-time residents and immigrants. Another question is how everyone, regardless of background, can be included in these efforts.

Just how complicated this is in practice can be clearly seen in the current war in the Middle East, which began with Hamas's brutal terrorist attack on Israeli civilians. The repercussions of this conflict have been felt in Germany in many ways: in an alarming rise in anti-Semitic incidents and in the fears Jewish parents have of sending their children to school, as well as in the increase in anti-Muslim hostility. All of this weakens social cohesion.

Research for the Religion Monitor takes place at a deeper level, but can help us to understand the emotional dynamics playing a role in this specific conflict and how people perceive it in Germany as a country of immigration. Policy makers and members of society at large must resolutely oppose both forms of animosity: anti-Semitism and hostility towards Muslims. This requires counter-narratives and initiatives that send a signal endorsing Germany's values and that involve its residents regardless of their background or religion. Defending the freedom of belief enshrined in the Basic Law and strengthening social cohesion is the duty of each and every one of us.

In the current crisis situation, the following are crucial steps for taking action:

- It is important to clearly identify anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim animosity in Germany's various demographic groups – also as a way of not playing into the hands of extremists, who invoke existing resentments and exploit them in a conscious effort to divide society. Greater awareness and clear boundaries are needed here. In addition, much more must be done to recognize the reality of anti-Muslim racism in Germany – without relativizing or downplaying the anti-Semitism found in some Muslim groups. The subject of anti-Semitic attitudes among Muslims must be broached openly instead. Not addressing this topic would only play into the hands of right-wing populists who feel their conspiracy theories are being confirmed.
- In some Muslim immigrants' countries of origin, anti-Semitism is partially justified on religious grounds. In the absence of an Islam that has been integrated into Western European and German society, many religious Muslims who live here rely on the interpretation of Islam they know from their native country. What is therefore needed is an Islamic theology that reflects the circumstances of Muslims residing in western societies and that responds to the issues they face. A diverse, European-style Islam could thus develop that reflects local values. An Islam of this type, one at home in Europe, would also be an important building block in the fight against anti-Semitism. The departments of Islamic theology at Germany's universities have a key role to play here.
- One positive finding from the Religion Monitor is that the younger generation in general has a much more positive view of religious and cultural diversity and that positive interfaith interactions are already part of their everyday lives. This is a source of hope. In contrast, the older generations must be made more aware of instances of discrimination and racism.
- According to a recent study, young people in Germany know relatively little about the Holocaust. Educational institutions must do more to close this gap. If prejudices are to be overcome, however, Jewish life cannot be reduced to just the Holocaust and the conflict in the Middle East, but must be depicted positively in all its fullness and diversity, both in German history and today. Studies show that teachers are very influential

here. They also show that teachers can unwittingly promote anti-Semitic attitudes, for example by assigning Jews the role of victims or by doing too little to differentiate between Jewish life in Germany and the situation in Israel. Often, a “quasi-natural” aversion between Jews and Muslims is assumed and thus perpetuated. Teacher training programs must raise awareness of this problem.

- It is important – in both the media coverage and civil society discourse – to strengthen the counter-narrative to the conflict between people of the Jewish and Muslim faiths. Successful Jewish-Muslim initiatives exist, such as the Schalom Aleikum dialogue project and the mee2respect exchange project. The fight against anti-Semitism needs both: cognitive engagement – with German history and its unique aspects, for example – and efforts on an emotional level. Personal interactions and dialogue that bring people together can achieve exactly that.

- As the Religion Monitor studies generally show: Proven, sound knowledge and in-person encounters between people who view each other as equals can promote positive attitudes towards religious diversity while overcoming prejudices. Personal interactions – in school and later in life – can play a decisive role here, as can articles and discussions in traditional and social media. When we cultivate diverse contacts and focus on people and their history, we strengthen social cohesion.

### Imprint

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