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Die Wahrnehmung des Islams in Deutschland

Religionsmonitor
verstehen was verbindet

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Abstract

1. The space for the social recognition of Islam in Germany is quite limited. In countries such as Germany, Switzerland or Spain, the perception of Islam as a threat is particularly pronounced, as there is insufficient distinction made between "Islam" and Islamist terrorism. Although other European countries such as Great Britain, France and Sweden have been victim to terrorist attacks to a much greater degree, the fear of Islam is more pronounced in Germany. Only a quarter of the German population regards Islam as a potential source of societal enrichment. A negative image of Islam is dominant throughout broad portions of the population.

2. The majority of people in Germany tend toward much stronger negative stereotypes and hostility regarding Islam than is the case with other religions. If one interprets the Religion Monitor data in the context of other large studies of manifest stereotypes of Islam – that as well cannot be explained solely with reference to the fear of threats –, it is clear that a very negative image of Islam prevails in Germany and in other European countries. Islam is overwhelmingly perceived as violent, intolerant and repressive. In this regard, Islam's image is far worse than that of the other major world religions of Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. The extremist and

repressive phenomena that occasionally exist within these religions are largely overlooked.

3. Although Muslims, as the largest religious minority in German and Europe, live largely as normal citizens today, their religion is overwhelmingly regarded as irreconcilable with Western values/culture. The Religion Monitor data illustrate an overall European situation in which approximately one-half to two-thirds of the European population regard Islam as incompatible with the Western world. To be sure, this is not explicitly a degradation of Islam, but simply a demarcation of the West and its culture. In research, such views are referred to as hidden stereotypes. This demarcation of Islam and a concomitant marginalization of Muslims creates a social climate that can produce considerable social tensions.

4. Europe's largest minority religion is excluded and isolated from the widely propagated values of a free and liberal society. The widespread negative image of Islam contrasts with the fact that an overwhelming majority of survey respondents embraces religious tolerance in general, and that a majority still approves of religious diversity even in their own societal environments. Both values are of importance to social cohesion. However, the

Religion Monitor data show that negative stereotypes of Islam are widespread also among the liberal middle classes, even among those that maintain a self-image of tolerance. While it is possible that social desirability has driven up tolerance values in the survey, it is more likely that tolerant attitudes are genuinely pronounced, but do not include Islam. Indeed, Islam is apparently regarded less as a religion and culture than as a political and extremist ideology. Cognitive dissonance and value conflicts are avoided because Islam is excluded from the overriding norm of religious tolerance through the selective perception of its status as a political ideology. To this extent, the negative image of Islam is not a specific criticism of Islam, but is intolerance disguised as realism.

5. Hostility to Islam is not a marginal phenomenon, but is rather a socially acceptable trend comparable with the "salon anti-Semitism" of the 19th century. Manifest and latent stereotypes overall harden into a pronounced hostility to Islam in one-half to two-thirds of people in Germany and other European countries. This Islamophobia contrasts with approving and tolerant perceptions of Islam in one-quarter to one-third of the population. Comparisons with the salon anti-Semitism of past times suggest themselves insofar as parallels to the anti-Semitism of the 19th century, with its visions of a religious minority that threatened society, are clearer than those to the National Socialist era. Islamophobia is based on a more or less pronounced pattern of hostility. However, this is associated with a fully developed racist worldview only in the rarest of cases, in which Islamophobia is additionally coupled with an intolerance toward diversity in general. Today, however, hostility toward Islam is accompanied by a general religious tolerance.

6. Islam's image is better among younger people than among older people. However, it

is unclear whether this finding can be interpreted as a stable generational effect producing a differentiation in the perception of Islam. It can be assumed that in areas where people grow up surrounded by religious diversity, Muslims are more likely to be viewed as a part of Germany. However, the fact that a negative image of Islam is common even among younger people suggests that factors beyond the social environment are critical in determining perceptions of Islam.

7. Political ideologies in Germany do indeed oppose Islamophobia, but to date have failed to develop ideas for the positive inclusion of Islam in the Western world.

The question of why political ideologies have a perceptible but not sweeping effect on the image of Islam is of central importance. On the one hand, the greater acceptance of multicultural diversity within the center-left political milieu in Germany, as well as the fact that the political parties falling within this area of the spectrum have identified Islamophobia as an urgent political problem, has a positive effect on Islam's overall image. On the other hand, more than 50% of respondents in the political center and more than 40% in the center-left still agree with the proposition that Islam is not compatible with the Western world. The lack of ideas for a positive inclusion of Islam has made it possible even in the left-liberal and alternative-left milieu to cultivate Islamophobic attitudes on the basis of hidden stereotypes.

8. Currently, the prevailing negative image of Islam in Germany is largely unconnected to specific right-wing ideologies that – in other countries – are directed against the immigration of Muslims or toward a ban on minarets, for example. The significant disassociation between Islam's image and political ideologies and core democratic values, has had the advantage that Islamophobia has not as a rule been translated into concrete political actions. This is particularly true for Germany, where right-wing populist parties

have for historical reasons drawn less support than in other European countries.

9. Middle-class fears of losing economic and social status, as well as unemployment, can affect the perception of Islam; however, the degree of life satisfaction is more important than the actual economic position in this regard. Respondents' conception of their own status in society affects the perception of Islam to only a limited extent. People who identify themselves as holding low positions and those who see themselves as holding high positions have a more negative perception of Islam than respondents who feel their middle position to be appropriate. However, a large portion of the middle classes also reject Islam. Relative fears of social decline appear to be crucial here, manifesting themselves in varying degrees at every social level in times of crisis. In addition, unemployment markedly increases the likelihood that people will not perceive Islam as societally enriching. This suggests the predominance of simple competitive motivations toward Muslims, who often arrive as migrants on the labor market. However, as people assess their economic situations differently, their evaluations of their own lives more broadly are also relevant. This is confirmed by the results of the present study: People who are generally dissatisfied with their life situation have a significantly more negative image of Islam. Three-quarters of those who are dissatisfied feel threatened by Islam.

10. Openness with regard to religious people in general also has a positive effect on the perception of Islam. The more respondents trust religious people, the more positive is their image of Islam. Everyday religious experiences – even those that do not require religious belief – are thus a significant factor in the development of a positive image of Islam. Such individual experiences have a significantly stronger effect than volunteer community activities

associated with organizations or groups, which have little effect on the image of Islam.

11. Stereotyped conceptions of Islam are most likely to be shifted where dialogue and personal encounters take place. Very few people regularly have interreligious contact at the workplace or in their leisure time. Even in the so-called multicultural society, personal “bridge-building” contacts and dialogue apparently depend on the appropriate conditions being in place. Thus, in large cities, there is less perception of Islam as a threat than is the case in more rural areas. This indicates that the stereotyped views of Islam often arise through mediated information or opinions rather than through direct contact, which is often fleeting in urban areas. Moreover, those who regularly have contact with people of other faiths in their leisure time are significantly more prone to regard Islam as compatible with the West and as less of a threat. Among those who regularly have contact with people of other faiths in their leisure time – which in practice, means contact with the largest religious minority, the Muslims – it appears significantly more difficult to cultivate generally negative stereotypes and hostility toward Islam.

12. However, personal contact in small groups contributes to the improvement of Islam's perception only when the members of the religious minority do not achieve a group majority. If this critical threshold is exceeded, then Islamophobia statistically regains the upper hand. The effects of personal interreligious contact can be described through the metaphor of a “hill effect.” Increasing contact initially triggers an upward trend as non-Muslims' views of Islam improve; however, once non-Muslims are put in a minority position in a small group, the trend reverses again, and the image of Islam darkens. The cause of this effect, which today can arise in neighborhoods with an unusually high share of

Muslims, as well as in school classes and workplaces, probably lies in the perceived reversal of ordinary cultural hegemonies that can be experienced by individuals in small social groups. While Muslims represent a significant minority in German society as a whole, they can become a majority in small groups, which reverses established power relationships and is felt by non-Muslim members of the majority society to be disagreeable.

13. Unlike other aspects of xenophobia, formal education currently serves as only a limited buffer against Islamophobia. The higher the respondents' level of formal schooling or university education, the lower

is their perception that Islam is a threat, and the greater is their willingness to consider Islam as compatible with the Western world. However, considerable negative stereotypes and hostilities exist in educated circles as well. Despite the positive influence of higher-level schools and universities, this finding suggests that knowledge deficits continue to exist in these institutions, which remain Eurocentric and as a rule are highly selective in their reception of Islam and the Islamic world. Whether Islamophobia in educated circles is also translated into habitual distinctions and defense mechanisms with regard to Muslims cannot be determined at this point.