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German Muslims Fear Backlash after Paris Attacks

By SPIEGEL Staff

1/21/2015

The vast majority of Muslims in Germany condemn the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. But they are concerned that a new wave of Islamophobia may wash over the country anyway.

It had been a busy few days for Aiman Mazyek. Radio interviews, television shows, phone calls -- he hadn't had a moment of quiet. Until midday last Tuesday. It came suddenly, as he was driving his Mercedes station wagon through Berlin, his iPhone switched off, its battery empty.

The timing couldn't have been worse. Mazyek, head of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany, was to speak that evening at a vigil in the heart of Berlin for the victims of the attacks in Paris together with German President Joachim Gauck and Chancellor Angela Merkel. Moreover, the mayor of Berlin was waiting for him to return his call as was the US ambassador. Mazyek cursed. On such a day, he didn't want anything to go wrong.

The son of a Syrian father and a German mother, Mazyek, 45, has been head of the Central Council of Muslims, one of several Muslim associations in Germany, for the last four years. In the past, critics have accused him of trivializing religious fundamentalism and he has

occasionally found it difficult to decisively condemn the actions of reactionary fellow Muslims. But after the attacks in Paris, he quickly realized that a strong response was necessary. Which is why he was taking part in the vigil that evening at the Brandenburg Gate.

Soon after his phone went dark, Mazyek's Mercedes pulled up in front of his apartment, not far from Berlin's main train station. He jumped out, hoping to spend some time making last minute improvements to the speech he was to give that evening. Just a few hours later, he addressed 10,000 people, declaring the Paris attacks to be "the greatest blasphemy." "We Muslims will not allow our faith to be abused," he said.

Germany has experienced a fundamental shift, from a republic that sought to keep immigrants at arm's length to one that is now the second-most attractive immigrant country after the United States. But societal cohesion is currently being tested. The anti-immigration, Islamophobic protests in Dresden organized by Pegida have shown that there is still a significant amount of angst about foreigners in Germany and the Paris attacks have triggered fear that it could happen at home. "Everyone is unsettled," says Bilkay Öney, minister of integration in the state of Baden-Württemberg. "Both Muslims and non-Muslims."

Resentments and prejudices are on the rise. Mazyek has only to look into his in-box. For days, racists have been flooding it with hate mail. "Every Muslim is a potential murderer. You are not welcome. The only good Muslim is a dead Muslim," reads one. "The world will rise up and Islam will be eradicated," reads another.

Germany is home to around 4 million Muslims. There are Sunnis, Shiites, Alevis and Ahmadiyyas. There are immigrants from Turkey, from the Balkans and from Lebanon. There are those whose families have been here for several generations and those who have just recently fled their homelands, not infrequently to escape Islamist terror. University students and high-school dropouts, doctors and manual laborers: It is a heterogeneous group with their faith often being the only thing they have in common. But Pegida and Paris have intruded on their daily lives and triggered a variety of emotions. And a variety of reactions.

Mehdi Chahrour, 26, law student from Berlin

Mehdi Chahrour was studying in the library in the Berlin district of Neukölln when he first read about the Paris attack on his mobile phone. His first thought: Oh No!

That evening, he posted the following on Facebook: "1. I am aghast at the act of terror and my thoughts are with the families of those murdered. 2. Were the Prophet Muhammad alive today, he would surely have made clear: #notinmyname." The comment received 119 likes.

Chahrour was a child when he immigrated to Germany from Lebanon with his parents. He is a Shiite, prays five times a day, goes to the mosque regularly and fasts during Ramadan. He also goes to cafés with his friends, plays football, enjoys German poetry and hopes to get his Ph.D. in law. For Chahrour, none of that is contradictory. But it has become apparent to him that some of his acquaintances and neighbors see things differently.

Some people still ask him: Do you beat your sister? Do you support Islamic State? But Chahrour also knows of Salafists in Berlin who threaten those of different faiths and who berate women who aren't veiled. "I am afraid that Paris could strengthen the extremists, particularly racists, for whom the attack represents an opportunity," Chahrour says.

A few days after the attack, he is sitting with other young Muslims in a community center in Neukölln, which is home to a large Muslim population. Most of them are university students like himself and many of the women are wearing headscarves. It is the first meeting in the new year of MAHDI, an association of young Muslim Germans in Berlin that Chahrour helped found. The association's goal is that of helping young Muslim's to participate in society without losing sight of their faith.

Chahrour goes to youth centers and mosques to tell young believers that Islam does not differentiate between men and women, that it is important to understand the Koran in context and that violence in the name of Allah is a betrayal of the religion. He offers counterarguments to Salafist propaganda.

At the gathering in the Neukölln community center, those present are upset. One woman, who is studying education, says she doesn't understand why she should distance herself from a crime that she never approved of in the first place. Christians, after all, didn't apologize for the murders committed by Anders Behring Breivik in Norway, she says. A young engineer asks why the Germans took to the streets for the victims in Paris but not for those killed in the Syrian civil war.

Chahrour says that the Muhammad caricatures were tasteless and insulting. But the terrorists, he continues, did more to insult Islam than the caricaturists ever could.

Rana Chati-Dia, 37, teacher from Gelsenkirchen

Islamic State? Al-Qaida? The terror attack in Paris? Some of her students merely shrugged their shoulders when she brought up the attacks in the French capital, Rana Chati-Dia explains. Others were appalled when they learned about them. But for most, France is a very long way away.

Chati-Dia is an immigrant from Lebanon and teaches, among other subjects, German as a second language at a secondary school in Gelsenkirchen, a city in western Germany. Her students include Muslims, Christians and atheists. And they have a variety of educational backgrounds.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, the state where Gelsenkirchen is located, every fourth citizen has an "immigration background," as it is referred to in Germany. Among primary- and secondary-school children, the ratio is even higher. Multiculturalism has long since become reality in the school yard. But in recent days, Chati-Dia has noticed that children with immigration backgrounds and those without have been sitting separately. She has also heard crazy conspiracy theories being uttered by her Muslim students. The attack in Paris, they say, "was just staged" to damage Islam.

Even before the attacks, Chati-Dia had tried to discuss racism with her students. She wanted to know what they thought about neo-Nazis and Pegida, and about Salafists and Islamic State. She was shocked by the answers. Most said they had "no idea" or that they were uninterested. Had she asked about the former FC Bayern president Uli Hoeness, who was convicted on tax evasion charges in March, she says, "a lively discussion would have gone on for the whole hour."

Chati-Dia has lived in Germany for 30 years and she has been a citizen for the last 12. But she hasn't experienced such an atmosphere of mistrust since the terror attacks in the US on Sept. 11, 2001, a time when Muslims all felt they were viewed with suspicion by the population at large. Chati-Dia is also pursuing a degree in Islamic studies at the University of Osnabrück. Later, she would like to teach the subject to provide students a different understanding of their religion: "One that doesn't have to do with oppression, terror and murder."

Abdubaki Sahin, 21, baggage handler from Neu Wulmstorf

Ultimately, the questions following a terror attack always come, says Abdubaki Sahin, a baggage handler at the Hamburg Airport who goes by Abdul. He is responsible for stuffing suitcases and bags into airplane holds. And hardly a shift goes by in which another worker doesn't ask him: "Does it really say in the Koran that you have to kill people who insult your prophet?" Each time, Sahin says: "No, of course not. Each life is sacred." Usually, the response is: "But then why do Islamists do it?"

The questions will become even more frequent in the wake of the Paris attacks, Sahin believes, just as they almost always do after terrorists commit a crime in the name of Allah somewhere in the world or when jihadists in Syria chop off someone's head. Sahin doesn't understand why he should have to exculpate himself following such extremist attacks. "If they are Muslims, then I'm not one," he says.

Sahin lives in Neu Wulmstorf, a town not far from Hamburg. He considers himself to be a devout Muslim; he fasts during Ramadan and can recite some verses out of the Koran. But he also smokes and drinks alcohol. He lives a kind of patchwork Islam, like so many young Muslims in Europe.

Sahin has no understanding for radical Islamists. A school friend asked him once what he would do if he were to see a Christian lying injured in the street. "I would give him first aid and call an ambulance, of course," he replied. His acquaintance shook his head: "Abdul, then you sin before the Lord. You have to let Christians lie."

Sahin believes such people are merely part of the lunatic fringe, just like the Pegida demonstrators. He sees them as part of a minority that likes to play with fire.

Sadiq Anjum, 59, restaurant owner from Dresden

The man some in Dresden view as a threat to the West enjoys serving his guests pakoras, samosas and curries. Sadiq Anjum, a refugee from Pakistan, owns Global Spicy, an Indian restaurant in Dresden's Johannstadt neighborhood. He's one of the Muslims who make up 0.1

percent of Saxony's population, and remains in the state despite the prevalence of neo-Nazis and despite the weekly xenophobic Pegida protests.

Anjum is a friendly man and chooses to say nothing bad even about the demonstrators who have been stirring up hatred against Islam and asylum-seekers in Dresden in recent weeks. "It is free here; people are allowed to march in the streets," he says.

The restaurateur moved to Germany back in the 1970s. He spent many years in Bochum, in the western state of North Rhine-Westphalia, before moving to Dresden 15 years ago. Anjum says it took a while before he felt at home in Saxony, saying that people in the east are more reserved with strangers than those in the West. But he's also convinced that it's even possible to find common ground with Pegida supporters. Politicians, he says, need to seek a dialogue with Pegida. Otherwise, he warns, a movement of the discontented could spiral into terrorism, as happened in Pakistan.

Anjum is concerned that the mood in Germany could become hostile, particularly after the Paris attacks. He rejects the Muhammad caricatures published by Charlie Hebdo, just as he does any depiction of the Prophet. But, he says, the terrorists themselves "harmed the Prophet Muhammad." As such, Anjum was particularly touched when Dresden Mayor Helma Orosz praised him as a role model without mentioning his name at an anti-Pegida rally attended by 35,000 people a week ago Saturday.

Orosz spoke of a "small, inconspicuous Indian restaurant" in Johannstadt. She said people ought to ask the owner whether he is Hindu, Muslim or Christian. He says he would answer, "My religion is Germany; my Holy Scripture is the constitution; and a new election is held every four years for my prophet."

Mely Kiyak, 38, journalist from Berlin

She has brought a thick folder with her to our interview at a café in Berlin. It is crammed with handwritten letters on the finest paper and even hand-made collages and drawings. But it isn't fan mail. It is the vilest of hate mail.

The attacks against journalist and author Mely Kiyak aren't targeted at her conduct or her opinions. Rather, they focus almost exclusively on her origins, her name or her gender. As the daughter of two Kurds, she is widely thought to be a Muslim, though in fact religion means little to her.

Kiyak gets plenty of letters from right-wing extremists. But many of the missives have more dignified origins -- from the college educated and businesspeople.

Other journalists with immigration backgrounds -- at publications like SPIEGEL, *Die Zeit*, or *Die Tageszeitung* -- share similar experiences. Often, they are disparaged as jihadists. Or they are labeled the spoiled children of immigrant guest workers who should count their blessings and keep quiet.

Kiyak and her colleagues have found a clever way of channeling such hatred into something more constructive. They regularly stage "Hate Poetry" evenings, with the motto: "You write 'em, we read 'em." In a combination between poetry reading, cabaret and agitation, the journalists recite the contents of their bile-filled post. It's an irony filled reckoning with the hatred with which they are regularly confronted. Or, as Yassin Musharbash, a reporter with *Die Zeit*, puts it, "We shoot the shit back into orbit."

During the 1990s, Kiyak lived in the eastern German city of Leipzig, where she says she experienced neo-Nazi attacks as well as right-wing marches. Among her circle of friends, she says, "someone landed in the hospital once a week." At some point, though, the neo-Nazis in Leipzig disappeared from the streets and Kiyak found herself wondering where they had gone to. When she observes Pegida today, she says she often thinks to herself, "Aw, there you are again -- you've just grown a little older."

The "Hate Poetry" group deliberately travels to the places where it hurts the most. Recently, for example, they held an event in Dresden, ground zero of the Pegida movement. The readings are also an act of civil courage, with the group even winning the "Journalists of the Year" prize by a prominent industry magazine. But is it really possible to just laugh away hate or racism?

Kiyak says she's read a lot of smart pieces since the Paris attacks, many coming from German Muslims, German Christians and German Jews. German society, she believes, has changed for the better. Kiyak wants to think positively -- to feel and live optimistically. Otherwise, she says, she wouldn't be able to bear it.