Anti-Islamic sentiment on the rise in Europe

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Originally published January 24, 2015

The recent military-style assault on the office of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, followed by a separate hostage standoff at a Kosher supermarket traumatized Paris and sent shock waves across Europe. The three-day terror spree in Paris ended with the deaths of 17 victims and three gunmen. The public response to the massacre of innocent people was overwhelming; a symbol of solidarity, the phrase "Je Suis Charlie" ("I am Charlie") spread around the world overnight. The slogan grew into a popular hashtag on Twitter, has been chanted by marchers in Paris streets, and has become ubiquitous in the media. Amid the heightened tensions, French police continued to interrogate nine terror suspects as part of an anti-terrorism push that swept across France, Belgium, Germany, and Britain in recent days. At the same time, far-right nationalist parties across Europe seized on the recent attack to underscore their anti-Islam and anti-immigrant agendas. Soon after the Paris attack, Geert Wilders, a far-right Dutch politician who is facing trial for inciting racial hatred, called for the

"de-Islamization" of Western societies and claimed that Europe was now "at war". In France, nationalist leader Marine Le Pen, who is also performing strongly in recent polls, blamed "radical Islamism" for the attack.

Anti-immigrant sentiments have been rising in recent years across Europe, partly driven by a moribund economy and high unemployment. In France, the Netherlands, and Austria, right-wing parties with anti-immigrant agendas have led recent national polls. Last May, right-wing parties posted their best result in elections to the European Parliament. Their electoral success has continued since then. The anti-immigration Sweden Democrats recently become the third largest party in the country after a snap election in December. In Germany, even before the Paris attack, tens of thousands of people gathered in the eastern German city of Dresden for an anti-Islam rally organized by a far-right group called "Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West", or **Pegida**. While German politicians have explicitly spoken out against the movement, in many nations the xenophobic rhetoric about immigrants remains unchallenged by established political parties concerned about losing votes.

Perceptions of a Muslim socio-cultural infiltration continues to rise along with Muslim populations across Europe. But often these perceptions are [hyperbolic](). Numerous articles have been written on the subject of Muslim takeover in Europe based on population growth statistics. These generally serve to excite, rather than inform, readership. According to the Pew Project, Muslims in fact make up a very small part of most European countries, and their growth rate is declining overall. For example, Muslims accounted for only 7.5% of France's population in 2010. While these figures do show growth, and native-born population growth has largely stagnated, claims of an imminent Islamic majority are somewhat specious.

The European Union (EU) has, historically, allowed a relatively large number of immigrants into its member countries. In the wake of the recent Paris terrorist attacks, leaders of several member nations, and citizens across the entire union, are calling for tougher immigration laws, especially in regards to people seeking political asylum. Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán and Czech president Miloš Zeman called for immigrants to assimilate or return to their home countries. Pegida makes similar statements. These proposed laws are clearly targeted at Muslim immigrants, designed to break down immigrant "parallel societies". Pegida leader Lutz Bachmann calls these parallel societies a threat to Europe's Judeo-Christian values.

French prime minister Manuel Valls says Europe is "at war against terrorists, Jihadists, [and] Islamic fundamentalism". In practice that frequently translates into discrimination against average Muslims. Despite pleas for acceptance from major leaders such as Angela Merkel, popular opinion in Europe is turning against Muslim immigrants. In the wake of the Paris

terrorist attacks, political momentum for such laws is only likely to increase. EU interior ministers met on January 11th to discuss plans for tighter borders, and anti-immigration parties' polling numbers are at record highs in many countries.

References

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