

A View from the CT Foxhole: Dr. Christian Klos, Director General of Public Security, Germany's Federal Ministry of Interior and Community

By Julika Enslin

Director General Dr. Christian Klos took over the leadership of the Department Public Security in the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community (BMI) at the beginning of 2020. He is in charge of legal and general policy issues at national, E.U., and international level regarding security, including counter-terrorism, extremism and organized crime. In addition, he supervises the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) and the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV; the domestic intelligence agency).

Dr. Klos has been working at the BMI since 1998, initially in the Project Group for European Harmonization. From 2000 to 2004, he was a national expert in the Directorate-General for Justice and Home Affairs of the European Commission. After returning to the BMI, he was initially responsible for international counterterrorism before working for six years in the ministry's management staff, including as head of the minister's office under Minister Dr. Wolfgang Schäuble. From 2011, he headed the division on immigration law and was also appointed Commissioner for Return during the refugee and migration crisis in 2015. In 2017, he set up the Directorate on Return Policy, which he headed as Deputy Director General.

CTC: You are the Director General of Public Security at the German Ministry for Interior.¹ How does your Department and the Ministry of Interior fit into Germany's counterterrorism approach? And can you describe for our readers what different entities and agencies in Germany are tasked with counterterrorism and where you fit in with your role in the Ministry of Interior?

Klos: The Directorate General for Public Security consists of two parts: The first part focuses mainly on principal issues of public security and in particular, legislation at a national, European and international level, so this is more the legal part. And the second is the more operational part, and here we deal with different phenomena such as serious and organized crime, counterterrorism, the fight against extremism, be it right-wing or left-wing extremism. We also focus on counter espionage, counterintelligence and last but not least, we protect the confidentiality of classified documents and IT.

I have also the supervision of the Federal Criminal Police Office (*Bundeskriminalamt* or BKA)² where they have, for example, departments which deal with state protection and counterterrorism. So the Federal Criminal Police Office is the key police force in Germany for countering terrorism. We have a federal structure here in Germany and usually police work is with the federal states. But for counterterrorism, the Federal Criminal Police Office, the BKA plays not only a coordinative role but in terms of counterterrorism, the leading role, and is also the interface of the federal states with

the international level. So, the BKA deals at a European level, corporation with other European Member States of the European Union, of course Europol, and other international partners, most prominently of course the U.S. partners, namely the FBI and other agencies involved in the fight against terrorism.

In addition, I have the supervision of the domestic intelligence service, the *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz* (or BfV), the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution.³ This is an intelligence agency, and it is also very much involved in the fight against terrorism but from the intelligence angle.

And I should also mention that there is one special task of the Ministry, which is quite unusual for a ministry. It is a real operational part, and this is the existence of an instrument to ban organizations. When the strict legal conditions are met, we can ban organizations which either perform extremist or terrorist activities, violating criminal law or are directed against international order. Of course, terrorist organizations would be the target or objective of this legal precondition. Recently, for example, we banned Hamas here,⁴ which is of course an already listed terrorist organization for more than 20 years. However, this instrument allows us to better restrict activities of these organizations in Germany. The key objective of banning organizations is to absolutely destroy the organizational structure and to seize all assets of such organizations. Of course, Hamas had no organization here, but the use of symbols, for example, can now be easily addressed by law enforcement after an organization is banned.

That was the advantage of the ban of Hamas, which came after the atrocities by Hamas on the 7th of October 2023, and therefore, this was very important. But there are also other organizations in the Islamist context, for example, Hezbollah⁵ or the Islamic Center in Hamburg,⁶ which is a key actor in the dissemination of Iranian religious ideology and promoting the caliphate. Therefore, this was also an organization which we recently banned and also seized all assets linked to them. Any further activity which would then be linked to such an organization is then also punishable under criminal law as a consequence.

CTC: With regard to the jihadi threat in Germany, a report published in February 2025 by the U.N. sanctions monitoring team on the global jihadi threat⁷ stated that in Europe, regional states assessed Islamic State Khorasan (ISK or ISIS-K) to be the most significant external threat to Europe. What is the ISK threat specifically to Germany right now?

Klos: We had a car-ramming attack perpetrated by an Islamist in Munich on February 13, during the Munich Security Conference which caused two casualties and injured dozens of people.⁸ Investigations are still running. So, Islamist terrorism is something we unfortunately still see. We are continuing to see Islamist radicalization in Germany, mostly self-radicalized via online fora so



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that there is not the so-to-speak post 9/11 network structures, which have been dismantled in many cases. We are increasingly seeing in Germany—and in Europe, as a whole—individual actors being radicalized and using means such as cars, knives, etc. These are easily available ways of killing people or injuring people. And this is of course then currently the main “felt threat” and the real threat actually. It is primarily an internal rather than external threat.

When it comes to the external threat, I would agree with the assessment that ISIS-K is in Germany as well. What we observe from the intelligence side is that there are clear indications that the group intends to conduct attacks in Europe, and this can also include Germany and therefore we are very much aware of this threat, and we have seen also travel activities. So, it's not just some minor indications. We really see things happen but we don't know where it would be, so, we try our utmost to prevent this.

CTC: When it comes to the threat of the violent far-right, there have been neo-Nazi groups that have been banned by the German government in the past such as Artgemeinschaft⁹ and Hammerskins.¹⁰ But the attacker in Hanau five years ago, for example, was found in investigations to have acted largely alone.¹¹ How would you classify on the extreme right-wing spectrum the threat from organized groups, versus unaffiliated lone actors? And are you more concerned about one or the other?

Klos: I think I would not try to rank the threats because both are

a significant threat. We have right-wing extremists, we have right wing radicals, and this is, I would say, a blurred scene. There are a lot of groups of course. And if you ban organizations, it doesn't mean that people cease to exist. They're still there and they still have the ideology. Therefore, right-wing extremism is really a subject of concern. Just to give you a few numbers, we have around 40,000 people in Germany who we regard as being right-wing extremists. In comparison, the Islamist threat is a bit lower, a little bit less than 40,000 are categorized as extremists. And on the left-wing, we have around 30,000 people categorized as extremists.

When it comes to right-wing extremism, we have singled out serious organizations where we find it necessary to ban them because they are very active with their unlawful undertakings. Possibly they have also a perspective of becoming bigger. Of course, sometimes there are also organizations consisting of very old men and they're just dying out and you don't have to ban them, it's not worth the effort.

That is always the challenge with banning organizations, because you must succeed. It's a very strict procedure. We have to have a very clear order banning them in taking direct legal remedies to the Federal Administrative Court (*Bundesverwaltungsgericht*).¹² You really have to make your case, because if you ban an organization but then lose the case and the ban is lifted by the Federal Administrative Court, then the result is counterproductive and you risk being accused of acting against, for example, the right-wing opposition. So, you have to be really sure if you are going to take such steps against organizations.

When it comes to right-wing extremism, it is true to say that we had a lot of lonesome actors. We convened here in Berlin a bilateral initiative of the U.S. Department of Justice and my Ministry to have a counterterrorism law enforcement forum. Among the challenges this forum looked into was right-wing extremism. When you look at attacks such as the Christchurch, New Zealand, attack, you have a lot of lone-wolf actors around. But these actors also are connected to certain milieu, including, for example a martial arts scene influenced by right-wing extremism.¹³ There is also a music scene, very active, where you can find this right-wing extremist music and concerts.¹⁴ And of course, there is online material. There are also international links when it comes to, for example, Hammerskins. So, there are interlinked persons, but those who we have seen take action are not necessarily members of these groups.

One exception, of course, is the so-called National Socialist Underground, the NSU. This was a terrorist group, a right-wing terrorist group in Germany who have targeted in particular people with a migration background. This was already a few years ago, but is still very notable. Therefore, there is no easy way to characterize the threat—there are all kind of layers.

You also have a new-right movement in terms of ideology, and this is of course particularly serious because this lays the foundation for any kind of act which follows. If you have the ideology, then possibly people will follow not only just the buzzwords, but also ideologically and this is also what we see is very dangerous. We look into it. There is a particular magazine, the so-called *Compact* magazine in Germany, which is the voice of this new-right in Germany. We are still in the process of banning this magazine. The Federal Administrative Court has issued a temporary decision (*einstweiliger Rechtsschutz*), which resulted in us giving back the assets to this magazine.¹⁵ But we hope that we will win the court case¹⁶ in the end.

I can assure you that freedom of expression, freedom of press are of equal standard as in the United States, but we are by law eligible to ban also press and media entities, if there is an extremist or terrorist background. We have done it in the past with [the Hezbollah mouthpiece] Al Manar TV¹⁷ and others in the Near and Middle East and also here in Germany. These are propaganda channels which we would like to get rid of.

CTC: Shifting to left-wing extremism, last year *CTC Sentinel* published an article about the rise in violent left-wing extremism in Germany and the “Engel-Guntermann Network.”¹⁸ And of course, looking back historically, sometimes when we think of Germany the Red Army Faction (RAF) might be one of the first things that comes to mind in terms of terrorism. But what from your perspective is the current threat posed by left-wing extremist groups? And is it rising, or is it changing a lot in tactics and goals from what you are seeing?

Klos: The left-wing extremist threat has changed over time, particularly in recent years. I quoted the number around 30,000 people that we count as left-wing extremists, of which most would say 10 percent are also willing to use violence. The violence has changed. It was in the past not violence but rather sabotage. There were then attacks against any kind of infrastructure, but not against persons. This has significantly changed. In particular, the network you’ve mentioned directed their action, their attacks against other individuals, mostly right-wing extremists. But that can also be representatives of big companies. But mostly right-wing extremists, that’s their declared enemy. And they target them. And so, this is really a shift of, if I can say, towards more violent activity in which people are being beat up.

They also enter right wing events looking for confrontation. For example, there was a “day of honor” in Hungary,¹⁹ which was a magnet for right-wing extremists, and German left-wing extremists went there and then beat up a number of right-wing extremists in Hungary. So, there’s also international activity with the left-wing. And there is a second dimension which is really significant because it has caused the greatest financial damage perpetrated by extremists or terrorists let’s put it that way in in the recent past, which is the attack on the energy supply of the Tesla motor factory in Brandenburg.²⁰ They shut down the whole factory for a number of days, which caused a three-digit million-euro damage for the Tesla company. And of course, this is very bad for the German economy and the signal it sends. But this is not the only incident we had. There have also been attacks against other critical infrastructure, but mostly not very successful, not to this dimension which we have seen with this attack against Tesla. But sometimes it’s directed against—which is odd—even public transport, which is hard to understand because usually they’re also environmentalists in the left-wing scene and there is no real logic in interfering with some public services like public transportation. This is really illogical, but ok, extremists are never really logical. So, what can I say? And of course, we need to be vigilant about any threats to military installations of our NATO partners. What we really see is that the focus is on critical infrastructure, and this is an upcoming trend.

CTC: Vehicle rammings have been a feature of recent attacks. One of the most devastating attacks in Germany was the Breitscheidplatz attack in 2016 when the attacker drove a

truck into a Christmas market in Berlin killing 12 and injuring more than 50.²¹ And you mentioned the attack on February 13 in Munich where a man drove into a group of protesters. Then in mid-January, U.S. authorities revealed that the January 1, 2025, New Orleans attacker had researched the car ramming in Magdeburg before his attack.²² What is your office’s approach to countering the threat posed by car rammings, and how can Germany mitigate this threat? Is it in any way more difficult to detect or prevent than others?

Klos: We recently held a special meeting of the Committee on Internal Affairs of the German Parliament (*Bundestag*) on the Munich attack. And not only the Minister of Interior of Bavaria, but also my Minister, the Federal Minister of Interior and others declared there is no 100-percent security possible for people, especially when it comes to soft targets.

Having said this, in the aftermath of the mass-casualty Breitscheidplatz ramming, there have been a lot of changes at such events to protect against such attacks. Car ramming is always an issue. Usually there is a security concept to be presented by the organizer of such an event, to include all kinds of barriers, including mobile barriers. I think in New Orleans this was also a bit of a problem, that there were some barriers missing²³ and this actually was the same in Magdeburg. There was a security concept, there were all these physical barriers, but there was one bit not really fully covered according to the security concept, it was too wide, there was a space in which a car could fit through and that’s how the Magdeburg ramming happened.

There is the need for such security concepts, and I think this also has preventive effect. This is not performed at the national level but rather at the municipal level. It should also be stressed we can’t change the whole character of Christmas markets where people are coming together to have a good time which is exactly what the terrorists want to destroy.

And if you look at the recent Munich vehicle ramming attack, it targeted a demonstration from the unions to demonstrate for better wages and had nothing to do with the Munich Security Conference. It was just a peaceful demonstration for better wages, and it was protected by police in the front and in the back and with a police car. But this was of course a protection against traffic to allow demonstrations to move forward and to reach their destination. But the car rammer just bypassed the police car and then hit a number of people there. Which means, soft targets are extremely difficult to protect. You can do it for particular events which are located in a certain place where you can have physical protection. But we have to be honest, we cannot protect all our public spaces. It’s impossible, especially with spontaneous gatherings. We have to look into this, but no 100-percent security is possible.

CTC: Shifting topics, the German Council on Preventing Extremism, the BAG RelEx (German term: *Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft religiös begründeter Extremismus*) in one of its recent policy briefs observed a rise in anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism after the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack and Israel’s military response in Gaza.²⁴ What is your assessment of the impact of October 7 on the German terrorism landscape?

Klos: It definitely had a major impact here on the security situation. On the day of the attack, we increased the security preparations

and measures with regard to Israeli or Jewish facilities here, be it diplomatic representations or synagogues, or municipal or Jewish schools, kindergartens. So, we had really to react. And because we have a higher share of Muslim population—of which, of course, 99.7 percent are absolutely peaceful—but I must admit that of course here, there was also sympathy for the terrorist attack of Hamas. For example, sweets were given out here in Berlin by an organization called Samidoun, which also have affiliates in Canada and the Netherlands, and we banned this organization. They are sympathizers of Hamas and their acts.²⁵

And I would actually not name anti-Semitism and antimuslim racism in Germany in one sentence because the scale of anti-Semitism is so much higher. If I look at all extremism, again and again you see the common link is anti-Semitism. So, we do have an increase of anti-Semitism in Germany, but the highest increase of anti-Semitism here comes from pro-Palestinian individuals which are mostly seen in urban areas which have a higher share of Muslim population. Again, this is a minority, but very visible. You see this at universities as well. I spoke with representatives of Jewish student organizations, and they feel threatened. They cannot study or they feel endangered to openly show their belief, which is something I cannot accept. In Germany, everybody has the right to express their belief, and it must be possible to wear a kippah or to have a David Star wherever. If you have on social media on your history, a religious symbol, then you see, a sh*tstorm of hate and actually also criminal offences against these students. So, this is really something which is concerning me. We have a whole range of criminal acts against people of Jewish belief, or Israeli people here in Germany.

We do not see the reverse reaction from the Jewish community because of what happened in Israel that they would attack pro Palestinians here. This we do not see at all. What we do see sometimes is demonstrators who intentionally show up with, for example, the Israel flag, at pro-Palestinian demonstrations. So, this is really a challenge for police to get them separated.

When it comes to anti-Muslim xenophobia, yes, I would say there is an increase, but we have a much more security relevant increase of anti-Semitism in Germany. And this is a key focus of our efforts here these days.

CTC: Last year, there were multiple media reports about intercepted Russian attack plots against German defense industry executives, including the CEO of Rheinmetall.²⁶ There were also media reports about German police suspecting Iran to have hired a Hells Angel biker to help attack Germany synagogues in 2021.²⁷ What is your assessment of the counterterrorism challenge posed by states such as Iran and Russia in Germany?

Klos: Of course, when it comes to Russia, and in particular the war of Russia against Ukraine, violating international law, then I cannot be that explicit as I've just been with the other forms of extremism. We do see, of course, efforts of Russia trying, to get information, on the German support of Ukraine in particular of course, military support, and training of Ukrainian soldiers here in Germany. But also information about German industry, defense industry in particular. We have seen individuals doing this. There are also some Germans of Russian origin, who offered their services to Russia to possibly sabotage some things here in Germany. We work to try to dismantle this.

What we do see is, but we cannot actually interpret it for the time being, drone flights. This is something I think you see also in the U.S.—drone flights over military installations or critical infrastructure which might be a surveillance mission. Not all of these are Russian drones, but among them are drones which are not the usually DJI drones of hobby drone pilots but rather a speed and shape and size that would be of a state actor. So, this is something that we see.

We clearly see, and sometimes we attribute also not only to Russia, but also, for example, to China, cyber-attacks on all kinds of be it industry and public infrastructure. This is also very serious. It is always a question of what the objective was. In terms of Russia, it is a clear objective to support the fight against Ukraine. In addition, and we are very concerned about this, of course, possible preparation of military action against NATO. This is extremely serious, but this concerns then Russia. For others, let's say China, it is more industrial espionage. They would like to just get intellectual property from such activity or test our countermeasures.

And then of course, there is also the challenge posed by transnational repression. So other actors like Iran and Turkey but also China and Russia. They target their opposition, in other countries like here in Germany. And here there is also activity and if we learn about it, of course we intervene immediately.

CTC: Incidents such as the Islamic State-inspired deadly knife attack in Solingen by a Syrian asylum seeker last year have prompted larger debates about migration and asylum in Germany.²⁸ As you are very knowledgeable on this topic, having written a Ph.D. about European migration policy and worked in the German government on migration in very high-level positions, what would you add to that debate in terms of whether migration and asylum in any way intersect with any of your current tasks in looking at counterterrorism in Germany?

Klos: There is an interlinkage, of course. Because you can see that terrorist organizations for example like to hide individuals in certain procedures like asylum procedures, so we could possibly be infiltrated not only by terrorists but also by state actors. So, there is a link, and we have of course then to crosscheck our legal migration channels with the intelligence we have. We have also information exchanges with our international partners on this, which can help in preventing the entry of these people. And I think this is a key task of the European law enforcement and intelligence community to keep or get all these people out. We have our information system in place. We have the Schengen Information System (SIS) and a visa information system, all European systems, which are linked with lists where we can actually exclude people from entry or visa issuance.

So, our security community needs to prevent such people from coming. Of course, smuggling networks play a role. So, the fight against illegal migration and the work on security is very closely linked.

CTC: Coming to that European level, terrorist threats can, of course, extend beyond German borders because attackers or perpetrators might move between European countries or access weapons before in other countries. From your office specifically, what does counterterrorism cooperation look like with other European countries?

Klos: We have a very strong operative cooperation, but also political cooperation across all kinds of counterterrorism issues. It's longstanding. Of course, there was a huge momentum of European cooperation after 9/11, apart from the international dimension and cooperation, in particular with the U.S. But there are major steps forward in terms of cooperation, with Europol at the heart of this. Counterterrorism is actually a key European task. It is just very natural to get in touch with our European colleagues on all kind of things. We also built joint investigation teams, if there are transnational phenomena. International terrorism is international, the networks work across Europe, not only in one country, and therefore you must work together.

CTC: One other partner is, of course, the United States. The U.S. and Germany have worked together in counterterrorism for a long time. Are there any lessons that you've learned from U.S. partners in counterterrorism that have influenced the German approach? Or have you also in your time come across issues where you thought this is maybe something where Germany and the U.S. have to take a different approach in counterterrorism just because of differences in the countries?

Klos: I would definitely underline the things we have in common because I think this outweighs much more the differences. And I hope that this also will continue because I think we rely on each other. As I already mentioned, there's an extremely good cooperation between the FBI and the Federal Criminal Police Office at the operational level—this has been longstanding. I have visited the FBI and the Joint Terrorism Task Force in New York, for example.

There is a permanent operational exchange between both countries and high mutual respect of the work of each other and the counterterrorism units in place. And I think this is extremely positive and really vital for our countries to have such a very close cooperation. This also applies for the cooperation between the two countries' intelligence services. The CIA in cooperation with the German External Intelligence service (*Bundesnachrichtendienst*, BND) or as I already mentioned the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the internal intelligence service is also very important. And here, I must admit that we are very thankful to our American partners to receive important information, which is sometimes or actually often, much more accessible for American colleagues than for us because of legal reasons and very different perceptions of privacy. Data protection plays a very big role—I would even say from my perspective, an exaggerated role in Europe. Of course, I wouldn't go so far as fully endorsing the American approach but something in between for Europe and Germany would be much better. Therefore, we sometimes rely on information gathered in the online world by our American partners. It's extremely worthwhile. We have prevented a high number of terrorist attacks in Germany due to such information—not only from the U.S. but a large part of this information has come from the U.S. agencies—and this is very important for us.

As part of our cooperation with the United States, we are committed to doing everything to prevent any kind of terrorist threat directed against U.S. interests, be it in the U.S. or be it here in Germany, we have a lot of U.S. military installations. We are vigilant about this. I would regard the cooperation extremely good and valuable for both sides. **CTC**

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