Islamism Reloaded?

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On August 29, 2025, Schloss Wahn of the University of Cologne once again hosted the Cologne Forum for Intelligence Agencies – this year under the title “Islamism Reloaded?”. Against the backdrop of the historic venue, around 60 doctoral researchers from across Germany gathered alongside guests from law enforcement, academia, and the intelligence community. The forum offered a rare opportunity to gain insights into the work of the German intelligence services and to engage in direct dialogue with representatives from the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), the Federal Intelligence Service (BND), and the Military Counterintelligence Service (MAD).

The event focused on the current Islamist threat landscape, state countermeasures, and interagency cooperation. Participants discussed the international structures of jihadist networks and the ongoing challenges of countering extremism in security-sensitive areas. The day concluded with an engaging and critical final discussion.

Radicalization in the Digital Age

The discussions explored the mechanisms of Islamist radicalization, which today often unfold within a very short time frame and largely unnoticed by families or institutions. Speakers emphasized the role of online platforms and social media as catalysts of extremist ideology, illustrating how digital spaces transform both recruitment and mobilization. The overall threat level in Germany remains consistently high, with attacks considered possible at any time. Current actors range from individual perpetrators to transnational networks, including groups and proxy organizations active in the Middle East.

Cooperation as the Core of Counterterrorism

Coordinated security structures play a central role in counterterrorism, particularly the collaboration between federal and state authorities. Intelligence and law enforcement agencies integrate their efforts, share information, and conduct joint assessments to ensure rapid and effective responses to emerging threats.

The challenges posed by extremist propaganda, which serves both as a tool for radicalization and as potential investigative material, received careful attention. Participants highlighted the delicate balance required between monitoring digital content for security purposes and safeguarding civil liberties, underlining that effective counterterrorism relies on both operational cooperation and adherence to ethical and legal standards.

From 9/11 to Lone Actors

Further discussions traced the evolution of international jihadism from the early 2000s to the present day. Whereas earlier attacks were characterized by centralized planning and complex logistics, today's threat landscape is dominated by lone actors using simple means. The shift from personal networks to digital communication has redefined both terrorist operations and counterterrorism strategies.

The growing relevance of open-source intelligence, such as publicly available videos and posts, was underlined as a key source in the assessment of current threats. Attention was also drawn to the increasing operational activity in Africa and to shifting global alliances that position extremist groups and certain state actors in pragmatic opposition to Western democracies.

Extremism Within State Institutions

Preventing extremism within state institutions remains a critical challenge, highlighting the importance of maintaining democratic integrity and public trust. Extremist attitudes can, in rare cases, emerge even within the very structures meant to safeguard democracy. Early detection, transparent internal procedures, and a culture of ethical awareness were identified as key elements of prevention. Effective counter-extremism requires more than formal control mechanisms – it depends on continuous education, open dialogue, and institutional vigilance grounded in shared democratic values.

Dialogue Beyond the Classroom

The Cologne Forum for Intelligence Agencies once again demonstrated its role as a bridge between academia and practice. In a protected setting, young researchers were able to engage with practitioners, ask critical questions, and reflect on the balance between freedom and security.

Personally, I found the forum both intellectually stimulating and thought-provoking, as it underscored how vital transparent dialogue and interdisciplinary exchange are in addressing security challenges without compromising democratic principles. As a legal scholar, I was particularly struck by the complex interplay between legal frameworks and practical security considerations, which must continuously be balanced in a democratic society.