

**Ritu Sharma\***

## ***The Perception of Muslims in Germany: Decoding the German Media Coverage of the Islamic State***

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### **Abstract**

*For decades now, 'Islam' and 'Muslims' have always been cause of raging public debates in Germany. The rise of the Islamic State has further dented the image of the second largest religion in Germany. A section of German population earlier was concerned about the changing demographics and took to streets against perceived 'Islamisation' of the country for which the Islamic State became the prime focus of the media. For a long time now 'Muslimness' has been taken as the antithesis of 'Germanness' which has not helped the situation to amicably settle down either. Here an attempt is made to study the patterns in the print media organisations focussed predominantly on the issues related to violence, fundamentalism and intolerance of other religions or pluralistic values; among other themes covered are women subjugation and mosque constructions.*

### **Introduction**

The German election results on 25 September 2017 saw Angela Merkel getting re-elected for the office of Chancellor for the fourth term. The results could have been as attributed to the electors' endorsements of her refugee policies in the past. However, the election is seen as a 'watershed' moment in the history of Germany as two political parties were punished by the voters. This paved the way for the entry of an openly right-wing party in the Bundestag, the German parliament.<sup>1</sup>

These results have been an indirect manifestation of the disillusionment and fear of the German population vis-à-vis the burgeoning Muslim population in the country, the warning signs of which were visible as far back as 2014 when thousands of Germans took to the streets in a series of 'anti-Islamisation' protests aimed at salvaging the existing

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\* **The author** is an Indian journalist, and Editor (India) of *Nuclear Asia*, a web portal on topics related to Civil Nuclear Energy.

‘Jewish-Christian’ values of the country. They were exhorting the government to take urgent measures to contain the ‘flooding’ of Germany with Muslim immigrants.

The declaration of a medieval style self-proclaimed “Caliphate” by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and hundreds of European youth joining the fighting ranks of the richest extremist group of all times further renewed this debate on whether Islam belongs to Germany or not. There has been a form of ‘moral panic’ (a concept given by Stephen Cohen in his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* 2011) in Germany since the beginning of October 2014 and has led to the inception of *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (PEGIDA, Patriotic European Against the Islamisation of the West) movement.<sup>2</sup>

The otherwise reticent Merkel, in her New Year speech, made a strong statement against the slew of weekly anti-Islam protests organized in the country under the aegis of PEGIDA. Even though these marches have found very low support outside the city of Dresden<sup>3</sup>, where they started, the sight of several thousand people taking to the streets with the German national flag in their hands and shouting *Lügenpresse* (Lying Press, a Nazi term) and *Wir sind das Volk* (We are the people)<sup>4</sup>, had brought the fear of revival of Xenophobic sentiments in the country to the fore.

The PEGIDA movement started in early October 2014 and its 19 page manifesto released in December 2014 asked for the protection of Germany’s traditional “Christian-Judeo” culture and, among many other things, also opposed Gender Mainstreaming and Political Correctness. One of the points reads that the PEGIDA opposes hate speech irrespective of religion; however, the significant presence of neo-Nazis and Hooligans in the weekly ‘anti-Islamic’ protests organised under its banner has been tolerated. Anti-Islam and anti-immigration protests preceded the PEGIDA movement as well, but the rise of this organisation marked a new wave of anti-Islamic protests and saw a rise in the xenophobia -Muslims in Germany.

The PEGIDA marches have also sent alarm bells ringing for the German intelligence agency, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV). One such ‘anti-Islamic’ rally organised in Cologne on October 26, 2014 took a drastic turn as 400 right-wing extremists turned violent.<sup>5</sup>

In response, the German Chancellor’s office held a meeting to analyse the security situation. They discussed the issue of the ‘anti-Islamic’ rallies and asked several state agencies to scrutinise the unusual mix of protestors in the ‘anti-

Islamic' rallies. A study by the Technical University, Dresden also indicates a convergence of beliefs between the PEGIDA movement and the extreme right – namely racial prejudices and rejection of Islam (Vorländer, 2015). It must be understood that this anti-Muslim xenophobia is as much a threat to the social fabric of Germany as is Islamic fundamentalism and hence the quest for understanding one of the key factors contributing to it.

One of the main characteristics of the PEGIDA movement was that it fizzled out as quickly as it gained momentum. PEGIDA protests had started in October 2014 and by the beginning of 2015 the numbers of protestors in the 'anti-Islamisation' marches kept dwindling in the face of a strong counter movement. The prelude to the genesis of 'moral panic' in the form of the PEGIDA movement saw Western European countries, including Germany, come to terms with the security challenges posed by the Islamic State, previously known as the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham, (ISIS). The reaction from a part of the German population has been qualified as 'moral panic' – a term introduced by Stanley Cohen in 1970s in his book 'Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers'. Terming something as 'moral panic' does not invalidate its existence completely, rather it means that things are exaggerated (Cohen 2011). Cohen lays down conditions for moral panic, namely presence of a soft target, a victim who can easily be identified with and a general consensus that 'something needs to be done' urgently to salvage the situation.

The public consensus was being forged through a blurring of lines between different identities. Since the Islamic State started grabbing front page headlines in the public and media discourse, the lines between Muslims, Muslim immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, extremist Muslims blurred increasingly, hence the 19-point all-encompassing manifesto of PEGIDA. Even as the socio-legal status of Islam in Germany has been a source of contention in the country for quite long time, the PEGIDA movement differs in term of its intensity over a short duration of time; where Islam was pitted as anti-German.

This research seeks to contribute towards understanding the role of media in the global image crisis of the fastest growing religion in the world – Islam – with German media's coverage of the rise of the Islamic State as a case study. For this research the immediate period before the commencement of the PEGIDA rallies in October 2014 has been chosen for analysis.

The paper is an exploration of the reasons that triggered the PEGIDA movement in Germany; which is a good entry point to understand the phenomenon of the increased hostility towards Islam and Muslim in Germany. Genesis of movements like PEGIDA<sup>6</sup> is a complex process with many factors

contributing to it. Nevertheless, the role played by media in accentuating the concern against perceptible ‘Islamisation’ of Germany and in perceiving Islam as a threat cannot be negated. The study seeks to analyse the framing used by two news publications – *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and *BILD* – in covering issues related to Islam and Muslims right after the Islamic State shot to prominence, and to examine the role played by it in shaping public opinion against Muslims using Agenda Setting Theory of Media and Terror Management Theory. The increased fear of Muslims in Germany has also been reflected in a representative poll conducted by the *Bertelsmann Stiftung* in November 2014 in which a total of 57 per cent non-Muslims perceived Islam as a threat – a rise of four per cent since 2012.

For a majority of the non-Muslims in Germany who do not have personal contacts with Muslims, the knowledge about Islam predominantly comes through the media. The research intends to explore the following questions:

- Has there been a negative framing of Islam in German media coverage since the Islamic State shot to prominence?
- If yes, how has the negative framing of Islam in German media coverage of the Islamic State created ‘moral panic’ in German public against Islam?
- Why negative framing of Islam in German media resulted in “moral panic” in German public vis-à-vis Islam?

### **PEGIDA as ‘Moral Panic’?**

The concept of ‘moral panic’ emerges from the constructionist perspective on social problems and suggests that anything a particular section of population considers as a matter of concern constitutes a problem in a society. The concern may not be directly related to the evidence of actual harm caused by the condition and the periods of high-intensity concerns are short lived (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). In 1972, British sociologist Stanley Cohen defined the concept as:

... a condition, episode, person, or group of persons that emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests: its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians, and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved, or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible (p. 9). (S. Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics : The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* 2011)

The weekly anti-Islamic mass rallies of PEGIDA are qualified as ‘moral panic’ as the hostility against the ‘monolithic’<sup>7</sup> Muslim community; where the lines between an Islamist extremist, a Muslim immigrant, a German-born Muslim and a Muslim asylum seeker are woefully blurred; is unreasonable and disproportionate. Data collected by the Ministry of Interior in November 2014 has put the number of Muslims with inclination towards violence as one per cent of the 4 million Muslims living in the country.<sup>8</sup> The detractors might say that the transnational character of the Islamist extremists accentuates the concern about them. However, the unjustified scrutiny of an entire community for the deeds of a few can also prove to be counterproductive. Consequently, the rehabilitation programme started by the German government for the German youth, who return from Iraq and Syria after seeing action, will be difficult to yield results in the face of such hostility.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

***Agenda Setting Theory:*** The theory has its genesis in Walter Lippmann’s 1922 classic ‘Public Opinion’, where the newspaper columnist contended that there is a connection between the world – as portrayed by the media – and the pictures in the mind of the audience (Lippmann 1922). In 1963, Bernard Cohen went a step further and made an accurate observation of this scenario: “The Press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.” (B. C. Cohen 1963)(McCombs and Shaw 1972)(McRobbie and Thornton 1995) Agenda here does not have any disparaging meaning; rather it means “sets of issues communicated in a hierarchy of importance at a point in time” (Dearing and Rogers 1996).

Later, the first level of agenda setting theory presented by McCombs and Shaw (1972) following research on 1968 US Presidential Elections asserted that the larger coverage of an issue by the media makes it more prominent in the minds of the news audience.

There has been a plethora of research on the perspectives or frames that journalists and members of public use to describe an issue. In this framing, certain attributes are highlighted more than the others. This is what is termed as the Second Level Agenda Setting. Frequency of coverage of an issue or an attribute is a major paradigm in the Second-Level Agenda Setting.

***Terror Management Theory:*** ‘Terror’ in the Terror Management Theory (TMT) means anxiety/terror caused by the mortality of humans. The main concept of the TMT is Mortality Salience – i.e. being aware of one’s inevitable mortality.

The ground work of TMT was done by Ernest Becker (1973) in his book *The Denial of Death*. He contended that humans overcome/manage the fear caused by their inevitable death by developing shared understanding of the world. 'Faith' in these worldviews protect people from this existential fear.

The TMT contends that this buffering from a death-related anxiety is provided by a cultural bird's eye view of the world at large – a meaningful, ordered and stable conception of reality, which can help an individual in attaining personal values along with symbolic immortality by living up to these standards; and self-esteem – which is the sense of accomplishment in an individual achieved by living up to these standards (Schimel, et al. 1999) (Arndt, Cook, & Routledge, 2004; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Landau, et al., 2004).

Many researchers have also established that these timely reminders of mortality furthers one's faith in the viewing the world; and this also means a more positive evaluation for those who confirm this view of the world and negative evaluation for those who deviate from this view (Greenberg, et al., 1990; Landau, et al., 2004; Pyszczynski, Rothschild, & Abdollahi, 2008; Schimel, et al., 1999).

The TMT also contends that stereotypes; "over-generalised beliefs about members of groups" are used for bolstering one's sense of self-worth, strengthening their group identity and protecting the social system (Schimel, et al. 1999).

## Methodology

For the purpose of the study, two news publications – *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and *BILD* – have been selected. Since 'moral panic' is more prominent in the conservative spectrum, the conservatively inclined *Frankfurter Allgemeine* being the second largest circulated daily in Germany can be a source of good insight into how the reportage of the rise of the Islamic State increased fear of Islam amongst German population. The second paper, *BILD*, is the largest circulating tabloid in Germany. Newspapers that have been chosen for this study as previous research into Agenda Setting role of the media have indicated that the newspaper coverage strongly influence the television coverage than the other way around (Trumbo 1995; Vliegthart and Waggravee 2009). Also for the reasons of better accessibility, the resources available online on the websites of the two newspapers will be analysed.

The scope of the research has been limited to the three month time period beginning from the official announcement about the establishment of the Caliphate on 29 June 2014 till 30 September 2014 – after which the PEGIDA

movement started. Immediately after the declaration of the Caliphate, an increase in the media coverage of Islam and Muslim was expected. Since the study aims at finding the reasons that triggered the ‘moral panic’ in the form of PEGIDA movement, the end of September 2014 is chosen as the end limit of the time period of analysis. The unit of analysis is a news report and to collect the sample data an internet search for the words and “Islam” and “Muslim” was conducted on the websites of the two newspapers for the aforementioned time period. The search yielded a total of 329 news items for analysis. This included 171 news items from Frankfurter Allgemeine and 158 news items from *BILD*.

After the collection of data, the news items will be sorted on the basis of the attributes credited to Muslims in the story into positive, negative and neutral. ‘Positive’ stories will be those that ascribe positive attributes to Muslims and Islam, create positive Muslim role models and highlight positive developments in the Islamic world, for instance a Turkish Muslim becoming police officer in Germany and helping in preventing radicalisation. A ‘negative’ story would be the one prominently ascribes negative attributes to Islam and Muslims like terrorism, crimes, religious intolerance amongst Muslims etc. And ‘neutral’ stories would be those where Islam is in background without any active ascription of any attribute to Islam and Muslims. Like reporting about Christian Wulff, former President of Germany, the newspapers always include the statement he made about Islam being integral part of Germany in 2010. Also the news items where both positive and negative attributes are included will be categorised as neutral.

In order to find the dominant frame in the German media coverage of Islam since the declaration of the Islamic State, following codes were created:

***Violence:*** Under this category the news items about terrorism acts and acts perpetrated by the Islamic State will fall. Crime stories where the faith of the perpetrator is highlighted will also be classified under this category. The present research does not seek to take part in the ongoing debate about the definition of terrorism, so the news items where an act is termed as a terror act will be taken as such. Also, a sub-category of the Islamic State has also been created so as to find out the relative proportion of the coverage devoted to the Islamic State as compared to the other categories – which has been central to this thesis.

***Intolerance:*** Intolerance to other religions has been another attributes associated with Islam and Muslims. This category would include news items about Christian/Yazidi groups being targeted by Islamist extremist groups/ individuals and also items where anti-Semitism is attributed to Muslims.

**Fundamentalism:** According to *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*, fundamentalism is characterized by a desire to ‘return to the fundamentals of religious tradition and rejection of western secular modernity’. The news items about Salafists, Salafism, sharia police patrolling streets of Germany and Sharia law itself will be put under this category.

**Gender Inequality:** Gender is defined as “socially and culturally constructed roles, responsibilities, privileges, relations and expectations” ascribed to women and men (Women, Girls, Boys and Men: Different Needs and Equal Opportunities 2006).

**Others:** Any news items dealing with issues other than the above mentioned four categories will fall under this category. For instance construction of Mosques will be classified under ‘Others’.

Several stories carry multiple frames; however, it is put under the Islamic State if the group is mentioned. Secondly, the frame referred initially is taken to be the dominant frame. Following the empirical translation of the collected news stories, a qualitative analysis will be conducted to find out the frequently used stereotypes vis-à-vis Muslims and if group memberships are stressed in covering a particular incident.

The collected data will be triangulated with the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s survey carried out in November 2014 to gauge the perception of the German population towards Islam and Muslims. Triangulation is a method of approaching the investigation into a research question in more than ways to enhance confidence in the findings (Bryman 2011). This will help in understanding if the Agenda-Setting effects of the German newspapers have been strong or weak.

## Data Compilation

The research encompassed a total of 329 news reports and it can be broken down into following categories.

**Table 1: Classification of analysed news items into positive, negative or neutral.**

	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Frankfurter Allgemeine (FAZ)</i>	15	133	23	171
<i>BILD</i>	10	135	13	158
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>268</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>329</b>

The data yielded 329 news items regarding “Muslim” and “Islam” in both the newspapers – 171 from *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and 158 from *BILD*. Out of these 15 news items in FAZ, had a positive inclination and 10 items in *BILD*



were definitively positive. The number of Neutral news items in FAZ was 23 and in *BILD* the corresponding number was 13. Bulk of the news items in both FAZ and *BILD* were however negative – 133 and 135 respectively. Converted into per centage nearly 77.78, per cent news items in FAZ and 85.44 per cent news items in *BILD* were negative. Only 8.77 per cent of news reports analysed in FAZ and 6.33 per cent in *BILD* were found to have a positive tilt. And only 13.45 per cent news items were neutral in FAZ and 8.23 per cent news items in *BILD* were neutral.

**Table 2: Break down of the different frames used in the news reports.**

	<i>Frankfurter Allgemeine (FAZ)</i>	<i>BILD</i>
Violence	76	66
Fundamentalism	20	32
Intolerance	32	17
Gender Inequality	6	10
Others	37	33
<b>Total</b>	<b>171</b>	<b>158</b>

If the stories are classified according to the pre-decided codes, majority of the stories are found to be related to violence in both the newspapers. In FAZ 76 news items were centering on violence whereas in *BILD* the corresponding number was 66. Out of these news items on violence, a major chunk comprised of news items about Islamic States in both cases. In FAZ 44 news items were about Islamic State, whereas in *BILD* the number was 58. The other two dominant frames were Fundamentalism and Intolerance. In *BILD* 32 stories had fundamentalism as their theme whereas in FAZ the figure was 20. When it comes to the frame of ‘intolerance’ of diversity of religions, FAZ carried 32 news items. In *BILD* the number of news items falling under the ‘intolerance’ frame was 17. Surprisingly, Gender Inequality did not figure that prominently in the gamut of issues covered by the two newspapers. In *BILD* only 10 news items revolved around the Gender Inequality frame whereas in FAZ the number was 6. The news items touching upon other issues were 27 in *BILD* and 37 in FAZ. The cluster of issues included in the “others” category were attacks on mosques, construction of mosques in Germany and a Muslim shooter becoming the king shooter in the German Shooting Brotherhood, that is by tradition, a fraternity of Christians.

## **Making Sense of the Data**

Has there been a negative framing of Islam in the German media coverage

since the Islamic State shot to prominence? This research studied news stories for a short time period immediately prior to the origins of the PEGIDA movement to assess the role played by the media coverage of Islam and Muslims in fuelling the ‘moral panic’ in German population that got manifested in the form of the protests to oppose the purported “Islamisation” of Germany. The data collected during the research has also reinforced that Islam and Muslims continue to be a recurring theme in the German media. The study also found that the coverage of Islam and Muslims in the two chosen newspapers has been dominated by negative news by a larger margin in comparison to positive news. The majority of the coverage in these two widely circulated newspapers was revolving around violence, terrorism, intolerance and fundamentalism. The daily lives of the nearly 4.5 million Muslims living in Germany have virtually no mention in the hundreds of stories analysed for the research. Succinctly put, in the minds of the media and the German public at large, Islam has been hijacked by a minority of the extremist Muslims; the terrorists whose every action and statement is amplified through extensive media coverage and put under the broader umbrella of Islam and all Muslims.

The findings of the present research confirm that there is a negative framing of Islam in the German media coverage of Islam and Muslims following the rise of the Islamic State.

***Islamic State Dominates Print Coverage:*** Interestingly while the daily lives of moderate Muslims across Germany and in other countries do not make for a sensational, juicy piece of news item, the daily life in the territory administered by the Islamic State is covered in minute detail. A video film shot by the female member of the Islamic State in the Iraqi city of Raqqa was covered under the headline “Bizarre Bilderaus der Hauptstadt des Terrors” (Bizzare images from the Capital of Terror (Dümer 2014).

The research of the Swiss Monitoring group Media Tenor on the long term coverage trend of the German electronic media from 2001-2014 found that with the ascent of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; and Boko Haram in Nigeria the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the German media has worsened progressively (Kolmer and Schatz 2015).

***‘Muslims not Criticising Terrorists Enough’:*** Although, it is the prerogative of the newspaper to accord importance to a particular news item as per its policy, the fact that the voice of moderate Muslims is downplayed is worth mentioning here; as the fault of the unabated violent Islamism is laid on the doorsteps of the imagined homogenous Muslim community that does not condemn the extremists severely.

For instance the story of the Islamic State killing Human Rights activist in Iraq gets more play up than 120 Muslim scholars writing an open letter condemning its brutal interpretation of Koran (Dschihadisten ermorden Menschenrechtlerin im Irak 2014). On the contrary, when Pope Francis criticises the Islamic State for misusing religion it is a big news (“Niemand darf Gott als Schutzschild missbrauchen” 2014). This extensive coverage granted to the extremists committing violence in the name of religion in comparison to the moderate Muslims, further contributes to the distortion of the image of Muslims and Islam in the perception of the German population.

**Muslims versus Christians:** The coverage of Islam and Muslims during the analysis period has been framed heavily as the Christian West versus the Islamic State or other Islamic extremist groups. It is a ‘War on Terror’, ‘Coalition against the IS’, ‘Coalition against Jihadis’ and so on. Since the limitations of space and time hampers nuanced coverage of the complex issues of radicalisation and terrorism; the news items seldom differentiate between Islam and Islamism or between Muslims and Islamists.

The Islamic State is also reported with respect to threatening to end 1800 year old history of Christianity in the region. The sub-heading is “Die Christen im Irak sind fassungslos, dass ihre muslimischen Nachbarn zu willigen Helfern des Terrors mutierten (The Christians in Iraq are stunned that their Muslim neighbours are silently and willingly aiding the terror) (Reinhard Bingener 2014).

News reports like these ignore the dimensions of conflict situations and seek to dehumanise the whole community on the basis of their conflict time behaviour and generalisations. Moreover, the news reports also omit that even Muslims are victims of the Islamic State. When the news is about the fight between Kurds and the Islamic State then it is not reported as a sectarian feud, rather as Muslims versus Kurds. In other words, being Muslim is equated with ethnicity (Hermann 2014).

While covering these reports, Christianity is always covered in more positive tones and presented as the religion of peace. A Catholic Bishop’s plea for Germany sending more weapons against the Islamic State is accompanied by statements like *Eristeiner der mächtigsten Katholiken – und sorgtsich um Frieden und Stabilität in der Welt* (He is one of the most powerful Catholic – and worries about peace and stability in the world) (“Es ist vertretbar, dass Deutschland Waffen schickt”, 2014).

The bias of the German media against Islam is very palpable in a news report about Evangelical Church propagating Homophobia in North Africa. Even while reporting about the movement by American Evangelical church, FAZ

adds that Christianity competing with Islam on homophobia is at disadvantage as “Koran forbids homosexuality” (Scheen 2014).

**Building Threat Perception about Islam:** Both the newspapers carried stories that presented future scenarios about threat of Islamist extremism. This scenario building was accompanied with reports that presented German authorities abilities as inadequate to handle the threat. Die Frageistnicht, obeinTerroranschlag in Europa passiert. Die Frageist, wann (The question is not is a terror attack will take place in Europe. The question is when?) (Dümer, 2014) – Statements like these attributed to terrorist experts is enough to set the threat perception against Islam soaring.



Figure 1: The mapping of the fantasies of the Islamic State by BILD (*Die Machtfantasien von ISIS n.d.*)

A lack of parity in the strength of the Islamic State and corresponding capabilities of German authorities and the security agencies of other western countries is also projected (Gesuchte Islamisten reisen ungehindert in Frankreich ein 2014). It is enough to fuel the sense of insecurity among German population with respect to the increasing presence of Muslims amidst them.

**Muslims are Intolerant:** During the three months of analysis, there were many news items holding Islam responsible for the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany or Europe (Hass-Prediger ruft zur Juden-Vernichtung auf 2014) and atrocities on other communities elsewhere in the world. Considering the historical guilt burden in Germany, anti-Semitism evokes very strong emotions

in the population. Also the Western countries have repeatedly shown promptness in giving asylum to the Christian victims in North Africa or elsewhere and the media has also publicised these events; further consolidating the intolerant image of Muslims in the process.

A commentary in FAZ talks about the limits to its welcome culture and asserts that an anti-Semitic Islam does not belong to Germany – “*Gehört selbsteinjudenfeindlicher Islam zu Deutschland? Nein, er gehört nicht hierher*” (Altenbockum 2014).

News reports like this also adds to the enemy image of Islam and consolidates “Muslimness” as an anti-thesis of “Germanness”; which has apathy against anti-Semitism ingrained in its socio-political structure.

***Appropriation of Symbols of Islam and Muslim by Islamists:*** The more the World is getting interested in Islam and its followers; the more its symbols are being ascribed dubious meanings. For instance a beard, head scarf and mosque – the innocuous symbols of the religion are used consistently to evoke contempt amongst non-Muslims for Muslims. Professing a woman’s right to wear what she wants, the West – including Germany - has been in a bind over the issue of Muslim woman seeking to wear a Burqa or head scarf. Similarly, minarets of a mosque are seen as altering the landscape of the country and hence its construction elicits resistance in the locale. Further, beard seen as a Muslim’s quest to emulate Prophet Mohammad’s image has become the insignia of a Jihadi fighter. Although the situation is complicated as the Islamists themselves seek to appropriate these symbols to further their ideology, newspaper reports also aid in sustaining the controversial images of these symbols.

Unlike France, in Germany Burqa is not banned. Even though students are not forbidden from wearing head scarf, the teachers are not permitted to do so. Recently, the news of a Muslim woman prohibited from wearing head scarf in a Christian hospital hogged the headlines. This in turn led to couple of other stories where columnists claimed to find head scarfs as against women liberation (Kascha 2014).

In her column in BILD torn between freedom of religion and women rights, Margot Käßmann expresses her dismay at head covering prescribed in all religions – burqa, chador and headscarf. But these three have come to symbolise Islam. She ends her column by saying, “I am thankful for living in a free society. And as an elderly woman I find it beautiful, when I see a young girl, with long hair flowing in the wind, the short skirt also looks good. Good, there are taste limits that I find good....” (Käßmann 2014). Here again the writer is attributing

the choice of clothing solely to religion. In many societies irrespective of religion wearing short skirt would not be accepted culturally.

For FAZ as well, head scarf is a symbol of going back in times and regression. It even called it the face of changing Turkey. “The new Turkish woman wearing headscarf again.... Politicians’ wives and female MPs using the headscarf as a political symbol. Is the secular, Kemalist tradition of Turkey at risk? What used to be banned in Turkey, is now socially acceptable. But the new religious freedom threatens the freedom of others. What are its limits?”<sup>10</sup> (Özkan-Bellut 2014)

***Muslim and Islam are Emphasised in All Negative Stories:*** The study also found that a great emphasis is put on the religious identity of the protagonist with respect to a bad news. Even if the story is a crime story it will be appended by a phrase like “recent convert to Islam” even if religion has nothing to do with the motivation of the crime. A man kills his colleagues in Oklahoma; apparently he was frustrated after his dismissal. But BILD considers it important to mention that he recently got converted to Islam (US-Amerikaner enthauptet Kollegin 2014).

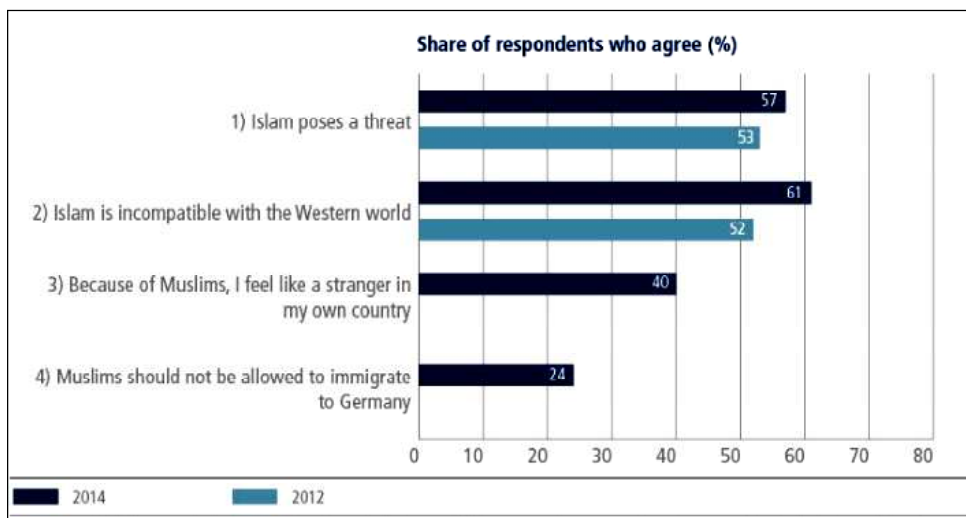
Similarly when Russel Tsarnaev, the wife of the perpetrator of the Boston bombing remarries, the newspaper does mention when she got converted to Islam and that she wears headscarf. The story is replete with adjectives like ‘Bomber’s widow’ and ‘Bomber’s sister’, even as the 25-year-old American made the decision to distance herself from her former husband (Russell Tsarnaev heiratet wieder 2014). Now with these kind of associations made with the perpetrator of the bombing, it is not clear if the news item sought to evoke sympathy for Russel Tsarnaev or evoke guilt by association.

If yes, how has the negative framing of Islam in German media coverage of the Islamic State created “moral panic” in German public against Islam? In providing perspective to the German public on the issue the media has constantly been using the frames of “Christians vs. Muslims”, “Islam vs. West” and “Violent Islam, Saviour West”. Also, the German Press is considered free according to the Freedom House and it receives a score of 17 on a scale of 0-100, where 0 represents the best. Germany’s political environment score 7 on the same scale (Freedom of the Press – Germany 2014). Reasonably free and open media and political systems are the two prerequisites before one can analyse any Second-Level Agenda-setting influence of the negative framing of the Islam and Muslim (McCombs, 2002) i.e. if this negative framing has been translated into their negative perception by the public?

The PEGIDA’s anti-Islamisation rallies are an indicator of an increased animosity towards Islam and it has been confirmed in a survey conducted on

behalf of the *Bertelsmann Stiftung* in November 2014. As per the survey 57 per cent of Germans consider that Islam pose a threat and this matches the positioning of Islam in the German media, with the two chosen print media incessantly portraying the potential threat of Islamic State and Islamists pose to the peace and security of Germany. In 2014 a whopping 61 per cent Germans consider Islam to be incompatible with the Western values. This number has also recorded an increase of 4 per cent in comparison to the year 2012 (*Religion Monitor: Understanding Common Ground*, 2015) (Figure 2).

Critics of this assertion may say that the reason has been the absolute brutality of the Islamic State and the constant turmoil in the larger Islamic World and not the myopic focus of the Media. But the fact is that the fighters of the Islamic State and the radicalised Muslim youth in Germany have become the face of the millions of Muslims in the country, even as the *Bertelsmann Stiftung* study observed that the Muslims feel really connected to the German state and society even if they are intensely religious. The study also observed that nearly 90 per cent of the highly religious Sunni Muslims favoured democracy as the form of government and 93 per cent of moderately religious Sunnis supported religious pluralism. It also debunked the claim that the Muslims are living in a separate, parallel society in Germany. But the perception of the German public about the incompatibility of Islam and the Western Values is contrary to this finding.



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung.

**Figure 2: Attitudes toward Islam and Muslims in 2012 and 2014.**

A further confirmation of the second level Agenda-setting of the German media is the discovery of the survey that the anti-Islam feeling is strong in the region where the population of Muslims is low. This means that the local population relies on the media to form a perception about Islam and Muslims. The misperception about Islam is so strong that nearly 50 per cent Germans stated to feel like strangers in their own country because of Muslims. And even in the areas where the Muslim population was very low and people did not have any contact with Muslims, as much as 40 per cent people had the same feeling (Religion Monitor: Understanding Common Ground, 2015).

The rise of the Islamic State and the radicalised youth traveling to Iraq and Syria, leaving behind all comforts accrued in the western world, to do their bit for the consolidation of the Caliphate, fuelled this need for orientation in relation to Islam and its followers. The media filled this gap by its out rightly negative coverage of Islam and Muslims. Since the concern of the public with respect to the issue of Islam was high, the media coverage translated into strong agenda setting effects (McCombs, 2002).

The media aided the triggering of moral panic as it did not offer any nuanced discussion on the issue. The media did not even bother to explore as to why countries like Indonesia and India with huge populations of Muslims do not face the challenge of the radicalisation of their youth at the same level as Germany.

Why did the negative framing of Islam in German media result in “moral panic” in German public related to Islam? Now the question arises as to why the particular conflict in Iraq and Syria after the rise of the Islamic State triggered the “moral panic” and not 9/11 attack (that has often been termed as turning point in the global history of Islamist extremism). The explanation to this can be explored through the Terror Management Theory.

The framing of Islam in German Media has long been negative and the stereotypes about Muslims have constantly been consolidated since 9/11 attack and have been reflected into various surveys (Muslim-Western Tensions Persist 2011). Setting up of anti-Islamisation *Die Freiheit* (The Freedom) party in Berlin 2010 is another indicator of the tension between Islam and German population. However, the rise of the Islamic State in 2013 and the declaration of Caliphate in mid-2014 further built up the threat perception of transnational Islamist extremism.

Germany has never experienced any terrorist attacks of the scale faced by some other Western countries like the US and the France. But the reaction of the public can be understood from one thing the priming of Mortality Salience,



as the advent of the Islamic State claimed its victims in the form of aid workers/journalists from the Western countries and it challenged their worldview of democracy, liberty and equality. For the first time hundreds of German youth left for Syria and Iraq to fight for the Caliphate. The consequent intensive media focus on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; and other terrorism-related news brought the threat of 'transnational' Islamist extremism closer to Germany – both physically and psychologically.

Research has shown evidence that in the face of the reminders of the inevitable death, people tend to do a more negative evaluation of people who deviate from this worldview (Greenberg, et al., 1990; Landau, et al., 2004; Pyszczynski, Rothschild, & Abdollahi, 2008; Schimel, et al., 1999). When the religious or ethnic community affiliation of the perpetrator of a violent act is projected as the underlying theme of a news report, the negative image formation of the community is inevitable. The terror-threat scenario projected in detail in the two newspapers created an 'us' versus 'them' scenario and in the face of the priming of the mortality salience; the German population responded by further devaluating the image of Islam and its followers, as reflected in the *Bertelsmann Stiftung's* survey (2015).

The denizens of East Germany were more proactive in participating in the PEGIDA protests against perceived Islamisation. In previous surveys also, it has been revealed that the stereotypes and prejudices against Muslims were stronger in East Germany. TMT substantiates that terrorism/violence related news can heighten the death related thoughts and in turn it can further strengthen prejudice against the out group (Kunzendorf, Hersey, Wilson, & Ethier, 1992; Greenberg, et al., 1990).

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of the three months coverage of Islam and Muslims in two leading daily's in Germany confirmed a negative framing of both. In continuation of previous studies, this research also confirmed that the two print media organisations focussed predominantly on the issues related to violence (terrorism and Islamic State), fundamentalism and intolerance of other religion or pluralistic values. Among other themes covered were women subjugation and mosque constructions.

Islam and Muslims have always been cause of raging public debates in Germany for decades now; the study further indicated that the rise of the Islamic State has further dented the image of the second largest religion in Germany. A section of German population earlier concerned about the changing demographics of the country took to streets against perceived 'Islamisation' of

the country as the Islamic State and became the prime focus of the media. The fact that for a long time “Muslimness” has been taken as the antithesis of ‘Germanness’ has not helped the situation either.

The problem again, is not the negative coverage about Islam and Muslims in the German media; rather an absence of the moderate Muslims and Islam from this coverage who can be portrayed in a much more positive light. The research does not put a question mark on the prerogative of the print media in selecting the news it wants to print; however, the truth is that moderate Islam and Muslims lose out the battle to ‘Islamic’ extremists in getting access to the mainstream media platforms. Unfortunately, the media has also been helping in consolidating the stereotypes of Muslims, rather than bringing a fresh view on the issues faced today. As a consequence, the ‘Islamic’ extremist has not only gained the power of a gun by its side; but also the amplifying power of the media – both of which contribute as the disseminator of all their actions and warped interpretations of Islamic traditions.

### Notes

1. More detailed analysis of the German national elections available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/germany-angela-merkel-s-fourth-term-comes-at-high-price-a-1169632.html>
2. The group also has a large presence on the social networking site Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/PEGIDA/790669100971515>\_The protests had started in October 2014 in Dresden, located in what once was East Germany. The news report on the PEGIDA rally attracting nearly 25,000 people available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/PEGIDA/790669100971515>
3. The beginning of the year 2015 saw a strong counter movement against the PEGIDA movement. Steps like switching off lights of iconic Cologne Dom and coming of anti-PEGIDA protestors on the street created a strong counter narrative to the movement. <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/pegida-widerstand-koeln-demonstriert-gegen-antiislamisten-a-1011385.html>
4. The protests had started in October 2014 in Dresden, located in what once was East Germany. The news report on the PEGIDA rally attracting nearly 25,000 people available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/PEGIDA/790669100971515>
5. Hooligans anti-Islamist rally in Cologne turns violent, <http://www.dw.de/hooligan-anti-islamist-rally-in-cologne-turns-violent/a-18022366>
6. The beginning of the year 2015 saw a strong counter movement against the PEGIDA movement. Steps like switching off lights of iconic Cologne Dom and coming of anti-PEGIDA protestors on the street created a strong counter narrative to the movement. <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/pegida-widerstand-koeln-demonstriert-gegen-antiislamisten-a-1011385.html>
7. Contrary to popular assumption, the Muslim community is far from being monolithic with divisions along sectarian and regional lines; and are further accentuated due to absent of a central authority. These divisions have hampered the development of single representative organisation for the community.

8. The future of Global Muslim Population, 2011 prepared by Pew Research's Centre Forum (<http://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-regional-europe/>) puts the population of Muslims in Germany at a little over 4 million, i.e. 5 per cent of the population. However, in a government conducted census only 1.9 per cent respondents said that they were Muslims (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-22727898>). Experts believe that the many Muslims exercised their legal right to not to state their religion in the survey.
9. Translated from "*Ich bin dankbar in einer freien Gesellschaft zu leben. Und ich finde es auch als ältere Frau schön, wenn ich die jungen Mädchen sehe, lange Haare wehen im Wind, der kurze Rock sieht toll aus. Gut, es gibt Geschmacksgrenzen, das finde ich schon....*"
10. Translated from "*Die neue Türkin trägt wieder Tuch.... Politikergattinnen und weibliche Abgeordnete nutzen das Kopftuch als politisches Symbol. Ist die laizistische, kemalistische Tradition der Türkei gefährdet? Was früher in der Türkei verboten war, ist nun gesellschaftsfähig. Doch die neuer religiöse Freiheit bedroht die Freiheit der anderen. Wo liegt am Ende die Grenze?*"