

Murder in Magdeburg

## A horrific Christmas attack in Germany is weirder than expected

The far right tries to exploit a Saudi anti-Islamist's murder spree



Photograph: AP

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FOR WEEKS German officials had fretted about the risk of a terrorist attack on the country's Christmas markets: crowded, difficult-to-secure gatherings with religious connotations that could make them attractive targets for jihadists. In 2016 a Tunisian migrant aligned with Islamic State drove a lorry into a Christmas market in west Berlin, killing 13 people in one of modern Germany's deadliest terrorist incidents. Since then, patrons of the markets had grown wearily familiar with the presence of security barriers and armed police.

The horror arrived on the evening of December 20th, when a BMW ploughed through the Christmas market in Magdeburg, a city in the eastern state of Saxony-Anhalt, killing a child and four women and leaving hundreds injured. The suspected perpetrator is Taleb Al-Abdulmohsen, a 50-year-old Saudi psychiatrist who arrived in Germany in 2006 and was granted asylum ten years later. He was arrested on the scene, and has been charged on several counts of murder and attempted murder. Yet Mr Al-Abdulmohsen bears little resemblance to the [young jihadists](#) who populate Germans' nightmares.

Originally hailing from a largely Shia city in eastern Saudi Arabia, in Germany Mr Al-Abdulmohsen devoted himself to campaigning against Islam and supporting the efforts of others, especially women, to flee the Saudi regime. Angered by what he considered German authorities' blindness to Islamism's dangers, he increasingly turned to totems of the [European far right](#), including Geert Wilders, Tommy Robinson and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. In language comparable to that of extremist groups, Mr Al-Abdulmohsen once said that Angela Merkel, Germany's former chancellor, deserved to be executed for her "criminal secret project to Islamise Europe". He was "obviously Islamophobic", said Nancy Faeser, Germany's interior minister, after the attack.

So far, the case leaves more questions than answers. One is whether Germany's authorities were asleep at the wheel. Mr Al-Abdulmohsen appears to have a long history of erratic behaviour and run-ins with the police. In 2013, in a row over medical-exam results, he reportedly threatened medical authorities with a repeat of a terrorist attack that had taken place in Boston days earlier. His increasingly obsessive behaviour isolated him from NGOs and other activists; according to *Die Zeit*, a newspaper, one called him "a psychopath". Witnessing Mr Al-Abdulmohsen's unravelling on social media, Saudi authorities urged German spooks to arrest him last year. But domestic investigators may have been concerned, not without reason, that the Saudis might have their own reasons for seeking to undermine a dissident activist. Last year federal and state criminal investigators conducted a risk assessment on Mr Al-Abdulmohsen but concluded that there was no need to act.

Over the past year, on social media and in private messages, Mr Al-Abdulmohsen became obsessed with the idea that German authorities were persecuting refugees who have renounced Islam. His messages sometimes flashed bright red. In August he posted, “Is there a way to justice in Germany without blowing up a German embassy or indiscriminately massacring German citizens?...I have not found it.” After the attack Peter Neumann, a German terrorism expert based in London, suggested that the British threat category of “mixed, unstable or unclear” might best describe Mr Al-Abdulmohsen’s ideology. Amid this strange brew of obsessive paranoia and far-right conspiracy, German officials are withholding judgment over motive, for now, and promising further investigation. On December 30th two parliamentary committees will grill intelligence and other officials over the attack.

A second question concerns the political fallout. Germany is gearing up for a [snap election](#) in late February, after its three-party coalition fell apart in November. Although the early sparring has focused on Germany’s stagnant economy, nerves over immigration and security were already on edge after several fatal jihadist attacks earlier this year, including one by a Syrian asylum-seeker who had evaded deportation.

On December 21st around 2,000 far-right activists and neo-Nazis convened in Magdeburg, calling for the “liberation of the German people” and urging the “remigration” of foreigners. That is a favoured demand of the AfD, particularly in its eastern German strongholds, including Saxony-Anhalt. One AfD politician from the neighbouring state of Brandenburg tried to square the circle of Mr Al-Abdulmohsen’s anti-Islamic language by saying that he did not care whether “foreigners justify their hatred of us Germans with Islam or something else.” The AfD has planned its own demonstration in Magdeburg on Monday. Its current national polling score of just below 20% would translate into the party’s best-ever election result.

Yet it is far from clear that the Magdeburg attack will prove a turning-point in Germany’s election. Leading politicians will certainly face questions over whether Germany’s policing and intelligence apparatus functioned as well as it might have done. But the country is now winding down for Christmas, and the campaign has barely begun. Much could happen in the nine weeks before polling day; actions by Donald Trump, due to be inaugurated on January 20th, might have more influence on Germany’s election. Most importantly, Mr Al-Abdulmohsen’s idiosyncrasies do not lend themselves to easy exploitation by politicians, especially by the AfD, a party with which he often expressed sympathy.

A third question is over the role of social media in spreading disinformation. Even once it became clear that Mr Al-Abdulmohsen did not fit the archetype of an Islamist extremist, conspiracy theories continued to swirl, in Germany and beyond. One of them, concocted by a Iranian-German techno promoter, was boosted by Elon Musk, the American plutocrat and owner of X, who now appears to be turning his gaze towards Germany. Hours before the attack Mr Musk had tweeted, “Only the AfD can save Germany.” One day later, Mr Musk said Olaf Scholz, the chancellor, was an “incompetent fool” who should “resign immediately” since German authorities had not heeded the Saudi warnings. (Mr Musk had in fact also been lauded by Mr Al-Abdulmohsen.) Some politicians in Germany and Brussels were already mulling a clampdown on Mr Musk’s use of his platform to spread disinformation. His provocations will doubtless fuel their convictions. ■