

Europe and the Migration
of Christian Communities
from the Middle East

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No Place for “Arabs and Turks”?

German Public Discourse about the Conflict in and Migration from Syria,
2015–2019

Lars Klein

1. Introduction

The article at hand starts with a recollection of the Sarrazin-debate of 2009 following. It does so, because that debate resonates with quite a few developments and discussions that are imminent now: Back then it was written that the Sarrazin-debate had to be considered a surrogate discussion about German identity.¹ In retrospect, the debate signals a turn towards populism and it accelerated the theoretical debate about “postmigration” as part of Critical Migration Studies.

Following a sketch of the Sarrazin-debate, it will be examined in a case study in how far a populist rhetoric has spilled over to mainstream reporting on the war in – and migration from – Syria. The analysis will show in how far the concept of “postmigration” offers a proper angle to analyse the situation of migrants from Syria in Germany.

2. Recap of the Sarrazin debate: Racism against “Arabs and Turks”

Berlin in the early 2000s was still suffering from a huge dept. For many it seemed a clever choice, when the Governing Mayor, Klaus Wowereit, coined the famous slogan “Berlin – Poor but Sexy”. He had installed Thilo Sarrazin as Senator of Finance in 2002. Upon leaving his position for a seat in the directorate of the German Bundesbank six years later, Sarrazin gave an interview with the “European cultural magazine”, as it calls itself, “Lettre International”. It was part of a special issue entitled “Berlin on the couch”, which was explicitly meant to discuss different visions of Berlin. Sarrazin’s vision carried the emblematic title “Klasse statt Masse. Von der Hauptstadt der Transferleistung zur Metropole der Eliten”.² In the interview, Sarrazin does what the title promises, he concludes that Berlin was not an industrial city, had nothing to offer except culture and tourism. He sketched Berlin as city of the elite, in which its mass universities should be replaced by elite universities.

1 Naika Foroutan et al., *Deutschland postmigrantisch I. Gesellschaft, Religion, Identität*, Berlin 2014, 9–17, 15.

2 Frank Berberich, *Klasse statt Masse*. Thilo Sarrazin im Gespräch, in: *Lettre International* 86 (2009).

He also understood that in a city of culture, not everybody could contribute. It is here that Sarrazin arrived at the racist core of his vision. He held that too many children were born into poor families, but not in order to conclude that poor families needed help to overcome their situation, but to speak of a “Kosovo strategy” on the side of these poor families aiming to make up ever larger numbers of society – a cloying version of the fear of “foreign infiltration” that keeps on floating in right-wing populist circles and found its echo in the idea of “population exchange” during the summer of migration in 2015. The number of “Arabs and Turks” rose “due to wrong policy”, Sarrazin added, with them having “no productive role” to play in society “other than selling vegetables on the market”. Sarrazin was again not discussing integration, but suggested they might find a spot in Cologne or elsewhere.³

A survey conducted in 2009 found that 51% of Germans polled agreed with Sarrazin’s claim that large parts of the Arab and Turkish population was neither willing nor able to integrate.⁴ A sentence often heard in the debate on the following debate on the interview was one like “it has to be allowed in this county to say ...” or the finding that Sarrazin might have overdone it, was but right in essence. That again is a recurring trope in populist rhetoric.

It is an interesting aspect of this scandal that Sarrazin was a prominent member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) back then, which in a dragging procedure finally suspended his membership in 2020. When he gave the interview and wrote his book(s), though, he was understood to that also as member of the SPD, so that the weekly “Die Zeit” concluded the Social Democrats were playing with right-wing ideas while the CDU was working towards constructive integration models, namely Armin Laschet in his position as first ever Minister responsible for Integration in North Rhine Westphalia.⁵

That masks the fact that the Christian Democrats were struggling to find their position in the party system and with defining what conservatism means for them. Angela Merkel had moved the CDU to the center, a dozen prominent Christian Democrats left their positions, or politics altogether, among them Roland Koch or Friedrich Merz – who made a comeback only ten years later to cover the right spectrum of the CDU, for example, in the “Zukunftsteam” of Armin Laschet, when he ran for Chancellor in the 2021 election.

Upon the huge echo that his interview found, Sarrazin published the much-contested book “Deutschland schafft sich ab” (“Germany does away with itself”) two years later in 2011.⁶ He stressed that the facts and figures he had worked with were not disputed and that they backed his findings. At the same time, he admitted that sometimes he could not find the statistics he was looking for, so he made them up. He used those figures that came closest to what he thought the situation was and if no one disagreed with him, he had established those figures to which there were no real statistics available.⁷ This strategy found his

3 Berberich, Klasse statt Masse.

4 ZEIT ONLINE, dpa, Reuters, Sarrazin gerät stärker unter Druck, in: Zeit Online vom 11. Oktober 2009.

5 Jörg Lau, Unter Deutschen. Die Integration der Ausländer ist viel weiter, als Thilo Sarrazins törichte Worte vermuten lassen, in: Die Zeit vom 8. Oktober 2009.

6 Thilo Sarrazin, Deutschland schafft sich ab. Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen, München 2018.

7 Tobias Kniebe, Debatte, in: SZ-Magazin vom 11. März 2010; Naika Foroutan, Sarrazins Thesen auf dem Prüfstand. Ein empirischer Gegenentwurf zu Thilo Sarrazins Thesen zu Muslimen in Deutschland, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin 2010, <https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/5745/christensen.pdf?sequence=1> (23.10.2021), 9.

resemblance in the “alternative facts” that Donald Trump liked to argue with. And where the Washington Post had found 30,573 lies to counter, Naika Foroutan and her team have written a 70-page report to correct Sarrazin’s figures of his first book. Foroutan, Professor for “Integration Research and Social Policy” at Humboldt University Berlin, was one of those migration scholars who objected most forcefully to Sarrazin. She and others have shown that what seemed to be a discussion of economics and city branding in essence was a racist sorting between those who deserved their spot in society and those who did not; between those that yielded profit and those that costed money.

Foroutan therefore highlighted in a later publication what could have been concluded from the Sarrazin debate already: that what we had to deal with was the “racism of the establishment”. Stereotyping, xenophobia, racism, attempts to safeguard resources cannot be attributed to the so-called “losers of modernization or globalization”, the poor and low-income classes. Foroutan points out that 55% of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)-voters had achieved their A-Levels, 44% earned more than 3,000 EUR per months.⁸

Similar conclusions were drawn by the Sociologist Gurminder Bhambra when analysing how Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. She too did not find proper evidence in claims that it was the losers of globalization making themselves heard, but concluded instead that the privileged white middle class struggled to safeguard their relative privileges.⁹ Class then was “not the operation of a race-neutral economic system, but part of an economic system which is deeply racialized”.¹⁰ Such an approach also links to the research on populism by Norris and Inglehart. They have found that economic explanations do not suffice to explain the success of populist parties, and complemented it with their model of a “cultural backlash”.¹¹

This was the atmosphere in the early 2010er years in Germany: Populism was established in the political and public debate, conservatives struggled to position themselves towards immigration and integration, and in parts of the society we have a largely undifferentiated discussion of migration from the Middle East. The right-wing populist demonstrations “Pegida” started in 2014. Since the very name of “Pegida” suggest that “Patriotic Europeans” see their “Abendland” threatened, suggests that turmoil can spread from the Middle East to Europe, just as migrants are perceived as threat and largely overrated in number. We can thus also expect this to feature in the reporting.

Whether a support in society for stereotypes and racism against “Arabs and Turks” meant to problematize migration from Arab countries and whether religion mattered here, will be analysed in the next step.

8 Naika Foroutan, *Die postmigrantische Perspektive. Aushandlungsprozesse in pluralen Gesellschaften*, in: Marc Hill/Erol Yıldız, *Postmigrantische Visionen. Erfahrungen – Ideen – Reflexionen*, Bielefeld 2018, 15–27, 17.

9 Gurminder K. Bhambra, *Brexit, Trump, and ‘methodological whiteness’: on the misrecognition of race and class*, in: *The British Journal of Sociology* 68 Suppl. 1 (2017), 214–231, 221.

10 *Ibid.*, 227.

11 Pippa Norris/Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash. Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge 2019.

3. Reporting the War on Syria in Germany: Not following the populist debate, but problematizing immigration

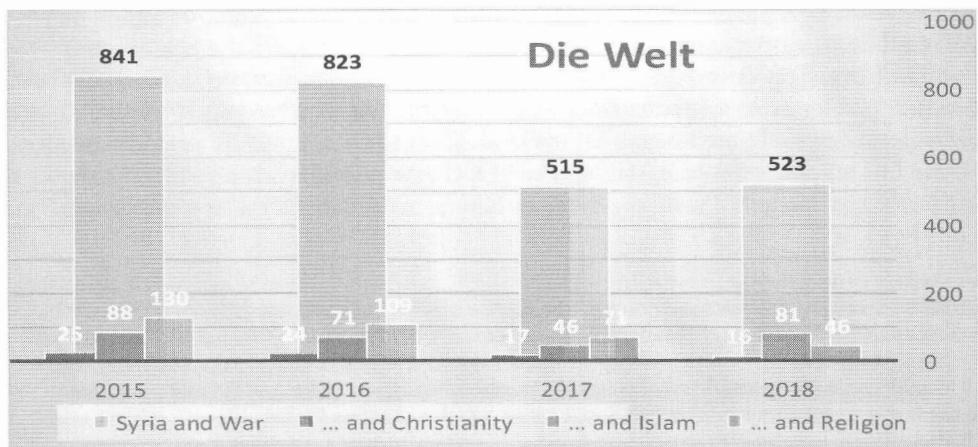
If we turn from the Sarrazin-debate to migration from Syria, we can formulate as hypothesis that the populist debate has had an influence on how the war and those fleeing the war have been reported. What could further be expected was a link between Muslim refugees and problems with integration.

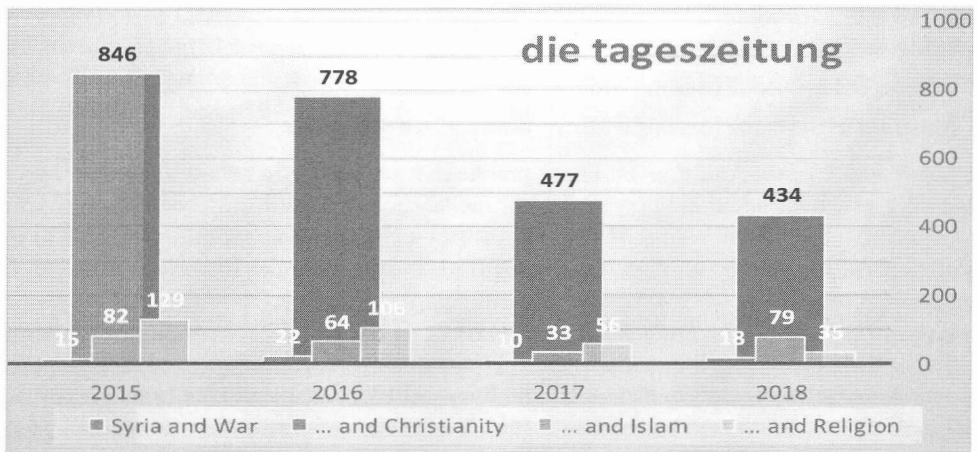
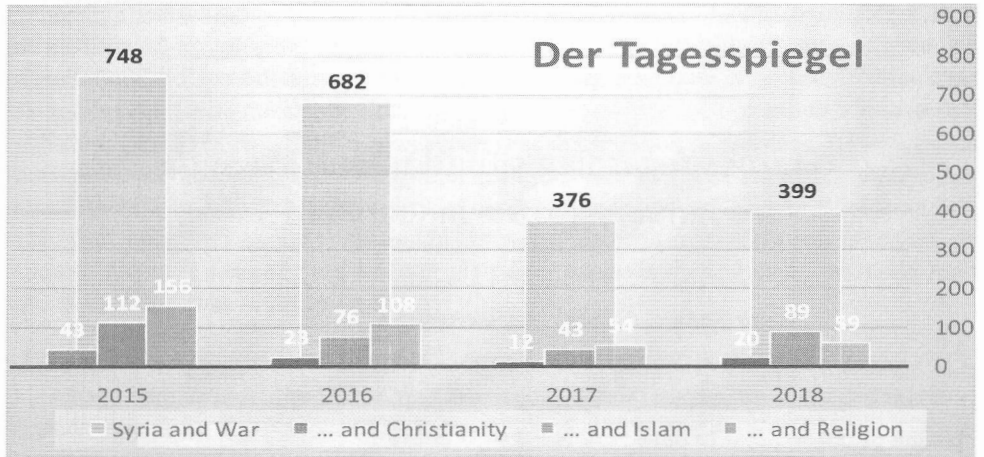
In order to test that, data will be used that have originally been gathered for the opening conference of the Powers-Network in Jordan in 2019. That was done with the help of the Nexis database as available at the University of Göttingen. For the German media, it includes a number of newspapers, TV stations and magazines. It does not include the most important quality newspapers, the “Süddeutsche Zeitung” and the “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”. So the three papers were chosen to represent the spectrum of reporting, the conservative “Die Welt”, the liberal “Der Tagesspiegel” and the left “taz, die tageszeitung”. All of these are available all over Germany and read all over Germany, while the “Tagesspiegel” was at the same time clearly rooted in Berlin.

Given the high number of reporting on the war in Syria, the keywords “Syria” and “War” were supplemented in three separate searches by “religion”, “Islam” and “Christianity”. The time frame was not chosen so to cover certain events, but to get an idea of current reporting in early 2019. Reporting was surveyed back to June 2016, with an in-depths analysis of the year prior to the conference the material was collected for, that is Mid-January 2018 to Mid-January 2019.

3.1 First take: General findings

So how was, based on our limited sample, the conflict in Syria framed? It is one first finding based on the numbers of reports alone that the conflict in Syria did not seem to be framed as religious conflict. Only a smaller part of articles in all three papers addressed “Religion”, “Islam” and/or “Christendom”.





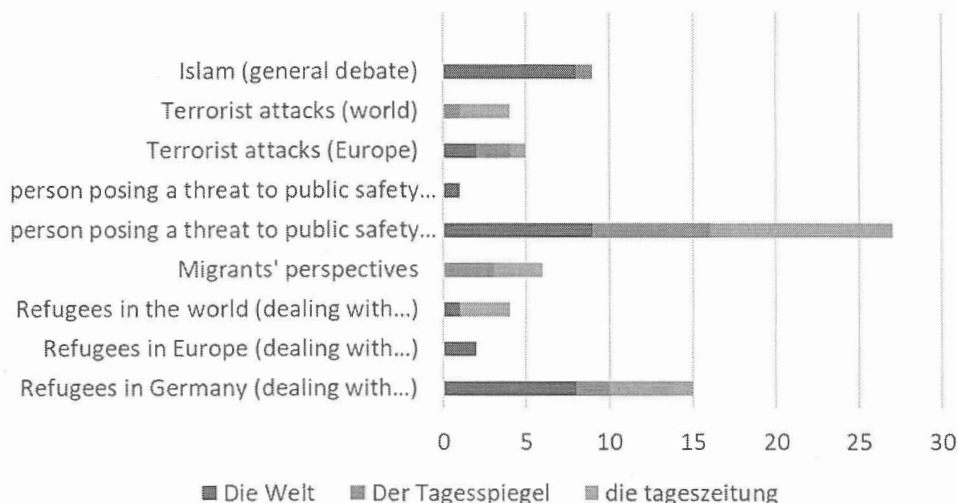
What we can also tell, if we look at the figures alone, is that the number of total reports dropped over time and that the mentions of religion decreased largely in correlation to that drop. It “largely” correlated, because there are exceptions, which will be addressed further down.

What did readers of the papers with different political profiles learn about the role of religion in the war in Syria?

It could be found that the more conservative a newspaper, the more often religion was made an issue, 78 “Welt”, 65 “Tagesspiegel”, 55 “taz”. In the search that asked for “Islam” more concretely, there were 79 articles in “Die Welt”, 70 in “Der Tagesspiegel” and 67 in “taz” from January 1, 2018 to January 17, 2019. It was the “tageszeitung” that saw the sharpest increase in mentions of “religion” in 2018.

It is this increase that did not seem obvious, so this time span was further looked into. The articles were clustered according to the frame chosen. Every article was mentioned once only, according to the dominant frame. Again, no frame stood out, but the following ones could be defined:

Frames regarding situation outside Syria January 2018 – January 2019



- Religion as relevant for the war in Syria (5 “Welt”, 9 “Tagesspiegel”, 9 “taz”);
- “Persons posing a threat to public safety” (“Gefährder”) in Germany: They are addressed in all papers, interestingly enough more so in the “taz” (11) than in “Die Welt” (9) or “Der Tagesspiegel” (7). The articles here dealt with court rulings on how to deal with “Gefährder”, rather than “Gefährder” themselves, which explains the interest of the “taz”. We also find articles on the attack on the Christmas Market in Berlin.
- Terrorist attacks: 4 in “taz”, 3 in “Die Welt”, 2 in “Der Tagesspiegel”, while 3 out of 4 articles on attacks outside Germany could be found in the “taz”.
- ISIS: An issue for “Der Tagesspiegel” (10) much more than for “Die Welt” (3) or “die tageszeitung” (2).

The other contexts in which religion was mentioned concerned the Middle East as a region (5-4-5), politics towards the Middle East (2-2-5). Articles on Turkey (8-7-4) include articles on elections in the country, in which Syria was an issue. The situation in Afrin (4-6-2) and the role of Turkey as well as protests by Kurds abroad. Other actors and countries discussed were Israel (8-7-4). Articles on Israel also mention Syria in relation to Gaza, for example. Most of these articles on Israel could be found in “Die Welt”, which might be ex-

plained by the editorial policy of its owner Springer, which traditionally pays special attention to Israel. The role of Russia in Syria, also during the Olympic Games was also addressed (3-1-5). Especially given the decision on a withdrawal, it is surprising that only a few articles dealt with the United States (4-4-2).

A dominant issue for all three newspapers was the situation of refugees. How were refugees received, how was their integration going? While that was an issue, interestingly enough there were altogether more articles on the situation of refugees in Europe and the world than there were on their situation in Germany. Those articles often concerned the situation of migrants from the region from their own perspectives and could be found more often in the “taz” than in the to others.

3.2 Second take: Mentions of “Christ*”

In a second take, it was now looked into those articles in particular that included the word “Christ*”, since the situation of Christian migrants from the Middle East was the topic of the conference for which this paper was prepared.

In the first part of the article at hand it was established that there was a populist debate on migration to Germany, which was facilitated also by the publications of Thilo Sarrazin and the subsequent debate, as well as, for example, the demonstrations of “Pegida”. Finally, given the fact that the conservative profile of the Christian Democratic Party was disputed, we could also expect politicians to pay special attention to the fate of Christians in the conflict.

All newspapers also often address the cultural sector. “Die Welt”, for example, features a conversation with two Jewish Rappers about the role of religion in their work and the music of other Hip-Hop artists in Germany¹².

In terms of general reflection, the “Der Tagesspiegel” uses its op-eds on Christian holidays to reflect upon religion and conflicts¹³ or even to examine the usefulness of religion, given the conflicts in Berlin that can be ascribed to religion – and concludes that it is generally good and healthy to believe in something.¹⁴

When delimiting the search and looking for the word “Christ*”, it can be found that in most cases in all three newspapers, Christendom is mentioned next to other religions. We can see that in 2016 there has been a lot of attention for the city of Aleppo and its Christian population and heritage.

“Pegida” did not feature relevantly in the reporting on “Syria”, “War” and “Religion”, which is surprising.¹⁵ That can in turn mean that whatever the protestors of “Pegida” were

12 Thore Barfuss, „Ich als Jude hätte diese Zeile niemals gerappt“. Rapper Sun Diego und sein Kumpel Salah Saado über Antisemitismus-Vorwürfe gegen Kollegah und jüdisch-muslimische Freundschaften, *Die Welt* vom 10. April 2018.

13 Caroline Fetscher, Aufbruch zum säkularen Tempel. Ein großer, politischer Traum: Frieden und Versöhnung, auch zwischen den Religionen. Was wäre dafür notwendig?, in: *Der Tagesspiegel* vom 24. Dezember 2017.

14 Claudia Becker, Die Angst vor dem Glauben. Nicht nur wegen des islamistischen Terrors ist die Skepsis gegenüber dem Islam groß. In diesen Sog geraten sowohl das Christen als auch das Judentum. Religion gilt vielen als rückwärtsgewandt. Ein fataler Fehler, in: *Der Tagesspiegel* vom 10. April 2017.

15 “Pegida” is mentioned in three articles, but in passing and one of them being the satirical column “Die Wahrheit” in the taz.

concerned with, was not the war in Syria and its consequences, not even with regard to migration from the country. The same is true for attempts to use the prosecution of Christians in Syria for domestic reasons. Right-wing populists in fact did appeal to an end of the persecution of Christians, but their attempt to coin the label “Christenverfolgung”, allegedly used in order to link it to other forms of persecution, only featured once in the 198 articles of the sample.¹⁶

Concern about the further escalation and destruction of the country stand in contrast to what was reported on twice at least, namely the visit of a group of AfD politicians to Syria and Russia in 2018, which left them to state that everything was quite alright in Syria and people could now return.¹⁷

The said discussion among Christian Democrats (CDU) to support immigration from “Christian Western cultural circles” was indeed subject of three articles. It was addressed in a debate between the then Parliamentary State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Finance and later Federal Minister of Health, Jens Spahn and Cardinal Woelki, Arch-Bishop of Cologne. While Spahn considered the approach “perfectly alright”¹⁸, while Woelki criticized it sharply. He said that this preferential treatment would mean to contribute to the work of right-wing populists and to a further polarization of the society.¹⁹

4. “Postmigrant Society”: Attempting to overcome a “Migrantization” of public discourse

Although the analyses cannot be compared as such, these results fit to what the “Medienanalyse Flucht + Migration” has found. It has analysed media reporting on flight and migration for the years 2016–2020 and found what the sample at hand does support, namely that the reporting was “largely accurate”. But it also held that there was a tension between reporting on immigrants as having suffered from war and flight and immigrants framed as security threat for Germany.²⁰

It is here that a link can be found of Muslim refugees who take their religion with them, which is not necessarily compatible with German or European values, and that they take their conflicts with them, so import lots of problems.

16 Ricarda Breyton, “Missionieren muss erlaubt sein”. Markus Grübel ist Regierungsbeauftragter für Religionsfreiheit. Wie er Glaubensfeindlichkeit in Deutschland erlebt - und warum er nichts dage-gen hat, wenn Muslime den Koran verteilen, in: *Die Welt* vom 19. Dezember 2018.

17 Heiko Werning, Rechte Zirkustruppe erlebt ihr Damaskus, in: *die tageszeitung* vom 9. März 2018; Matthias Kamann/Pavel Lokshin, AfD-Tours im Dienste der Innenpolitik. In den vergangenen Wochen sind rechtsnationale Politiker nach Syrien und Russland gereist. Dass sie von dort nur wenig Kritisches berichten, hat einen Grund, in: *Die Welt* vom 20. März 2018; Matthias Kamann/Pavel Lokshin, Mit “Blex-Tours” zu Assad und Hasspredigern. AfDler bereisen Syrien und ernten parteiintern Kritik, in: *Die Welt* vom 7. März 2018.

18 Robin Alexander/Ulf Poschardt, “Diesmal geht es um Existenzielles”. Jens Spahn (CDU) und Manfred Weber (CSU) raufen sich zusammen und formulieren Ziele für die Union: ein klares Profil in der Flüchtlingspolitik – und eine schärfere Wahlkampfstrategie, in: *Die Welt* vom 28. September 2016.

19 N.N., Politik Kompakt, in: *Die Welt* vom 28. September 2016.

20 Marcus Maurer u.a., Fünf Jahre Medienberichterstattung über Flucht und Migration 2021, www.stiftung-mercator.de/content/uploads/2021/07/Medienanalyse_Flucht_Migration.pdf.

The reporting on the war in Syria largely indeed addressed the conflict in Syria itself and less so the way this conflict was seen from Germany – be it by politicians, artists and/or migrants from the region living in Germany. This means in turn that we can assume, on the basis of the smaller sample here, that not too many articles discussed Christian migration to Germany in the specific context of the war in Syria.

We can also see that religion is not problematized too much in the reporting on the war in Syria. We can see attempts by both Christian Democrats and AfD to make religion an issue, but we can also see that these attempts did not resonate much, since only one of the newspapers picked the respective attempt up and in a neutral, if not negative way.

The next question was then whether reporting on migration from Syria picked up negative attitudes towards Muslims. We can see here that in terms of the topics of the reporting at least (terrorism, “Gefährder”, societal conflicts), migration is problematized.

The research for the article at hand shows that there is a big concern about societal conflicts after migration, and that is, deepened by migration. Most of these articles concern antisemitism. The sample, however, was not meant to show which other frames could have been used, since it has a particular focus on religion, not immigration.

An article published by “Der Tagesspiegel” describes how “right-wing circles” foster the idea that antisemitism is a matter of migrants.²¹ This position was refuted in a personal account of a Jewish person. The author recalled that it was often said migrants brought anti-Semitic or anti-Israeli positions with them to Germany, but maintains herself that this would hardly be an issue would it not be met by a larger part of German society that subscribes to and supports these attitudes.²²

This supports criticism voiced by scholars of “postmigration”, who claim that migration is over-emphasized, as Foroutan writes. She adds that migration is understood to be the explaining a whole range of problems in society²³, it surely works, but not understood to help overcoming this situation.

The reporting in the quality newspapers analysed for the article at hand overall tried to explain the conflict in Syria with its background, tries to give people from Syria a voice. It does not pick up on a polarization of positions on the conflict itself and migration from the conflict zones. It does, however, show an overall concern with the problems for cohabitation with migrants from the region.

“Postmigration”, in turn, has to be considered, as Hill and Yildiz state, an epistemological turn, a break with a division between migrant and non-migrant,²⁴ a “discursive approach

21 Raed Saleh, Schluss mit der Selbsttäuschung. Rechte politische Kreise wollen die Debatte um Antisemitismus auf Flüchtlinge beschränken. Wie wir Judenhass wirklich bekämpfen können. Es gibt drei Möglichkeiten, etwas zu tun: Verbote, Appelle und Aufklärung Am Anfang des Tolerierens steht oft das Verstehen, das Kennenlernen Unter dem Deckmäntelchen des vermeintlichen Anti-Antisemitismus stecken Reaktionäre und Neonazis, in: Der Tagesspiegel vom 29. April 2018.

22 Susanne Krause-Hinrichs, Und plötzlich ist mein Jüdischsein Thema. Antisemitismus ist mir, Jahrgang 1964, vor allem als Geschichtsthema begegnet: in der Schule oder in der Biografie meiner Familie. Das ändert sich gerade. Was heißt das eigentlich für mich?, in: Der Tagesspiegel vom 16. September 2018.

23 Naika Foroutan/Coşkun Canan/Benjamin Schwarze, Deutschland postmigrantisch II. Einstellungen von Jugendlichen und jungen Erwachsenen zu Gesellschaft, Religion und Identität, Berlin 2015, 10–23, 14.

24 Marc Hill/Erol Yildiz, Einleitung, in: id., Postmigrantische Visionen, Erfahrungen – Ideen – Reflexionen, Bielefeld 2018, 7–10, 7.

against the ‘migrantization’ and marginalization of people who see themselves as an integral part of society”²⁵ and have to be considered exactly that.

²⁵ Anna Meera Gaonkar et al., Introduction, in: id., *Postmigration. Art, culture, and politics in contemporary Europe*, Bielefeld 2021, 11–42, 19.