



# PARTES SPOTLIGHT

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## Protecting Places of Worship: Insights on Extremist Threats and Preventive Measures in Europe

Exploring Trends, Threats, and Security Best Practices for Religious Sites across Europe - Uncovering Perceptions, Strategies, and Key Findings

In the course of the PARTES project, from March to June 2023, we analysed 30 case studies on violent attacks, hate crimes and cyber-attacks on places of worship, spanning 13 European countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Norway, Portugal, The Netherlands, Romania, Spain, and Sweden) and encompassing three religious confessions (Muslim, Jewish, and Christian). The following conclusions have emerged:

- A substantial **37% of the attacks and hate crimes under scrutiny were perpetrated by far-right extremists**, with 30% carried out by unidentified individuals, making them the two most prevalent categories of perpetrators. Following closely were acts linked to Islamist extremism (17%), other xenophobic motivations (13%), and far left extremism (3%).
- Far-right groups, predominantly radical right populist parties, cultivate an environment of hate against religious minorities in public discourse, notably through antisemitic and anti-Muslim rhetoric. Nonetheless, antisemitic narratives, primarily online, were less prevalent compared to anti-Muslim discourse.
- Despite constituting only 3-5% of the studied societies, **Muslim communities often bear the brunt of violent attacks** and hate crimes, particularly when attempting to establish mosques.
- Certain far-right extremists have attempted to carry out attacks during religious holidays, believing they would inflict more casualties, exemplified by incidents like the attack on a synagogue in Halle and the al-Noor mosque in Norway.
- Far-right and jihadist attackers typically employ weapons or knives in their assaults, while anarchists tend to resort to homemade bombs.
- Religious communities often publicly denounce these attacks and call for enhanced protection.





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- Public authorities commonly investigate these incidents, yet many cases remain inconclusive, with outcomes often undisclosed.
- Some attacks are retaliatory in nature, such as the attack on a church in Sweden following the burning of the Quran, or attacks on mosques in Lisbon and Granada in response to jihadist incidents elsewhere. There were also instances of Quran burnings in Denmark.
- In cases involving attackers radicalised by jihadism or attacks targeting the Muslim community, media and social network debates often polarise, with speeches linking Muslims to terrorism and anti-Muslim narratives being pervasive.
- Special mention goes to the Christchurch attacks in New Zealand, where a far-right extremist live-streamed an attack on two mosques, subsequently replicated by others in Norway and Austria.
- **A combination of online hate campaigns and physical attacks has been identified**, as seen in cases like the “Generation Identity” hate crime in Austria and the attack on the Main Mosque in Granada. These included actions like placing hate-filled stickers around mosques and distributing a map of mosques in Austria, along with attacks involving flares and banners carrying hate messages in Spain.
- Importantly, attackers' perceptions of their victims often play a role. For instance, two Christian Egyptian men were assaulted because the attackers mistakenly perceived them as Muslims due to their skin colour and physical features.

In the course of desk research conducted by the researchers, an examination of the main extremist groups targeting places of worship was undertaken. Additionally, the ideologies and strategic considerations guiding extremist groups when targeting places of worship were explored across 10 European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Portugal, The Netherlands, Romania, and Spain). Key insights from the comparative analysis include:

- **Far-right and far-left groups exhibit higher levels of organisation compared to groups with other ideologies.**
- Individual attackers are frequently radicalised by jihadist and far-right-wing ideologies.
- The most common attacks and hate crimes by unidentified attackers involve vandalism and graffiti, with mosques often subject to the scattering of pork pieces around their perimeters.
- Most far-right attacks are classified as hate crimes, accompanied by the dissemination of hate speech, often coordinated with online hate campaigns followed by physical attacks.
- Some far-right groups do not directly commit violent attacks on places of worship but normalise hate narratives that justify violence against religious minorities.
- **Jihadist attacks have been on the decline in Europe in recent years**, despite posing a significant threat in the early 2010s.





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- **Jihadists do not primarily target places of worship** but are motivated by hatred towards other religions and Western society populations.
- Extremist groups aim to insert their hate narrative against religious communities into the political agenda, generate rejection against these communities, and gain visibility and media coverage through their attacks to recruit sympathisers.
- Extremist groups often employ strategies like disseminating hoaxes, misinformation, and xenophobic populist statements to reinforce their polarised worldview.
- Identifying the ideology of perpetrators is challenging unless they leave a message or manifesto.
- Latvia stands out among the studied countries with relatively few violent attacks on places of worship and a limited presence of organised extremist groups.
- Far-right groups primarily target Muslim and Jewish places of worship, influenced by prejudices, conspiracy theories (e.g., the Great Replacement), and a strong cultural-based nationalism.
- Left-wing groups reject hierarchical power and political institutions, viewing religion as a key institution upholding conservative and traditional values. As such, they often reject the majority religion in the concerned country.

## Best practices to protect places of worship

The research team at PARTES has also compiled evidence-based information on security best practices to prevent or protect against hate crimes and violent attacks. This effort resulted in two significant compilations: **48 documents outlining best practices** for protecting places of worship against violent attacks and hate crimes, and **7 guidelines on the cooperation between public authorities and religious institutions**.

Regarding this analysis, it is noteworthy that there is a dearth of resources pertaining to best practices for preventing and mitigating hate crimes (10) in comparison to violent attacks (24). Moreover, there exists a substantial gap between best practices for preventing (19) and mitigating (5) violent attacks. Most available resources emanate from the United Nations and its agencies, with a significant contribution from European projects (e.g., SOAR or SASCE) and American institutions. Academic research in this field remains scarce, signifying an emphasis on security and physical measures over addressing hatred and its ramifications.

Regarding guidance on cooperation between public and religious authorities, there are few comprehensive guides exclusively dedicated to this topic. Most identified guidelines contain only limited sections addressing this issue.





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The analysis has also yielded further conclusions based on good and bad practices identified in the case studies:

1. **Religious communities must securely store their self-defence resources to prevent unauthorised access.**
2. **Authorities should deploy effective security measures during religious celebrations.**
3. **Religious communities should periodically assess their security measures to identify potential gaps and requirements.**

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