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In the Wake of Berlin: What Now for Merkel?

By John Wight
December 23, 2016

It would be hard to find a leader who has suffered as sharp a reversal in popularity as Germany's Angela Merkel. Her open door policy towards refugees and migrants in 2015 has resulted in political blowback, which in the wake of the terrorist atrocity in Berlin may well reach the point of no return with a German general election looming in 2017.

At time of writing authorities in Germany are still to apprehend the person or persons responsible for an attack involving an articulated truck being driven at speed through a Christmas market, plowing into men, women, and children in a chilling reminder of the attack which took place in Nice in the south of France back in July, on the evening of the country's annual Bastille Day celebrations. 84 people were killed on that occasion, while the perpetrator was shot dead by French police at the scene. In Berlin 12 people were killed, including the original driver of the truck that was used, while a further 49 have been injured, some critically.

As with the terrorist atrocity in Nice, credit for its Berlin counterpart has been claimed by Daesh. However this may be a case of opportunism on the part of the Salafi-jihadist terrorist organization. Even so, it does not take a genius to discern an Islamist motive behind Berlin despite the fact that those responsible have yet to be apprehended.

Soon after the attack, German police arrested a 24-year old Pakistani asylum seeker, only to later release him, citing lack of evidence; this after the media had widely reported that he was the

individual responsible. The resulting confusion has only added to the anger being levelled at both the authorities and the government. It replicates the anger that was unleashed in the country in the wake of the myriad sexual assaults that took place in Cologne last winter, with allegations that refugees and migrants were responsible for attacking dozens of women during the city's public New Year festivities. The lack of a vigorous response by the police on that occasion helped fuel anti-immigrant sentiment that was already rising.

Cologne and now Berlin are being linked to Merkel's decision to allow more than a million refugees into Germany during the vast exodus from countries such as Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and Somalia in the summer of 2015. The majority of them arrived after a perilous journey across the Mediterranean, setting sail in all manner of vessels, most of which were unsafe. Thousands drowned in the attempt, among them women and children. It was a tragedy that continues to this day.

Angela Merkel's decision to extend a welcoming hand to so many refugees was widely applauded within Germany and beyond at the time, viewed as a welcome rejoinder to the alarming growth of nationalist and right wing populist sentiment across Europe. Indeed it was considered a rare example of compassion in a world leader towards people who'd seen their lives turned upside down as a result of conflict, immiseration, and ensuing societal collapse.

Thousands of German citizens turned out at train stations and bus stations to welcome the incoming refugees with parcels of food and clothing. Donations to funds set up to help them flooded in as part of a national eruption of compassion and kindness that had suddenly taken root.

Merkel herself said "We can do it" when it came to opening Germany's borders to so many people in such a short space of time last year. She later went on to opine, "If we now start to apologize for showing a friendly face in emergency situations, then this is no longer my country."

Those words have now come back to haunt a leader whose popularity was once so high no rival candidate could have hoped to mount a serious bid to unseat her. This is no longer the case. Her party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), suffered a significant setback in German regional elections in Merkel's home state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, coming in third behind the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the right wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), running on an anti-immigration platform.

Merkel has seen her own popularity plunge to a five year low, this according to a nationwide opinion poll taken at the beginning of September. It is hard to imagine that her polling figures will not plunge even lower in the wake of the terrorist attack in Berlin. With a German general election scheduled next year, as mentioned, and with Merkel hoping to be elected for a fourth term as chancellor, suddenly she appears vulnerable.

Truly we are living in chaotic times, wherein terrorism and the fear of terrorism is the new normal. Compassion towards those whose plight refutes our right to consider ourselves civilized is understandably tempered by the threat of this terrorist menace. Refugees and asylum seekers

have moral and human rights to sanctuary. They are victims of the moral sickness that is the Western doctrine of regime change. It is really quite simple: no regime change no refugee crisis.

What is not simple is balancing the rights of desperate human beings fleeing the chaos created by war and conflict with the rights of people across Europe to be safe from the threat of indiscriminate slaughter. It is not irrational either this fear, though it is one being cynically exploited by the far right, which has seen its fortunes across the West improve to an extent not witnessed since the 1930s, under similar conditions of economic and political crisis.

Absorbing one million people in a short space of time, and without serious consultation or consideration of the consequences to social cohesion, was in hindsight a calamitous knee jerk reaction on the part of the German chancellor.

It is one that may very well prove her political epitaph.