

What is PEGIDA and why should I care?

By [Ciarán Morrissey](#), Comment Editor (2015/16)

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Image: Caruso Pinguin

If you've been watching the news lately, you're likely to have seen nationwide marches in Germany by a group called PEGIDA, or Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West. They're a group formed specifically to oppose the 'Islamisation' of Europe, and their weekly rallies in Dresden have attracted up to 40,000 people.

The group was formed last October in response to Germany's decision to supply arms and aid to PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) fighters in the war against the Islamic State. The PKK itself is a proscribed organisation that, until it became a useful military ally, was almost unilaterally condemned by the EU. Western support for it is controversial, but as it's one of the more battle-hardened and organised group of Kurdish fighters, it is politically convenient to supply them with assistance for now.

PEGIDA's opposition to the German government is more general than this; rallies typically consist of marchers demanding stricter immigration laws, the preservation of German and/or Christian culture, and anti-Islamic sentiment. It is the third point that is the most significant, especially given Germany's demographics.

Germany has over 9 million foreign-born residents, or around 11% of its population. This means it's got the third highest total amount of immigrants in the world. Going on the figures provided by the Federal Statistics Office; non-Germans make up 7.7% of the country's population, whereas citizens with a migrant background make up 12.3%. This gives us a figure of 80% of Germans who have no migrant background.

So why, then, does PEGIDA suggest that Germany is being "Islamised"? As of 2008, around 4% of all Germans were Muslims. As of 2011, it was counted at around 5%. That's not an especially large jump but it's conceivable to suggest that the Islamic population may consistently increase. After all, the secular pressures that largely neutered European Christianity seem to have little effect on Islam.

But is PEGIDA right to suggest that German culture is being wiped out, the Muslims are taking over, and soon the Germans will be foreigners in their own country? The answer to this, as it always is, is no. While there are German Muslims currently in Syria, and there has been a fire attack on a German newspaper

that reprinted the Charlie Hebdo cartoons, it's inconceivable to think that an Islamic takeover is right around the corner.

What is interesting about PEGIDA is that they're saying the same thing the European far-right has always been saying; it's just that they're being listened to a little bit more now. PEGIDA may have some valid criticisms of fundamentalist Islam; namely that it is misogynist, violent and incompatible with European values such as freedom of expression. But to suggest that this is typical of all Muslims, or even a plurality of them, is simply ridiculous. It's much the same as the EDL in this country. They began with a message everyone could get behind ("Islamic extremism is bad"), but this simply devolved into petty Islamophobia.

Groups like PEGIDA, Britain First and The Front National are needlessly complicating the issues. It's impossible to have an open and honest political discussion where one side is prepared to march in the streets and clash attack political opponents. We should care because this prevents a peaceful resolution for everyone involved. We should care because it's going to cause the cultural divides in Europe to get worse before they can get better. It may be nice to march in step with those you agree with, but living in a democratic society is about being able to cope with people you hate.



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