Twitter Thread by Katrin Bennhold



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A German soldier is arrested trying to retrieve a loaded gun from an airport toilet.
His finger prints lead to a Syrian refugee.
His cell phone leads to far-right extremist networks inside the military.
This is the tale of Franco A: 1/10

Franco A was a lieutenant in the German army.
He posed as a Syrian refugee – and got away with it.
For 16 months he lived a double life.
Prosecutors say he planned a terror attack that would be blamed on his refugee alter ego and unleash a national crisis 2/10

Franco A's arrest was a wake-up call for the German authorities long blind to far-right infiltration of their institutions.
His superiors promoted him even after he detailed his views in a master's thesis.
He spoke publicly at least once at a far-right event 3/10

When Franco A goes on trial for plotting terrorism in the spring, Germany will go on trial with him. How could a German soldier who didn't speak Arabic pass himself off as a refugee? And how could a far-right extremist rise through the ranks of the German military? 4/10

But the story of Franco A is bigger than his own. His family history grafts almost perfectly over German history. The story of his double life and evolution is in many ways the tale of today's two Germanys. 5/10

One Germany was born of its defeat in WW II and reared by a liberal consensus that rejected nationalism. That Germany is giving way to a more unsettled nation as a long-dormant far right rousts itself in opposition to a diversifying society. The postwar consensus teeters. 6/10

Franco A's most extreme views are no doubt shared by neo-Nazis. But his baseline grievances over immigration, national identity and globalization have become increasingly widespread in the Germany of today, as well as in much of Europe and the United States. 7/10

Franco A's generation, which came of age after 9/11, during the wars that sprang from it and in an era of global economic crisis, the distrust of government, far-right messaging and the embrace of conspiracy theories has entered the mainstream. 8/10

“Far-right extremist messages have shifted increasingly into the middle of society,” Thomas Haldenwang, the president of the domestic intelligence agency, told me in an interview. 9/10

I interviewed Franco A many times over the past year. He showed me videos of him as a refugee. He took me to his prepper basement. He was not shy to share his views but denied ever planning violence. “I'm an officer of the German army," he said,"and I swore an oath.” 10/10