FRANKFURT, July 12 — Germany, fearful of being the next major target for Islamic terrorists, is edging away from its deep aversion to intrusive and harsh enforcement tactics, provoking a storm of protest from those who recall the official brutality of Nazism and Communism in decades past.

Sensing a growing threat, Germany’s top security official, Wolfgang Schäuble, is breaking down resistance within the government to surreptitious online searches of computers belonging to people they deem suspicious. He is pushing for a law to allow security forces to shoot down a plane commandeered by hijackers. And he said this week that Germany should consider detaining potential terrorists and approving the killing of terrorist leaders abroad.

Such proposals are anathema to many in a country that has sought to eradicate any vestiges of state-sanctioned savagery by erecting a legal framework that enshrines the rights of the individual over the state. Critics say the changes would erode civil liberties and jeopardize Germany’s hard-won rule of law.

Yet by all accounts Mr. Schäuble, the interior minister and a canny conservative politician who has used a wheelchair since an assassination attempt in 1990, has Chancellor Angela Merkel’s staunch backing to shift the debate, even as she has made it clear that she will not endorse detentions or targeted killings.
“We have threats that we didn’t even know 10 years ago,” she said Tuesday on German television. “I want an interior minister who will grapple with these new threats.”

Germany’s debate underscores the growing conviction of security officials here that German cities will not escape the kinds of attacks that have bloodied London, Glasgow, Madrid and Istanbul since 9/11, a plot hatched by militant Muslims who used Hamburg as a refuge.

Last month Mr. Schäuble warned that Germany faced a heightened threat of attack, possibly even a suicide bombing, because of its military engagement in Afghanistan. His deputy, August Hanning, said the danger level was comparable to that of the months before 9/11.

The debate also comes at a time of rising tension within Germany’s large, mostly Turkish, Muslim population. On Thursday, four major Turkish groups boycotted an annual meeting on integration held by Mrs. Merkel, to protest the recent tightening of German immigration laws.

Given the growing concerns, several experts here said, it is time for Germany to re-evaluate the balance between personal liberties and collective security in its counterterrorism policy.

“We need this discussion about how far we have to go, and how far we can go legally,” said Guido Steinberg, who advised the previous chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, on terrorism issues.

Mr. Steinberg, now a researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin, said some of Mr. Schäuble’s proposals, particularly targeted killings, went too far.

But he said Germany needed to close other loopholes in its laws, including one that distinguishes between giving material support to a terrorist group, which is a crime, and simply promoting its message, which is not.

While few here want to set up a German outpost like the Guantánamo Bay military prison, current laws in Germany prevent the authorities from detaining people who they believe might be terrorist conspirators but whom they cannot extradite.

Mr. Schäuble has been calling for more muscular policies to combat terrorism since he joined the current government in 2005. A seasoned Christian Democratic leader, Mr. Schäuble, 64, is regarded as a shrewd tactician and one of the political heavyweights in Mrs. Merkel’s cabinet.

In January he said he would seek a constitutional amendment to allow authorities to shoot down a hijacked airplane to head off a terrorist attack. The Federal Constitutional Court struck down a similar law proposed by the previous government in 2006.

He also has not hesitated to seize on terrorist threats, at home or abroad, to press his agenda. Mr. Schäuble’s latest public-relations campaign came days after the botched car-bombings in London.

“The old categories no longer apply,” he said in an interview in the German weekly Der Spiegel. “We have to clarify whether our constitutional state is sufficient for confronting the new threats.”

Describing a situation in which Osama bin Laden’s exact whereabouts were discovered, Mr. Schäuble said, “The Americans would execute him with a missile, and most people
would say, ‘Thank God.’ ”

These remarks, which were confirmed by a ministry spokesman, brought heated criticism from opposition leaders and even some Social Democratic members of his own “grand coalition” government.

“He would lead the country down a very dangerous path,” said the co-chairman of the opposition Green Party, Reinhard Bütikofer. “He is advocating the exact opposite of what Prime Minister Gordon Brown has demonstrated so admirably: a combination of determination and equanimity.”

No other European country has publicly debated its terrorism laws since the failed British attacks. One of the few responses of any kind has come from France’s new president, Nicolas Sarkozy, who reiterated his support for installing 1,000 closed-circuit surveillance cameras in Paris.

The timing and nature of the debate in Germany troubled some experts.

“One of the time-honored tactics of terrorists is to draw governments into overreacting,” said Gijs de Vries, a Dutchman who is the former counterterrorism coordinator for the European Union. “Governments should resist public pressure to pile on new measures after each incident.”

But Germany is also debating this issue now because of its deep involvement in Afghanistan. Germany has 3,000 troops there, part of a NATO force that has battled a persistent Taliban insurgency.

With the Parliament scheduled to vote in October on whether to extend the deployment, security officials worry that Germans, either in Afghanistan or at home, could become targets for attacks.

Last July Germany narrowly avoided a potentially deadly attack after a pair of suitcase bombs failed to explode on commuter trains. The suspects, from Lebanon, were said to be enraged by satirical cartoons about the Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper.

That close call, Mr. Schäuble said in Der Spiegel, shows, “We could be struck at any time.”

Still, for now, he is facing a German public that treasures its liberties at least as much as its security. Already, his campaign has drawn unflattering historical parallels. On the Internet, a group promoting data privacy has sold T-shirts with Mr. Schäuble’s image above the slogan “Stasi 2.0” — a reference to an “improved” version of the reviled State Security Ministry of the former East Germany.

Peter Waldmann, a terrorism expert and emeritus professor at the University of Augsburg, said even a major attack would not overturn the German consensus in favor of protecting individual rights.

The shock of learning that the 9/11 attacks had been plotted in Hamburg was not enough, Mr. Waldmann said, because Germans comforted themselves that the threat was directed against the United States, not at Germany itself.

Now, authorities say the threat is directed squarely at Germans, which may make it tougher for people here to dismiss Mr. Schäuble’s arguments.

“If something happened, the same people who are criticizing him for going too far would criticize him for not going far enough,” said Eckart Klein, a professor of law at the
University of Potsdam.

Some experts suggest that the real goal of Mr. Schäuble's campaign is to win agreement on rules allowing secret searches of computer hard drives — something that seems within reach after officials from the Social Democratic Party said this week that they were open to a dialogue on the issue.

As for his more draconian proposals, Mr. Schäuble’s aides said he welcomed the sharp reaction.

“He’s trying to force our society to face up to these really difficult questions, for example, killing a terrorist,” said Christian Sachs, a spokesman for the Interior Ministry. “The German public has tried to stick its head in the sand, ignoring this dimension of this unorthodox war.”