

SECURITY INSIGHTS



Foreign Terrorist Fighters: German Islamists in Syria and Iraq and What Can be Done about Them

by Daniel H. Heinke

Introduction

Though the numbers of European Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Syria (and, to a lesser extent, in Iraq) appear to be declining, there is still a constant influx of new recruits for Jihadist factions in this cross-border civil war, most notably the so-called Islamic State (IS). Islamists have tried to recruit German-speaking Muslims in the past, but in recent years their efforts have increased in both quantity and quality. While there had been some individuals involved in conflicts in the Muslim world earlier—including support of the Taliban in Afghanistan, participation in the post-Yugoslav civil war in Bosnia, and, to a lesser extent, in Chechnya, Yemen, and Somalia—the war in Syria provided a whole new theater of conflict that has attracted radicalized Muslims from Germany on a previously unseen scale.

The official current estimate is that more than 850 persons left Germany for Syria or Iraq because of Islamist motivations, although it is not possible to verify that all of these individuals did indeed reach the region. About one-third of those who departed to join IS is known to be or assumed to be back in Germany. More than seventy of those have experienced armed combat with the Islamic State or at least undergone some sort of military training. About 140 Islamists from Germany are presumed to have been killed in the conflict. In order to both effectively counter future departures of foreign terrorist fighters and to develop a strategy on how to deal with the returnees, it is necessary to compile and analyze the available data on the individuals who have departed thus far, including known factors that influenced the radicalization process.

The German security authorities, i.e. the police and domestic intelligence agencies of both the Länder (states) and on the federal level, collected and aggregated information about 677 individuals who had departed Germany to travel to Syria or Iraq before 30 June 2015. This analysis was jointly conducted by the Bundeskriminalamt (the Federal Criminal Police Agency), the Bundesamt für

Verfassungsschutz (the Federal Domestic Intelligence Service), and the Hessisches Informations- und Kompetenzzentrum gegen Extremismus (Hessian Center for Information and Expertise on Extremism). The analysis was released on 4 December 2015 by the Ständige Konferenz der Innenminister und -senatoren der Länder (Permanent Conference of Ministers of the Interior of the Länder).

This edition of *Security Insights* highlights some of the most important findings in terms of data available, sheds some light on the factors involved in radicalization, and briefly outlines the main approaches used to counter this threat in Germany.

Analysis of German Islamists in Syria and Iraq

Significant numbers of individuals travelling to Syria or Iraq because of an Islamist motivation began around 2012/2013, reaching a first peak by the third quarter of 2013. After a decline in numbers over the next months, numbers peaked again in the second quarter of 2014 and remained relatively high during the rest of the year. The number of departures dropped significantly in 2015, however, with only approximately twenty individuals departing in each of the first two quarters.

Demographics

It is still difficult to identify a “target group” for jihadist radicalization. Various studies examining and analyzing violent Islamist extremists in Western countries (with a focus on shared analysis of investigations of terrorist attacks that were either executed or prevented) have been published in the past few years, but failed to provide a reliable socio-demographic profile of jihadists.

The Germans included in this analysis are 79 percent male and 21 percent female. The share of women who departed the country (henceforth “departees”) rose significantly

after the proclamation of the Caliphate by the Islamic State on 29 June 2014, though, climbing from just 15 percent before the proclamation to an astonishing 38 percent in the post-proclamation phase. This very large contingent of female supporters of the Islamic State represents an exceptional phenomenon not previously encountered—at least on this scale—with regard to jihadism.

The age range of the departees is 15 to 62 years, with an arithmetic mean age of 25.9 years. The age bracket 22-25 years constitutes the largest group (188 individuals), with 139 departees between the ages of 18-21 years and 124 in the 26-29 years bracket. Again, there are significant differences between the groups who had departed prior to and after the proclamation of the Caliphate (designated “early departees” and “late departees” respectively): the mean age of the late departees is three years younger than the early departees (23.7 vs. 26.6 years); and the percentage of minors (i.e. individuals under the age of 18 years) is considerably higher (12 percent vs. 5 percent). Not included in this analysis is the (substantial) number of children of every age who accompanied their departing parents. The fates of these children will have to be taken into consideration in a couple of years, however, after growing up in a violence-filled and highly ideologically-charged environment such as the Islamic State.

Of the 628 individuals with known marital status, 34 percent were single, 25 percent legally married, and 32 percent were married under Islamic law. Two hundred sixty-seven departees are known to have children. Sixty percent of the 548 individuals with known living conditions had their own household prior to their departure. Close to 90 percent of all departees lived in urban areas.

Sixty-one percent of the departees were born in Germany, with a broad range of other places of birth. The most significant other countries are Turkey (6 percent), Syria (5 percent), the Russian Federation (5 percent), and Afghanistan (3 percent). Including the individuals born in Germany, a total of 82.4 percent of all departees had what is called in German a “migration background.” With regard to this variable, there are no differences between the pre- and post-Caliphate phase.

Sixty-three departees are known to have attended a school at the point of their departure. One hundred fifteen individuals are known to have begun vocational training. Of these, 49 percent had completed this training prior to their departure, 31 percent had dropped out of it before they left Germany, and 20 percent were still in training when they left Germany. Eighty-one persons are known to have begun university studies, of whom 14 percent had completed university, 28 percent had discontinued it, and 59 percent were still enrolled at the time of their departure. Another 94 individuals are known to have had a regular job at that point, while 147 others were unemployed.

Religion/Ideology

Although the importance of converts may be overestimated as they are the focus of a lot of media attention and are apparently used by the jihadist groups in Syria for propaganda targeting potential new German-speaking recruits, at least 116 departees (i.e. 17 percent) are converts. At least 547 individuals are thought to belong to the Salafi spectrum, while only 22 definitely were not adherents to this religious movement. Although there is only patchy information about these connections, at least 68 percent had contact with supra-regional Salafists/Islamists and/or Salafi groups, including both smaller local formations and long-distance contacts. Five especially relevant groups were identified that each contributed to the recruitment of 10-19 departees.

Criminal Background

Two-thirds of the departees have been the subject of criminal investigations. Two hundred twenty-five individuals have been suspected of or tried for criminal offences prior to their Islamist radicalization, with violent attacks (assault, robbery, etc.) and property crime accounting for 29 percent each, followed by drug trafficking (16 percent). Politically motivated offences (i.e., criminal acts directed against political or ideological opponents or constituting unlawful support of a political or ideological organization) played no significant role. After the beginning of the radicalization process, 264 individuals were suspected of or tried for criminal offences, with politically motivated offences (under German law) now accounting for nearly a third of all delicts (31 percent), followed by violent attacks (24 percent) and property crime (20 percent). Drug-related offences constituted just 4 percent of the total. Out of the individuals with a criminal record, more than half (53 percent) were suspected of or tried for three or more offences, including nearly a third (32 percent) who had been charged with six or more delicts. Since the profiling of possible jihadists remains difficult, security authorities have shifted their focus to the factors influencing the radicalization process.

Radicalization Factors

Over the last couple of years, the “how” of the radicalization process has been the subject of exploration by both the security services and academia. The vast majority of the departees were radicalized in a “real life environment.” In most cases, the internet played no major role and only a few individuals were radicalized mainly via the internet.

Radicalization Process

German authorities place the current estimate of Salafis in Germany at 8,900, with a persistent upward trend. This provides for a pretty large recruitment pool from which to draft more jihadists. Close social contacts with people holding extremist views were assessed to be relevant factors in 96 percent of the cases investigated, thus once again undermining the fear of a pure “self-radicalization by internet.” Of the 514 departees on whom we had information about how they had been radicalized, 81 percent had proven contacts to Salafi groups, thus highlighting the relevance of this ideological orientation.

In many cases, the radicalization process was very quick. As far as details are known to the security authorities, nearly half (48 percent) of all departees left within one year after the beginning of the radicalization process, with close to a quarter (23 percent) departing within six months after the start of this process. Sixty-eight percent of the departees left within two years.

The tendency towards rapid radicalization processes among supporters of the Islamic State apparently accelerated even more quickly after the proclamation of the Caliphate. The median duration of the previously radicalized departees dropped from 27 to 20 months; correspondingly, the share of departees who left Germany within one year after the beginning of their radicalization climbed from 42 percent to 60 percent in the post-Caliphate phase.

Emergence of Individual Radicalization

Though individual radicalization normally gets noticed by family, friends, or acquaintances at some point, a surprisingly high number of persons—22 percent—departed before their Islamist radicalization was recognized by others. Recognition of whether a person is undergoing radicalization obviously often depends on the duration of the individual radicalization process. About 70 percent of the individuals whose radicalization took place over a longer term (duration over one year) demonstrated their changed beliefs through their physical appearance, whereas only 56 percent of quickly radicalized people emphasized their beliefs through a specific hairstyle and/or clothing. These individuals who were radicalized over a shorter term were less involved in active Salafist propaganda activities (27 percent vs. 40 percent) and attended fewer seminars or public sermons (19 percent vs. 36 percent), as well. Consequently the radicalization process was less often recognized by friends in these cases (32 percent vs. 49 percent). Individuals who were radicalized over a shorter term travelled alone significantly more often (35 percent vs. 23 percent), but many of them left a farewell letter (26 percent vs. 15 percent).

The study concludes that the radicalization process of individuals who became radicalized quickly appears to be more covert and self-referential, i.e. a more individually-centered development. This study demonstrates that there are no simple patterns of radicalization or of recruitment of jihadist fighters. Hence, countermeasures need to be both multifaceted and specific.

German Government Measures against Prospective and Returning Fighters

Tasked with the need to interdict future departures and also to deal with individuals returning from Syria and Iraq, German authorities are pursuing a three-pronged approach.

The first (and most obvious) approach is the use of professional criminal investigations covering preparations for travel to Syria or Iraq, attempts to recruit fighters or conduct other forms of support for the IS or other Islamist organizations, and actual involvement in such an organization's activities. All three situations are actionable under German criminal law. Several investigations have been launched by the Federal Prosecutor General and the states' public prosecution departments, depending on the crime and jurisdiction.

The second sphere of activity comprises measures under administrative law. These are mostly directed against attempts to leave the country in order to join IS or other Islamist organizations and include provisions such as the withdrawal of passports and other identification documents and the prohibition against leaving the country. Administrative measures may also include, for instance, the obligation to report to a specific police station at regular intervals. These measures have proven to be an important factor in reducing the number of militant Islamists traveling to the Middle East.

An interesting instrument in this context is the possible proscription of organizations that the authorities consider a threat to public security, including closing down affiliated gathering places (like clubs or even mosques). Through administrative measures like these, authorities believe it is possible to counter the establishment and operation of radicalization hubs, thus hampering attempts to influence more people.

Equally important, though, is the attempt to counter radicalization efforts before they produce a significant impact. Forming the third pillar of the overarching concept, the German ministers of the interior both on the national and state levels recently agreed to a coordinated set of preventative and intervention measures directed against Islamist violent extremism. Although this still falls short of a formal national strategy against violent extremism, with local concepts adjusted to their respective community requirements and coordinated by information centers at the state level, this approach aims to provide information to prevent radicalization and to utilize proactive social work to treat people already influenced by jihadist ideology. The aim is to encourage and assist non-governmental organizations in providing low-threshold access to information on Islam in a Western society, thus reducing the influence of jihadist sites with regard to this topic. Several regional non-governmental organizations already provide information and support to families attempting to intervene in radicalization processes or even facilitate demobilization of German fighters in Syria.

These three lines of approach (criminal investigations and prosecution, departure interdiction and counter-radicalization measures under administrative law, and societal counter-radicalization efforts) are complemented by the ongoing monitoring of jihadists by the domestic intelligence services and the police intelligence divisions on both national and state levels.

Conclusion

Thorough intelligence is necessary as the basis from which to develop an effective counter-terrorism policy. The comprehensive data collection on German Islamists serves as a very helpful starting point for further analysis and the preparation of suitable approaches to counter this threat.

This study confirms the finding that there is no viable socio-demographic profile of a jihadist. Race, country of origin, gender, age, relationship status, educational background, or prior criminal involvement are so diverse that no universally accepted common denominator could be deduced. It is clear, however, that we must undertake major efforts to address young people, in particular—and this increasingly includes young women. Juveniles and young adults represent by far a disproportionately high proportion of the departees.

Counter-radicalization endeavors should therefore address the specific developmental situation of young people, combining education, social integration, and appreciation of each young person as an individual along with programs designed to counter this ideology. It should be clear that this is not exclusively a challenge for the law enforcement and intelligence agencies, who actually play only a minor role. Countering radicalization has to be a multi-pronged approach involving social (especially youth) services, schools, and local communities – and has to bear in mind that young people are not simply small adults.

The effects of online radicalization may have been overestimated. Although the jihadist propaganda disseminated via the internet has a substantial impact on people, direct social interaction with like-minded others still appears to be the most important contributing factor to the radicalization process. This mutual affirmation of belonging to a distinct group that is in opposition to (and under attack by) the rest of the world is a major factor in an individual's radicalization. As this phase is still not subject to law enforcement intervention in most Western countries – these beliefs are generally protected by the right to freedom of speech – security agencies may have to look into possible methods of disrupting identified nodes (or hubs) of radicalization in order to prevent more individuals from being pulled into this process. The proscription of an organization can be a viable instrument in annihilating such an identified radicalization hub, thus preventing or at least significantly hampering the radicalization of additional persons. Such efforts have to be accompanied by educational measures targeted against the main messages of jihadist propagandists.

Finally, a field of future concern has to be the development of educational (and perhaps de-radicalizing) programs designed to address the children of Islamists. A substantial number of very young children have been taken to the co-called Caliphate and have experienced the inhumane ideology of the Islamic State – in many cases probably witnessing atrocities against dissenters and opponents of the jihadist dictatorship. There are already various accounts of children who were coerced into participation in murders. Once these children come back to their Western countries of origin, it will be a serious challenge to re-integrate these young people into our societies.

It is apparent that the threat emanating from jihadist radicalization and foreign terrorist fighters defies a single solution. Security authorities and other societal stakeholders have already developed effective counter-measures addressing key areas, however such constantly evolving challenges require fast and decisive adaptations and to devise new approaches.

*The articles in the **Security Insights** series reflect the views of the authors and are not necessarily the official policy of the U.S. or German governments.*

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