



Militants train in Pakistan's tribal South Waziristan region along the Afghan border in 2011. Germany has discovered some of its citizens using such camps to plot attacks back home.

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# THE JIHADIST THREAT IN GERMANY

THE “EURO PLOT” REVEALED  
A NETWORK OF GERMAN-  
SPEAKING EXTREMISTS TRAINED  
TO ATTACK THEIR HOMELAND

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On November 17, 2010, then-German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière warned that jihadist terrorists might be planning to attack Germany that same month. He announced that he had ordered the Federal Police (Bundespolizei) to increase its presence at airports, train stations and other possible targets. The warning was based on information that al-Qaida had sent teams from Pakistan to perpetrate attacks in Germany and other European countries. Experts and the media soon labeled the plans the “Europlot.” During the next four months, heavily armed paramilitary police secured important landmarks in the country. The closure of the Reichstag to visitors drew an especially nervous public reaction.

This was not the first time jihadists had targeted Germany. But this time, all available information suggested al-Qaida would use the increasing number of Germans who had traveled to the Pakistani tribal areas to carry out a terrorist campaign against Europe’s leading economic power.

In the first years after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Germany had not been a priority target for the jihadist movement, so that German policymakers and the public alike thought they might be spared terrorist attacks resembling the Madrid bombings of 2004 or the London bombings of 2005. Some security specialists believed that German Muslims were not as prone to “jihadist style” radicalization because the vast majority were Turks and Kurds who had not shown sympathies for the Arab-based al-Qaida and its allies. This assumption proved wrong. From 2006 onward, Germany confronted a heightened terrorist threat for two major reasons. First, since 2006, an increasing number of young Muslims in Germany decided to travel to Pakistan to

join jihadist organizations. Second, the presence of German troops in Afghanistan prompted terrorist groups to use those German Muslim terrorist recruits to try to force a withdrawal by attacking German targets. Although German troops had been stationed in Afghanistan since early 2002, the Taliban insurgency gained strength only in 2006, which increased al-Qaida’s and its allies’ awareness of the German presence in the Hindu Kush.

These developments resulted in the Europlot, according to which al-Qaida sent several individuals and groups from Pakistan back to Germany to organize and execute attacks. Fortunately, most of the people in charge of carrying out these plans seem to have been arrested and are currently jailed or on trial. Still, there is no reason to be less alert or cautious. Instead, it might be a good time to summarize the most important developments within the German jihadist scene and draw tentative conclusions regarding these developments for Germany.

#### THE SAUERLAND FOUR

The Sauerland Four were the “pioneers” of German jihadism, paving the way for potential German recruits to the Pakistani tribal areas and the organizations located there. Members of this group were arrested in September 2007 in a small town in the Sauerland region of North Rhine-Westphalia, where they were preparing explosives for car bomb attacks against NATO’s Ramstein Air Base and nearby off-base facilities.

The group was formed by four German jihadists who traveled to North Waziristan in Pakistan and joined the Uzbek Islamic Jihad Union (IJU). It appears that this



happened more or less by coincidence, rather than as a result of a carefully planned recruitment. As the two leaders of the group, Fritz Gelowicz (born in 1979) and Adem Yilmaz (born in 1978), later confessed, they had originally planned to go fight in Chechnya. When they were unable to travel to the North Caucasus, via Turkey, they went to Damascus to study Arabic instead. Once in Syria, they changed their plans after Yilmaz established contact with a group of Azeri jihadists who promised to send the Germans to Chechnya after they had gone through military training in Pakistan.

In April and June 2006, the four Germans traveled to Pakistan via Turkey and Iran and were trained in the use of small arms and explosives. Although they mainly wanted to fight Americans in Afghanistan, the IJU leadership asked them to perpetrate attacks in Germany with the goal of forcing German troops from Afghanistan. The attacks would have coincided with the debate in the German Bundestag in October and November 2007 over the extension of the Afghanistan mandates for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Operation Enduring Freedom. The IJU hoped that a successful attack in Germany would influence the debate and possibly the vote in parliament. It appears that the German recruits, suffering from malaria, dysentery and hepatitis at the training camp in Pakistan, were easily persuaded to carry out the attacks back in Germany.

The would-be German terrorists were ordered to focus on American and possibly Uzbek targets, but they were given a certain leeway in choosing targets and organizing attacks. When they were arrested, the Sauerland Four had

not yet decided exactly where they wanted to attack, but they were focusing on Ramstein, which they planned to attack using three large car bombs detonated by remote control. The young men planned to flee to Turkey and Pakistan after the attack and rejoin the IJU.

The arrests foiled the Sauerland plot, but the Germans had already recruited a small group of friends to travel to Waziristan. From 2007 on, dozens of volunteers traveled the now well-established route via Istanbul, Turkey; the Iranian cities of Tehran, Mashhad and Zahedan; and the Pakistani cities of Quetta and Bannu to the region of Waziristan, where they joined the IJU and later other organizations. Eventually, Germans formed the largest national group among Westerners in the jihadist training camps in Pakistan in 2009 and 2010.

### THE IJU AND ITS GERMAN RECRUITS

When the Sauerland group joined the IJU in 2006, only a few specialists had ever heard of the organization, a splinter group of the older and far stronger Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), both of which were based in Afghanistan until the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and subsequently escaped to Pakistan. IJU leader Najmiddin Jalolov and about a dozen followers left the IMU in 2002 because of violent debates over ideology and strategy. While the IMU insisted on preparing for the coming struggle in Central Asia and did not take part in the insurgency in Afghanistan until 2007/2008, the IJU subscribed to jihadist internationalism and supported the Taliban and al-Qaida in their struggle in Afghanistan.

The IJU (just like the IMU) had longstanding contacts with like-minded jihadists in the Caucasus. Jalolov and some of his followers had trained in Chechnya in the late 1990s and had reached out to Turkish and Azeri fighters who later helped Gelowicz and his colleagues find their way to the IJU in Pakistan. The young Germans were thereby integrated into a Turkic network linking the Turkish jihadist scene to the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. A particular advantage of this network to the Sauerland group was that two of its members could easily communicate with their new colleagues: Adem Yilmaz and Atilla Selek (born in 1985) spoke Turkish, which is similar to Azeri and Uzbek, as their mother tongue. By establishing contact with a primarily Turkic network, the mainly ethnic Turkish German recruits bypassed an obstacle that had hampered the recruitment of Germans until 2006 – that joining al-Qaida and its affiliates in the Arab world required knowledge of at least basic Arabic.

Members of the Sauerland group recruited up to a dozen friends and relatives in 2007 and sent them to Waziristan. The most prominent of these was German-Turk Cüneyt Çiftçi (born in 1980), who became famous as the “first German suicide bomber” when he perpetrated a suicide attack on an American-Afghan military base in Khost province on March 3, 2008, killing two Americans and two Afghans. The attack was later celebrated in a



The Sauerland Four are guarded by police during their February 2010 trial in Düsseldorf on terror charges.

GETTY IMAGES



A German-speaking member of the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), an extremist organization that broke away from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, is pictured. The IJU has recruited German nationals to attack their own country.



One of four Islamic terrorists found guilty of plotting bomb attacks on Frankfurt airport and a U.S. military base in Ramstein is transported to court in Karlsruhe in September 2007. In March 2010, the men confessed and received prison sentences of five to 12 years. EPA

He successfully called on German sympathizers to join the jihadists in Waziristan or support their activities by sending money, resulting in a rapid increase in the number of recruits traveling to Pakistan. Of more than 220 jihadist recruits who went from Germany to Waziristan after 2001 for training by the IJU, al-Qaida or the IMU, nearly 40 left in 2009.

This influx led to the emergence of a distinctly German subculture in the tribal areas, and in September 2009 to the emergence of the German Taliban Mujahedeen – the first exclusively German jihadist group. Its founder and leader, the German-Turk Ahmet Manavbasi (1977-2010), had been a drug dealer who was extradited from Germany to Turkey in 2000. By 2007 he had become the driving force behind the IJU's public relations efforts, building contacts to a small group of like-minded Turks in Istanbul who administered the Turkish language website "Time for Martyrdom," which became home to most of the IJU propaganda in the following years.

Manavbasi expanded his recruitment of young Germans, and in 2009 a small group from Berlin arrived in Waziristan. In parallel, a group of Turks and Azeris who had fought in the North Caucasus joined the IJU. They had not been able to re-enter Chechnya in 2008, and so decided to move on to Afghanistan. At that time, the IJU apparently decided to build a kind of international brigade of Turks, Azeris and Germans. While the Turks founded The Victorious Group (Taifetül Mansura), the Germans named their new outfit German Taliban Mujahedeen. Like the Uzbeks, these fighters were based in the Miranshah and Mir Ali areas of North Waziristan and joined the Haqqani network's activities in Afghanistan.

However, the German Taliban Mujahedeen's main function seems to have been propaganda. The new name was first mentioned in the video "Call to Truth" in September 2009, in which a speaker named Ayyub Almani (i.e., Yusuf

video, which became the first highlight in a public relations campaign primarily directed at Germany and Turkey. The IJU made use of the German recruits to portray itself as a factor in the world of Jihadist terrorism while trying to hide that it remained a small group whose members never exceeded 100 to 200 fighters.

#### GERMAN TALIBAN MUJAHEDDEEN CAMPAIGN

Eric Breininger (1987-2010), a young German convert to Islam, became the face of the IJU's public relations campaign and featured prominently on its German and Turkish language videos. He had been recruited by Daniel Schneider (born in 1985), the fourth member of the Sauerland group, and arrived in Waziristan in early 2008.

Ocak from Berlin) threatened Germany with attacks: "Only through your engagement here [in Afghanistan] against Islam an attack on Germany becomes an attractive option for the Mujahedeen. So that you try some of the pain, that the innocent Afghan people has to taste day by day. ... It is only a matter of time until the jihad tears down the German walls." In parallel to these remarks, the film shows pictures of important landmarks, including Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, Frankfurt's skyline, the grounds of Munich's Oktoberfest, Hamburg's main train station and Cologne cathedral.

This video was part of a larger public relations campaign by jihadists aimed at influencing the outcome of the late September 2009 parliamentary elections in Germany.

Shortly before the elections, German-Moroccan al-Qaida member Bekkay Harrach threatened terrorist attacks if Germans voted for parties supporting German troops in Afghanistan. Al-Qaida and the German Taliban Mujahedeen lost credibility in Germany when no attacks followed the election of the conservative-liberal coalition of Chancellor Angela Merkel.

#### AL-QAIDA AND THE EURO PLOT

The IJU's and German Taliban Mujahedeen's public relations campaigns proved to be a double-edged sword because they not only heightened the public profile of the organizations and helped recruitment, but they also drew the attention of the United States, which targeted – along with other jihadist groups in North Waziristan – both organizations' leadership and fighters with intensified drone strikes and other measures. Most importantly, IJU-leader Jalolov was killed by American missiles in September 2009 and many ordinary fighters were killed as well. In April 2010, Manavbasi and Breininger were killed in a rare firefight with the Pakistani army on the road between Mir Ali and Miranshah. Without the strong leadership of Manavbasi, the German Taliban Mujahedeen quickly disintegrated. Most of the organization's German fighters, together with others who left the IMU, joined al-Qaida, which quickly devised plans to send some of them back to Germany to execute attacks there.

Information about al-Qaida's plans and impending attacks in Germany surfaced again, beginning in the summer of 2010. German-Afghan Ahmad Wali Sidiqi and German-Syrian Rami Makanesi, who had been arrested in Afghanistan and Pakistan, respectively, were the first sources. Both reported that they had talked to al-Qaida leaders in Waziristan, where they plotted attacks in Great Britain, France and Germany. German authorities became increasingly concerned in November 2010, when Emrah Erdogan, a German-Turkish-Kurd al-Qaida member, called the Federal Criminal Police from Pakistan and warned of an attack planned for February or March 2011. According to Erdogan, two people had already entered Germany and gone underground, while four others were training and waiting for their orders in Waziristan.

Although Erdogan's information turned out to be unreliable, authorities soon discovered that al-Qaida had sent individuals and groups back to Germany to reorganize the movement and perpetrate attacks. In May 2010, German and Austrian authorities arrested Austrian citizen Maqsood Lodin and German citizen Yusuf Ocak, both of whom had returned from Pakistan to re-establish contact with former comrades who had stayed behind in Europe. In April 2011, German authorities arrested the so-called Düsseldorf cell led by Moroccan Abdeladim el-Kebir (born in 1982), another al-Qaida operative from Waziristan. At the time of their arrest, the four-person cell had begun to prepare explosives for an attack on an unknown target.

During the two trials – Lodin and Ocak in Berlin and Kebir in Düsseldorf – further information emerged about

the strategic debates within al-Qaida that led to sending the German recruits back to Germany. Lodin carried a USB-drive that contained strategic materials, most importantly an internal al-Qaida document called “future work” that laid out the organization's strategies. By perpetrating a larger number of small scale attacks worldwide, its authors argued, al-Qaida would regain some freedom of action and therefore its ability to perpetrate attacks on the scale of September 11, 2001. It became clear, in June 2011, that this paper was more than an internal discussion when al-Qaida released a video in which its leading members presented a strategic vision of “individual jihad” – “lone wolf” attacks by jihadists who had not necessarily been involved in the organization before. This was a major step for al-Qaida, which had always insisted on exerting as much central command and control as possible during operations.

During the Kebir trial, it became clear what the organization had in mind when American authorities provided German prosecutors with a March 2010 letter from Yunus al-Muritani, the mastermind of the Europlot, to Osama bin Laden. In the letter, only one of a broad correspondence between the two, Muritani expounded on his plans to perpetrate attacks in Europe and the U.S. and to build new al-Qaida infrastructure in Africa, where security services are weaker than in the Arab world. Muritani especially focused on concrete plans for future attacks on energy infrastructure worldwide. The Arab Spring and the death or arrest of most of the al-Qaida leadership between 2010 and 2012, however, made these plans obsolete.

#### CONCLUSION: HOMEGROWN TERRORISM

With al-Qaida's Europlot foiled and its masterminds either dead or arrested (The Pakistanis arrested Muritani in September 2011), the acute danger has dissipated. Nevertheless, Germany will continue to feel repercussions from the radicalization of large numbers of Germans in recent years. Of more than 220 Germans who trained with terrorist organizations from 2001, more than 110 have returned to Germany and only a fraction are in jail or on trial. There is a growing Salafist subculture in Germany, parts of which are sympathetic to the jihadists and whose adherents have served as a recruitment pool for al-Qaida, the IJU, the IMU and the German Taliban Mujahedeen in recent years. There is every indication that radicalization is increasing while the opportunities to join organizations abroad are limited. It is therefore likely that German groups will emerge and turn directly against the German state, without first going to Pakistan for training. It was Ahmet Manavbasi's vision to build a German jihadist organization to take on the German state, a vision that was reportedly shared by prominent IMU propagandist Monir Chouka and other Germans. If the trend toward jihadist radicalization continues in Germany, it is very likely that truly homegrown groups will emerge and pose new threats to Germany's and its allies' security. □

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