

20. Mrz. 2015

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in Security Culture,  
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## Returning from the 'IS' – Experiences from the counseling service HAYAT-Germany

Von Julia Berczyk

Teil XX unserer **Serie** zum „Islamischen Staat“

Persons traveling to participate in foreign conflicts by no means constitute a new phenomenon that is intrinsically tied to the 'Islamic State' ('IS'). However, law enforcement agencies all over the world

increasingly focus on foreign fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq due to a considerable rise in their number as well as the perceived threat they pose upon their return. Currently, around 650 German residents and citizens have travelled to the region to support jihadist groups such as the 'IS'.

### HAYAT-Germany: family counseling and de-radicalization

HAYAT (Turkish and Arabic for 'Life') is the first German counseling program for persons involved in radical Salafist groups or on the path of a violent jihadist radicalization, including those traveling to Syria, Iraq, and other war zones. Yet, HAYAT is also available to relatives or friends of a radicalized person.

Since January 2012, HAYAT has been the partner of the German Federal Office for Immigration and Refugee Affairs (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge BAMF), which established a national advice centre on radicalization ('Beratungsstelle Radikalisierung'). Taking calls from relatives and other concerned persons, the hotline provides a first line assessment to then redirect the calls to local, non-governmental partners like HAYAT.

The 'IS' certainly also had an impact on the number of cases at HAYAT. In recent years many relatives of persons who are about to travel abroad, are already staying in Syria and Iraq or have returned to Germany, turn to HAYAT for advice. (For more information on our work, please [visit our website](#)).

### The returnees

There are different reasons why people join jihadist groups. Grievances, a lack of recognition and appreciation, struggles within the family, the search for sense in life, the fight for justice, experiences of discrimination and exclusion are only some of many contributing factors that are being deployed by (violent) ideologies, which render them so attractive. Our experience at HAYAT indicates that independent of the social, national or religious background, basically any family in Germany can be affected.

But there are not only various reasons for people to radicalize and depart, there are also different motivations for leaving these militant groups. Contrary to public perception and many statements by security services, not every returnee is per se dangerous and will conduct a terrorist attack or will

### SOCIAL MEDIA



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Diana Schubert über die Rolle von #Kommunen in der #Prävention von #Radikalisierung  
<https://t.co/6F0QGmsxoQ>  
 #Salafismus  
 about 5 hours ago from Twitter Web Client

Fördern die Medien #Salafisten? Dynamiken, Verantwortung & Grenzen der Berichterstattung über salafistische Gruppen  
<https://t.co/YM8phOlqdf>  
 25. Januar 2016, 9:14 from Twitter Web Client

Riem Spielhaus fragt heute: Brauchen wir eigentlich wirklich mehr Forschung zum #Salafismus? Und wenn ja: welche?  
<https://t.co/9DFUOrgOPE>  
 21. Januar 2016, 9:28 from Twitter Web Client

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motivate others to do so. Moreover, not every returnee has been involved in violent combat, is brutalized and, thus, an imminent threat to society. Based on our practical experience we can identify three different types of returnees: the *endangerer*, the *traumatized* and the *disillusioned*. The *endangerers* pose a threat upon their return, e.g. by plotting an attack or by recruiting new jihadists. The *traumatized* need therapeutic counseling and aftercare, since an untreated trauma could sooner or later result in returnees posing a threat to themselves, their direct surroundings or national security. Finally, *disillusioned persons* have recognized, oftentimes very soon after their departure that the reality on site does not coincide with their original perceptions and expectations. They are no drop-outs yet. Nonetheless they doubt the proceedings and/or doctrine of the jihadists. They want to return home since they do not see any perspective and future in the 'Islamic State'. Overall, these different types do not necessarily share the same experiences, motivations for returning as well as goals once they have returned. Hence, the response to returnees needs to be differentiated in order to minimize the potential threat posed by them.

### Challenges and Options

It seems as if the 'IS' is increasingly lacking revenues and fighters. **According to current estimates**, more and more persons attempt to desert. By the end of 2014, we observed that about one hundred deserters had been killed and several hundreds, who were trying to escape, had been arrested by the 'Islamic State'. Moreover, 'IS' propaganda warns about falling for the love of their families, which indicates that the organization fears that its fighters refrain from fighting and return to their families.

Indeed, 'IS' fighters manage to return to Europe. The European governments adopted various means to deal with this problem, ranging from 'hard' to 'soft': Criminalizing the departure, confiscating passports or denying re-entry may serve as examples of a 'hard' approach. However, even though repressive means are vital, they only constitute one side of the coin. On the other side soft approaches like assisting drop-out processes are an integral instrument to minimize the threat. Moreover, repressive security legislature should not hamper genuine attempts to leave violent extremist groups. In order not to do so, we have to differentiate between types of returnees and realize that putting all of them in jail might actually promote radicalization. We need to open some doors in order to enable exits and provide people genuinely willing to leave jihadist groups with alternative ways of recognition, purpose and emotional and ideological support systems.

### The need for cooperation with civil-society actors

A proper assessment of the threat returnees pose requires knowledge of their activities in Syria/Iraq, their reasons for joining in the first place, motivations for their return as well as information on when and where they return to. The latter concerns information, which security services often find hard to access. Families and friends are often reluctant to cooperate since it might directly result in the arrest of their relative or friend. In order to obtain this information and assess the respective situation, civil-society actors such as **HAYAT can play a crucial role**. Such counseling services do often possess the access and knowledge about individual careers and developments as they have earned the trust of families and friends. Moreover, security services lack the resources to observe returnees 24/7. Actors like HAYAT have different ways of gaining knowledge. Hence, networks and cooperation between authorities and civil-society actors are indispensable. Sharing information and resources is inevitable in order to conduct a proper analysis and to evaluate the proceedings in each individual case. It may very well be more beneficial to increase collaboration and efforts in soft approaches than

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attempting to respond to each and every returnee by repressive means.

Investments have to be made with regards to preventative, supportive and reintegration efforts. HAYAT identifies three different levels in de-radicalization processes that need to be accounted for. At the pragmatic level, emphasis must be placed on assistance in e.g. finding a job, educational training or housing in order to gain new perspectives. At the ideological level, any de-radicalization process must emphasize the de-legitimization and invalidation of jihadi groups' narratives. Returnees need not only to refrain from violence but also come to terms with their past. The affective level addresses the need for individuals to be emotionally supported as well as the establishment of an alternative reference group. Family, friends and mentors need to be placed in new relation – namely, in opposition – to the radical group. Hence, the entire social surrounding needs to be prepared in order to provide a disillusioned returnee with a stable environment and perspective.

To sum up, investigations into crimes a returnee has potentially committed – and if necessary: their prosecution – are inevitable. But the possibility of dropping out should not be hampered and withdrawn from those persons genuinely willing to leave jihadist groups (e.g. by repressive means such as criminalizing a return or withdrawing resident permits). Disillusion should not be countered with a lack of prospect – otherwise we run the risk of instigating re-radicalization processes and creating endangerers ourselves. But in order to create such alternative opportunities, civil-society actors need to be fostered and equipped with more resources.



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 Tags: [De-Radicalization](#), [Ideology](#), [IS](#), [islamic state](#), [Jihadism](#), [Radicalization](#), [security](#), [Strategy](#)

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