
*Returning from the 'Islamic State' – Experiences from the
counseling service HAYAT -Germany¹*

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Persons traveling to participate in foreign conflicts by no means constitute a new phenomenon that is intrinsically tied to the 'Islamic State' ('IS') or other violent jihadist networks. When analyzing historical foreign fighter insurgencies, David Malet, for instance, reflects upon how local insurgencies – the conflicts oftentimes being portrayed as threat to a specific transnational community – mobilize international networks.² Malet argues that throughout modern history, there have been strong similarities with regards to the strategies of recruitment for a distant war independent of the respective conflict type. International combatants have fought for various causes, ranging from international communism to local ethnic group interests. Yet law enforcement agencies all over the world increasingly focus on foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq due to a considerable rise in their number as well as the perceived threat they pose upon their return. Currently, official numbers estimate that around 680 German residents and citizens have traveled to the region to support jihadist groups such as 'IS'.³

But how do we prevent individuals from traveling abroad and how do we respond to those who return, apart from law enforcement, increased security regulations and other repressive measurements? This article reflects upon the work and experiences of the counseling service HAYAT-Germany and emphasizes the indispensable role of non-state actors, integrative means as well as professional networks in order to counter the perceived threat posed by returning foreign fighters.

HAYAT-Germany: family counseling and de-radicalization

HAYAT (Turkish and Arabic for "life") has been the first German counseling program for individuals as well as relatives and friends of persons involved in radical Islamist groups or on the

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² Malet, David (2013): Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts, Oxford.

³ <http://www.zeit.de/news/2015-12/22/deutschland-bericht-zahl-deutscher-dschihadisten-auf-780-gestiegen-22160605> (last accessed 19.01.2016)

path to violent jihadist radicalization, including those who travel to Syria, Iraq, and other war zones.

HAYAT was established in 2011, tying in with the experiences of the first German de-radicalization and disengagement program for highly radicalized neo-Nazis: EXIT-Germany. This initiative developed methods and approaches to counsel and work with the relatives of radicalized persons to eventually prevent, decelerate and invert the radicalization process. Transferring this unique knowledge and experience into the realm of Islamic extremism, HAYAT is now available to parents, siblings, friends, teachers, employers, and anyone else who has a relationship to a person potentially on the path of a (violent) radicalization. Moreover, HAYAT is working directly with radicalized persons in order to demonstrate the prerequisites and possibilities of desistance from radical behavior, ideologies and groups.

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

During this first contact, HAYAT experts will conduct an analysis and risk assessment of the respective situation to determine the counseling demand and to answer the most important questions in the beginning: Is the relative in danger of becoming (violently) radicalized? Or is it a harmless case of conversion to Islam? Once the counselor has gained a clear picture of the situation at hand, an individual counseling process and step by step plan will be designed, including various measures to prevent further radicalization or to stop and reverse the process.

With the experience and expertise HAYAT accompanies persons, who don't want to lose their radicalized relative or friend and try to understand and win him/her back.

- HAYAT counsels, provides contacts and listens.
- HAYAT makes a clear differentiation between a strong, lived faith and an ideology of inequality that can result in violence and terrorisms.
- HAYAT assists in identifying alarming signs and shows the limits of what is possible.
- HAYAT provides new perspectives and accompanies the cases for as long as necessary.

Many parents of persons who are about to travel abroad (e.g. to Syria), are already there or have even returned to their home countries, turn to HAYAT for advice. HAYAT thereby follows three main goals:

- Try everything possible to make them voluntarily refrain from traveling abroad.
- If they are already abroad: try to stop them from active combat and make them return.
- Assist persons to return and integrate to a safe social environment that respects universal human rights.

HAYAT can resort to a nationwide network of partners. HAYAT thereby understands itself as a bridge between the family and institutions such as schools, social services and, if applicable, prosecution, police or employer and assists in communicating with various parties with the

primary goal of catering to the specific needs of the respective person and family (for more information on our work, please visit our website⁴).

The developments around the emergence of 'IS' certainly also had an impact on the counseling demand at HAYAT. In recent years many relatives of persons who are about to travel abroad, are already staying in Syria/Iraq or have returned to Germany, turn to HAYAT for advice.

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 a higher meaning 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, and 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 potentially 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 motivate others to do so. Moreover, not every returnee has been involved in violent combat, is brutalized and, thus, an imminent threat to society. The German 'Verfassungsschutz' (Germany's domestic security agency) also points to the fact that in the majority of return cases, there is no indication that the persons have been actively involved in combat.⁵ Based on our practical experience (as well as other experts in the field, e.g., Peter Neumann, Kings College London) we can identify three different types of returnees: the *endangerer*, the *traumatized* and the *disillusioned*.⁶

Despite the fact that some returnees do not fit into these clear-cut categories, there is still a certain differentiation possible. The *endangerers* pose a threat upon their return, for example 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 even national security. Finally, *disillusioned individuals* have recognized, oftentimes very soon after their departure that the reality on-site does not coincide with their original perceptions and expectations. But they are not drop-outs yet. Nonetheless they doubt the practices 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.

Our counseling cases at HAYAT also demonstrate that an individualized approach to dealing with returnees is of utmost importance – even in cases where two individuals have traveled together to join 'IS'. These friends, for instance, parted ways upon their arrival and eventually had very different experiences during their stay. Their separation was also strongly related to their motivation for joining 'IS' in the first place, but their different paths and careers on-site, in fact, also led them to develop different perspectives on what "real life" within 'IS' actually looks like.

⁴ <http://www.hayat-deutschland.de/>

⁵ Verfassungsschutz (2015): Reisebewegungen nach Syrien, in: <http://www.thueringen.de/th3/verfassungsschutz/auslaenderextremismus/Syrien/index.aspx>; 22.6.2015.

⁶ In the future, with the security situation deteriorating or a potential demise of the 'IS', we expect another category to emerge that would need differentiated and special attention: children born or raised within the 'IS' (since they didn't go through a 'regular' radicalization process but, still, might 'return')

To the public eye, they would both, upon their return, be equally perceived as an immanent security risk.⁷ However, during their counseling process we gained insight into their original motivations, experiences on-site, mind-sets, feelings, future plans etc. and, thus, know that two intrinsically different persons could return.

Hence, the response to returnees needs to be differentiated in order to identify the individual challenges. It also needs to ultimately minimize the potential threat posed upon their return. Independent of the type of returnee, there can only be individual approaches and counseling demands.

Challenges and Options

It seems as if 'IS' is increasingly lacking revenues and fighters. According to current estimates, more and more individuals attempt to desert.⁸ These deserters have to fear being arrested or even killed in case their escape or plans get uncovered. Moreover, IS propaganda warns about leaving the 'Caliphate' or falling for the love of their families, which indicates that the organization fears that its constituents refrain from fighting and return to their families.⁹

Indeed, many 'IS' fighters do manage to return to Europe. European governments have adopted various policies 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, such as assisting drop-out processes, are an integral instrument to minimize the threat that returnees might pose. 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 understand that jurisprudence alone is not the solution to a societal phenomenon, and politics as well as the society as a whole can no longer act as if they have nothing to do with the causes of radicalization and the question why some of our young people join militant Islamist groups. Returnees cannot be "parked" in jails forever and their return or re-integration into society is only a matter of time. While there is no need for pity, we need to open some doors in order to facilitate exits and provide individuals 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 with them, since it might directly result in the arrest of their relative or friend.

In order to obtain information and assess the respective situation, civil-society actors such as HAYAT can play a crucial role. Such counseling services often possess the access and knowledge

⁷ 82% of the German population thinks that returnees pose a great danger to security. Gezer, Özlem (2015): Emrah und seine Brüder, in: <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-134762497.html>; 22.6.2015.

⁸ Deutschlandfunk (2015): Exit-Strategie für diese Kämpfer, in: http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/islamischer-staat-exit-strategie-fuer-diese-kaempfer.694.de.html?dram:article_id=314055; 22.6.2015.

⁹ See e.g., Bunzel, Cole (2015): 32 Islamic State Fatwas, in: <http://www.jihadica.com/32-islamic-state-fatwas/>, last visited 02.07.2015; Dabiq Issue 4, p. 33.

about individual careers and developments as they have earned the trust of respective families and friends. Moreover, security services lack the resources to observe returnees 24/7. Practitioners such as 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 attempting to respond to each and every returnee solely by repressive means.

Further investments have to be made with regard 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, for example in 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 former worldview. 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 a 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 individuals 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. In contrast to many other European countries, where state-led programs often prevail, in Germany we find highly professionalized and engaged civil-society actors, both, in terms of de-radicalization as well as preventive efforts. This country is equipped with the necessary expertise and practical knowledge. However, many actors still lack the financial means, for example to invest in personnel in order to cope with the high counseling demand. Providing assistance in the long run is extremely time-consuming, especially when it comes to returnees. Sustainable structures as well as networks consisting of psychologists, social workers, attorneys, social services etc. are key in order to meet the needs that the different types of returnees pose. But in order to create such alternative opportunities, civil-society actors need to be fostered and equipped with more resources.