Family Counselling as Prevention and Intervention Tool Against ‘Foreign Fighters’. The German ‘Hayat’ Program.

Daniel Koehler

Abstract

Currently German authorities estimate that about 230 German citizens have travelled to the civil war battlefields in Syria ('Foreign Fighters'). The perceived threat results from the possibility of trained individuals with battlefield experience and contacts to international terrorist organizations returning with their Western passports to their home countries and either act as sleepers, active terrorists or recruiters for terrorist organizations. So far Western countries have not yet found an effective tool to stop or slow down the continuous stream of persons travelling abroad, for many different reasons. In addition the knowledge about the processes and careers leading to the departure from one’s home country to a war scenario is very limited. This article introduces one of the few civil society programs ('HAYAT') designed, among other tasks, to work in the close periphery of highly radicalized individuals and ‘Foreign Fighters’ - with the major goal to prevent these persons from leaving, prevent them from turning violent once they have left, and finally convince them to return to their home countries into a network closely coordinated with the authorities, but institutionally independent from them. HAYAT is a family counselling program available for every relative, friend or otherwise attached person (e.g. teacher) of individuals on the path of radicalization (violent and non-violent) at any stage. The unique methodology designed to work as a bridge between security authorities and civil society in regard to the ‘Foreign Fighters’ threat is the core of this article. In addition a short statistical overview on HAYAT’s cases of the first two years of work will be given.

1 Director of Research of the Institute for the Study of Radical Movements (ISRM www.istramo.com) and family counsellor at the HAYAT program.

Daniel Koehler: Family Counselling as Prevention and Intervention Tool Against ‘Foreign Fighters’. The German ‘Hayat’ Program.
Introduction

Individuals with Western nationalities or passports travelling to the battlefields in the Muslim world have become one of the most serious worries for security authorities in almost every Western country. The so called ‘Foreign Fighters’ come from every possible national and biographical background and join the fights in Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Mostly however, the Syrian conflict has reached a force of attraction towards young Western Muslims unparalleled in the last 20 years. Global Jihadi networks skilfully use modern information technologies and social media to distribute information and propaganda about the ‘Jihad’ on the ground almost in real time. Hundreds of groups and fractions strive for different goals in multiple and highly complex civil war scenarios. So far the only clear aspect of the Syrian conflict is the attraction posed to Western nationals. The King’s College’s International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR) estimated the number of overall Foreign Fighters with European nationality in Syria at about “135-590 individuals, or 7-11 per cent of the foreign fighter total”\(^2\) (April 2013). While the report was published, the ICSR estimated the current active European Foreign Fighters in Syria at about “70-441”\(^3\). In this report the number of Fighters from Germany ranges between one and 40. Currently however, the German authorities estimate about 230 German Foreign Fighters in Syria\(^4\). The main concern of authorities worldwide is, that these individuals join terrorist organizations, are trained in camps, gather battlefield experience and return to their home countries (legally with their Western passports) to become sleepers or directly engage in terrorist acts. Until now (December 2013 according to the German Ministry of the Interior) about 50 individuals of the 230 have returned to Germany. Of these 17 have allegedly participated in active combat and against six individuals the German Federal Persecutor General has opened preliminary investigations\(^5\).

\(^3\) Ibid.
So far it has been extremely difficult to prevent these individuals from leaving or track their moves. The chaotic situation in Syria makes it almost impossible to establish a hold of the Foreign Fighters, who can travel very easily to Syria via Turkey, not even needing a passport. Responding to the growing pressure of Western governments, Turkey decided to crack down on the ‘Terror Travellers’. Very recently 1.100 European nationals have been arrested and sent back to their home countries, before they could join the battle in Syria. However, this has not stopped or slowed down the stream of Western individuals towards the battlefield. What makes it even more difficult is the fact, that there are different ‘types’ of these travellers. Not all join terrorist groups and fight – many of them travel to Syria for humanitarian aid or political campaigning, or to Egypt to study Arabic at first. In addition some Western countries deem the Syrian opposition as legitimate, which makes it morally and legally impossible to prevent citizens of these countries to join them.

This highly complex situation has led to the focus of international research and policy makers on intervention and prevention programs, which could be established to counter this development. One comprehensive report “Prevention of Violent Extremism in Third Countries” was published by the Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies (CATS) in 2013 (Ranstorp & Hyllengren, 2013). The report deems the German example as essential, due to the “considerable experience of individuals resident in the country being recruited and making their way to conflict areas” (ibid.: 5).

This present article provides an in depth methodological analysis of the one program considered as “most successful” (ibid.: 16) by the CATS report: the HAYAT (Arabic and Turkish for ‘life’) family counselling program run by the Centre for Democratic Culture (ZDK) in Berlin. HAYAT is part of a nation wide counselling network on radicalization established by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) since late 2011, which includes a telephone hotline that re-assigns cases to local partners for individual support. Currently four local partners are active in different regions in Germany. Among these HAYAT is responsible to take over the highly radicalized cases with international (i.e. foreign fighter)
relevance due to its unique methodological setup and to train the other local partners in counselling work because of HAYAT’s unique knowledge and experiences.

Prior to this development, the ZDK with its project ‘Strengthening families against violence and extremism’, already between 2007 and 2010 gained experiences in the establishment of a counselling service for relatives and friends of youths in Islamic extremist environments. This project itself drew on the experiences of one of the world’s most successful deradicalization and disengagement programs for right-wing extremists: EXIT-Germany — also a part of the ZDK and the inventor of family counselling as intervention tool in Germany. Thereby, the team could fall back onto the long-standing practical and theoretical work of the ZDK in the realm of Islamic extremism and right-wing extremism and to specifically test its applicability as well as to develop and sample a counselling tool-kit with regard to Islamic extremism (cf. Dantschke, 2010).

**Theoretical Framework – The Basic Setting**

The counselling of relatives and friends of persons who are already radicalized or are in the process of becoming radicalized comprises much more than a mere individual or socio-pedagogical outreach work. Based on international scientific studies and actual past cases, the ZDK identifies family and friends as vital in the deceleration and reversion of radicalization processes (deradicalization).

The reasons for individual radicalization are manifold and vary massively, which makes it difficult to identify general mechanisms and pathways for deradicalization processes (for a general overview on the current state of research as well as methodological standards in deradicalization work, see Köhler, 2013, 2014, Pisoiu & Köhler, 2013, Wagner, 2013)

Still, there are strong theoretical and scientific arguments for a family counselling approach within the framework of a general societal deradicalization strategy.

Previous comparative studies of various deradicalization programmes were able to identify several levels of impact, which every deradicalization strategy and related programs need to
be based on in order to work successfully. These levels can be differentiated along three dimensions: affective, pragmatic and ideological (Rabasa, Pettyjohn, Ghez, & Boucek, 2010: 42 et seq.). These three dimensions can be deduced from comprehensive studies on successful and failed deradicalization processes as well as from practical experiences of the ZDK in previous counselling efforts.

Regarding the ideological dimension, any effective de-radicalization program must emphasize the delegitimization and invalidation of an individual’s or group’s narratives and interpretations, as well as dismantle the previously learned radical ideology during the deradicalization process and reach a critical self assessment of the individual’s past (cf. Köhler, 2013, 2014; Gadd, 2006: 180). Comparative studies of different deradicalization programs have shown that the effectiveness (i.e. rate of success) increases dramatically, once the ideological dimension is included (e.g. Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Rabasa, et al., 2010), which is backed by the knowledge of some criminological research emphasising the identity change as essential for desisting from crime (i.e. “secondary desistance”; cf. Maruna, 2006), and sociology (i.e. behavioural change is achieved most effectively, when the cognitive framework changes as well, cf. Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Aijzen, 1975). The interpretive framework of every group and every individual serves as an explanation and adds sense to individual or collective action. Here we refer to interpretive frameworks that are perceived as ‘radical’ by the respective social context. Usually these individuals and groups are very isolated. Respective ideologies and interpretive frameworks develop consciously as well as unconsciously and very rarely do so in direct contention with opposing argumentation patterns. To break with this isolation and confront the existing interpretative frames with alternatives as well as critical argumentation (or counter-narratives), therefore, constitutes a central task in every deradicalization strategy. Family counselling programs help to break up these ideological frameworks by establishing a ‘living counter-narrative’ – the family itself. By educating the relatives of radicalized individuals about radical argumentations and ideological narratives, the family becomes able to counter them. This does not necessarily mean to engage in theological debate for example (for that purpose a
scholar and respected authority may be brought into the counselling processes). Indeed it is to be expected that the radicalized person only feels encouraged to dig into the ideology even deeper or ask for more guidance of his or her (radical) mentors. The family should become a practical example portraying something different from what the radical ideology tells the affected person. By educating the family to recognize provocation, how to deescalate conflicts, and how to create compromises while respecting the faith of the relative and showing clear boundaries, the stereotypical black and white picture drawn by radical ideology might be questioned.

At the pragmatic level, emphasis is placed on the discontinuance and/or prevention of courses of action that individuals or groups have established in order to achieve their goals. The disruption of hierarchies and in-group trust, which deradicalization work focuses on, is only one aspect in the overall strategy. By providing the option of abandoning radical structures, the ideological isolation, which is also required for negative motivation (a point of no return), is being disrupted as well. Hence, it constitutes an addition to the ideological aspect of an effective deradicalization program. In the context of Salafi radicalization, the total social isolation within a closed group constitutes a particular challenge. Here, the internal demand for strict social separation also includes aspects of schooling, training and work. The permission to take part in society in this respect is underlying strict ideologically based and religiously embedded constraints and will be, in case of doubt, prohibited.

Deradicalization and family counselling programs are therefore a very effective tool in counter terrorism strategies (cf. Dechesne, 2011). Group hierarchies are disrupted, the risk of additional exits, ideological disturbance, costs for recruiting new members, loss of knowledge and skills, are only some effects on radical groups’ performance, when confronted with deradicalization and family counselling programs (cf. Staw, 1980; Levine & Moreland, 1994).

The affective level addresses the need for individuals to be emotionally supported and the requirement to establish an alternative reference group. In this regard, family counselling is
considered a vital instrument. Family members or friends that are opposing the respective ideology are being empowered in their argumentation, their capacity to take action and alternative quotation. Past cases have shown that prior to any exit, nearly every right-wing defector entertained doubts about his or her movement, its goals, values, ideological credibility and structures. The uncertainty often developed through talks or debates with close relatives or friends. The ZDK seeks to use this emotional bond in order to sow the seeds of doubt in the radical ideology required for any de-radicalization. Families and friends, who tend to be of high social and emotional significance to a radicalized person, get coached on ways to engage in debates and presented opportunities for a drop-out. In this way, the reference group gets placed in a new relation – namely, in opposition – to the radical structures. Family counselling thus is an important framework factor in deradicalization processes and to support attachment figures (in relation to emotions, values, opinions and interest of the radicalized person) massively increases the chances for a successful deradicalization. This has also been demonstrated in international comparative studies of different deradicalization programmes (vgl. Fink & Hamed, 2011: 16ff) as well as has been shown by experiences of the ZDK, both, in regard to right-wing extremism as well as Islamic extremism. Due to the provision of family counselling, several drop-out cases from militant Salafism have already been initiated and accompanied.

Empirical research on Islamic radicalization in Germany is still in its infancy. Nevertheless, knowledge on processes as well as potential risk groups of Salafist radicalization is essential in the establishment and realization of a respective family counselling service. Without intense and detailed knowledge of Salafist movements, characteristic radicalization processes and the respective relation to social context factors, a successful and meaningful family counselling is simply unattainable (vgl. Dantschke, 2010; Dantschke, Mansour, Müller, & Serbest, 2011). Thus, it seems necessary to fall back on the comprehensive and internationally acknowledged studies of Marc Sageman (2004) and Edwin Bakker (2006). Though the number of cases are too limited for clear to proof this claim, many aspects that were identified by Sageman and Bakker can be transferred to the situation in Germany.
would also like to refer to the analysis of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution of North Rhine-Westphalia, which studied the vita of 130 young non-Muslim Germans and those with a foreign passport (Verfassungsschutz, 2011). Moreover, the Institute for the Study of Radical Movements (ISRM) in Berlin started to transfer the practical experiences made with community coaching and family counselling in the realm of Salafi radicalization to internationally accessible scientific contributions (cf. Dantschke, 2013a; Dantschke, 2013b).

According to the study of Sageman (2004), which analyzed approx. 400 cases from the terrorism data base of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, more than half of the perpetuators with an average age of 26 years had a ‘middle class’ background – and thus, were not motivated by poverty or jealousy. However, in Germany the average age of joining Salafi milieus lies between 15/16 and 20 years and for the radicalization process between 20 and 30 years (cf. Dantschke, 2010, 2013a, 2013b; Dantschke, et al., 2011). Further, according to Sageman (2004), the influence of religious educational institutions is relatively marginal. About 62% of the persons he studied were holding a university degree (most of them were engineers) and the majority of the persons were employed, yet, often below their level of education. Most of the persons were married and only in a very few cases had a criminal record. Solely 1% of the sample group were showing psychological peculiarities and there were almost no signs of abuse or other experiences with violence during childhood. 84% of the persons were not living in their country of birth. According to Sageman, predominantly smaller groups (relatives, friendship, common descent) are of great significance in the radicalization and a great share of the perpetuators consisted of converts or „reborns“ (born within a Muslim family, however, not or only slightly religiously socialized). Further, it has been observed that most of the persons entertained conflicts with religious authorities in their direct environment.

Regarding reasons and motivational factors, Sageman has not found any general commonalities. However, relationships amongst themselves were of high relevance. 68% of
the persons knew each other prior to engaging in terrorist activities and 10% were relatives. Often the search for members of the same diaspora was significant for getting into contact with other, future terrorists. The mosque predominately served as a space for community (eating and drinking) and has not been considered a space in the search of religious commitment.

In a comparative study of Bakker (2006) analyzing a group of European Jihadists, it became evident – despite many differences in personal characteristics – that family bonds play a crucial role in the recruitment and radicalization process. These findings are of mayor relevance in the practical implementation and establishment in counselling services for family members.

Additionally previous counselling experience as well as research (despite being rudiment in international comparison) in Germany has shown that there are further motives and backgrounds contributing to the engagement in radical Salafist movements: family-internal conflicts and the related devotion to radical meaning systems, experiences of loss, discrimination (or a general sense of ‘not belonging’), the transition from youth to adulthood as well as the difficulty to find a self-determined place in society and to independently make decisions (vgl. Dantschke, 2013a, 2013b; Dantschke, et al., 2011).

Practical Implications – What Needs To Be Done Generally

Taking the theoretical framework as a basis, we can draw conclusions on the characteristics of potentially help-seeking persons. Departing from the assumption that Islamist radicalization is going along with a rapid change of friends, appearance (clothing etc.) and daily behaviour (food etc.) that is often noticed by family members at first as well as incorporating the prevailing knowledge about the German Salafist scene, it is assumed that predominately members of the middle class with Arabic, Turkish or other Muslim background as well as bicultural (e.g. a German and a Muslim parent) families will contact the family counselling project. A slight emergence of relatives of converts with or without immigrant background is also likely as well as of close persons (e.g. friends, teachers, social
workers) and institutions (schools, local authorities, youth welfare service) that are negatively affected. Persons from deep-rooted Turkish or Arabic milieu or generally more conservative Muslim background are not very likely to contact the counselling service, which is also in line with previous experiences in counselling.

The underlying approaches to counselling depart from a first overview of networks and structures, meaning, to deal with the question whether or not there is a radicalization process at all or rather just a devotion to a (eventually conservative) strand of Islam (cf. typology and classification Dantschke, et al., 2011). A very intense and highly complex expert assessment of networks, ideology, and risks leads to a first working hypothesis about the nature of the relative’s radicalization process (i.e. violent or non-violent radicalization). The assessment is conducted by a team consisting of experts in radicalization, Islamism, and terrorism. Right from the beginning, counselling in the realm of Islamic extremism is confronted with the difficulty to differentiate between the freedom to practice one’s religion and potentially security relevant radicalization, as well as the option of a non-violent radicalization taking place. Amongst others, the counselling team has to refute the sorrows of relatives and make room for the understanding and appreciation of the new life course despite the fact that this might not be in accordance with familial or personal views. In the case of a possible non-violent radicalization the counselling shifts to a more “family therapy” style approach, trying to improve the family context as much as possible, while respecting the faith and religious freedom of the relatives.

The next step is a clarification of personal dispositions and motivations of the radicalized individual (what makes the radical group so appealing?), which is essential in order to structure further counselling efforts. Potential conflicts within the family need to be detected and resolved. If necessary, also a reestablishment of family bonds is required as this has proven to be one of the most important elements in counselling experiences. The access to other, innocuous forms of community with similar religious background can be helpful as well, since the basis of counselling always remains that the dropout of radical Islamism does not equal leaving Islam behind altogether. Through this it should be
guaranteed that the access to and teaching of positive ways of articulation and the desire to change society will remain open. In this respect, assistance in finding a job equivalent to the educational level or the granting of advanced training is also essential. Generally, what needs to be kept in mind is that the counselling is first and foremost targeting relatives, so the affective environment of a radicalized person. Despite the fact that through the work with relatives an individual counselling process with the radicalized person can be initiated, the general idea remains the support and strengthening of the affective environment in the realm of a deradicalization strategy targeting society as a whole, which does not and should not include the radicalized person itself. The approach presented here comprises much more than a socio-pedagogic and practical assistance for an individual and should bring the affective environment, so the family, into a new relation in regard to the radical group and ideological structure. Thereby it is not only pointless but also counter-productive to include the radicalized or radicalizing person in the counselling process. Counselling is not directed at low-threshold social problems (e.g. such as drugs) but rather at security-relevant, political/religiously-ideological radicalization in the context of groups with terrorist potential and international links. The entire counselling process would lapse as soon as the radicalized or radicalizing person gets proactively involved without his or her own initiative due to the fact that the counselling service will be interpreted as ideological tool for manipulation of the adversarial system (of the faithless/kuffar). And even worse, every effort on the side of relatives is being interpreted as externally controlled process with the goal of abandoning one’s faith. However, in less security-relevant cases and pre-stages of a radicalization process, the inclusion of the respective person might very well be necessary for the reestablishment of family bonds in order to diminish potential communication difficulties within the affective environment that might be one motive for a further radicalization. The perceived positive change within the affective environment ideally opens up the opportunity to also work together on other levels. In case relatives and the respective person approach the counselling service together, a co-operation can take place right from the beginning.
In order to identify individual requirements and motivation for the radicalization of the respective person, the support and counselling process is always beginning with an individual discussion with experienced and professional advisors. On the basis of the gathered information of the advice-seeker’s goals, questions and needs, the team develops a plan of action, along with goals and a realistic time frame for the relative.

The first phase will focus on the affective dimension. To accompany the advice-seeking person in the rationalization of the problem and training on the thematic area is vital in order to render them capable to address the ideological and pragmatic level in future phases. The goal is to efficiently overcome the individually perceived biggest hindrances to the targeted goals.

Thereby it might concern:

- Preparation for and, if applicable, attendance at administrative formalities,
- Legal information and advice as well as mediation of adequate lawyers,
- Information and family-oriented counselling in regard to personal and societal security relevancy,
- Procurement/mediation of state institutions and assistance,
- Psychological assistance, mediation to other family counselling services, possibly youth welfare office.

The counsellor will accompany the process for as long as necessary and is available 24 hours by telephone to attend to families dealing with critical situations.

Within the process it is imperative to always safeguard the basic rights and security of all persons involved and to interfere result-oriented and meditatively in case of conflicts of interest or rights.

The respective situative goal of the counselling is individually tailored to the advise-seeking person, family or institution and adapted to the previously analyzed, concrete case.
The respective goals will be differentiated and scheduled. They are following the identified case logic in terms of sequence and pace. Different scenarios for action in order to reach the target marks will be designed and adjusted to the current situation. This also concerns the methodology as well as the included partners and persons involved, which are hard to find due to the necessary variety of required competencies in the counselling process. For instance, religious figures, security personal, psychologists, family therapists and different authorities need to be coordinated for external assistance as well as for the counselling process at the right time.

‘Foreign Fighters’ – HAYAT’s Unique Setting

The above explained methodology is of a very general nature. Indeed, HAYAT of course is also designed as a counselling program for families of non-violent radicals or persons in the very early stages of radicalization. The following part tries to explain how HAYAT works with security related cases, i.e. foreign fighters, (before leaving, during phase abroad, and after return).

The first step has been mentioned above. An expert team risk assessment tries to recognize the possibilities of a person radicalizing into a violent direction, if the situation is not already clear (i.e. the person has already left to fight, or has clearly expressed the plan to leave). Once the team has detected a security related risk, using a combination of concrete indicators and years of experience, the mode of counselling is shifted to risk prevention and security orientation. It is important to differentiate between different types of individuals who might want to leave their home countries. Many might want to leave to study Arabic in Egypt, or live in Turkey. This of course might be a first step to later recruitment for more actively radical groups. However, it might also be a legitimate wish of the relatives. Together with the families and using the expertise of the counselling team from every relevant discipline, HAYAT tries to establish an assessment for every individual regarding the possibility of ‘Foreign Fighter’ relevancy.
There are three different types of ‘Foreign Fighter’ related cases:

A) The relative is about to leave.

In this stage every effort to prevent the person from leaving has to be taken. It is important to know the motive for leaving to another country (e.g. learning Arabic, humanitarian aid, personal contacts, and repression at home), in order to provide alternatives (e.g. Arabic courses at home country, internships in recognized charities or peaceful campaigning/fundraising at home, legal assistance an cases of unlawful repression). Using the method explained above (creating a positive family environment based on respect and equality but also showing concern and worries), the family is counselled to do everything possible to prevent their relative from leaving. This can also involve security agencies, as long as the contact is mediated by the counsellor. It is important not to increase the repressive pressure on the radicalized individual (e.g. taking away passport, threaten to incarcerate).

B) The relative has already left

In this case the counselling team needs to find out more information about the activities of the relative. Is he or she fighting, or merely engaging in humanitarian assistance? Is there still any form of contact with the family? Are the authorities already investigating the case? Is there any sign of terrorist involvement? At this stage it is very likely, that the authorities are already at least monitoring the family. The HAYAT team is comprised of former high ranking police officers, experts in terrorism and Islamism. In addition the program has contact points in every Germany intelligence and criminal police department, which can be contacted to form task forces. The main task in this situation is to establish or stabilize the communication between the relative abroad and the family. In addition HAYAT works as a “bridge” between the family and the authorities, meaning that both sides’ rights and duties are respected and brought together. This is an extremely complex task, as for example the privacy rights of the family and their concerns in regard to the relative need to be balanced against the interest of the authorities to gain as much information as possible and maybe to get hold of the relative. It is made clear from the beginning of the counselling process that once HAYAT...
comes to the conclusion that a violent-radicalization and terrorist activity takes place, the authorities need to be involved, together with the family. HAYAT will help with legal assistance and provide mediation. In this way the goal is to minimize the negative effects on the family, while maximizing the efforts to bring back the relative safely or prevent risks. It might still be possible to counsel communication with the person abroad and effect his or her decisions. It might be possible to induce a deradicalization process via the family before the person has engaged in criminal or terrorist activities. In some cases the counselling will have to shift again to a family therapy style, helping the family to handle a possible loss.

C) The relative returns

In this case of course again a risk assessment needs to be conducted. Has the person been involved in illegal activities? Was there any training? Is there a connection to dangerous networks and groups? How are the authorities involved?

In many cases the person will be picked up by the police or intelligence service immediately after return, if not directly at the airport, and questioned. Here again the role of the family needs to be strengthened in order to provide a stable affective environment for the relative, should he or she be interested in leaving the radical group and ideology. Also to prevent further radicalization, the often times traumatic experiences at the battlefields need to be cared for with the help of the family. The basic rule here is that the close and stronger the positive affective environment around the radicalized person is, the more difficult it will be to radicalize further, or engage in security related behaviour undetected. If the person however has indeed be trained as a fighter, has joined terrorist groups, engaged in fighting and expressed no interest in leaving the group, the only thing that can be done by HAYAT is helping the family to cope with the situation and provide the option of deradicalization work in prison, if wanted later on.

Again it needs to be stressed here, that the main goals of HAYAT are risk prevention in every direction, to realize a positive (i.e. deradicalizing) effect on the relative via the family, and to
stabilize the family. HAYAT therefore is a unique bridge between security (i.e. counter terrorism architecture) agencies and civil society, moderating between both sides and being able to assess the situation from both perspectives due to the mixed expert team from both sides. It is clear, that the rights of the families and of the relatives are protected according to the national law. Any steps taken by the authorities in regard of prevention and intervention need to be mediated to the family on a case by case basis. This could mean that the family voluntarily talks to police accompanied by HAYAT staff, to investigate the options. It could also mean that the family is working together with the police in finding the relative before he or she can act and commit crimes. It can however also happen that a home searching has been conducted illegally or prematurely and might foster the radicalization process. It is important for HAYAT to explain the motivations and needs of every side (authorities and family) to each other, so that they can work together without mistrust and stereotypes towards the common goal: to prevent any risk and to minimize the negative effects for everyone involved. HAYAT therefore becomes essential information and mediating hub between these sides ensuring the flow of communication and protection of all interests. To achieve this HAYAT needs to build trust and prove capable of risk assessment using the same standards as the police, as well as being emotionally sensible and trustworthy for the family.

In short the goals of HAYAT in regard to ‘Foreign Fighters’ are: a) to prevent the relative from leaving (voluntarily), b) to motivate him or her to return or to desist from fighting etc., c) to induce a deradicalization process once returned.

One Specific Tool - Family Meetings
A methodological peculiarity that has been tested and placed into the theoretical context by the ZDK is the utilization of family group meetings within the counselling process. The exchange with, e.g. other mothers that have been or are still going through a similar situation, is an important and very effective addition to individual counselling. On the one hand, the contact to other persons that ‚are feeling just like I am‘ is giving the feeling not to be a singular case. The direct exchange with other persons concerned constitutes the basis
of an emotional stabilization and the opportunity to put one’s own situation into a broader context. To articulate problems, emotions, questions, sorrows and anxieties in front of others is a highly effective addition to professional counselling, which has also been proven to be successful in other contexts e.g. drugs, alcohol, aggressions etc.. Islamist radicalization of a relative is however a much more complex phenomenon compared to the aforementioned thematic areas. Multiple emotional, psychological, ideological, religious, criminal and terrorist entanglements and security situations must be considered by mediating counselling. The exchange situation can easily get out of control and additionally destabilize relatives. Thus, it is of utmost importance to establish a well elaborated and analytically based concept incorporating expertise and highest standards. This approach has already been developed in the context of right-wing extremism by the ZDK and adapted to target Islamic extremism. Through long-term experience in counselling and the organization of group meetings, the counsellors could identify core elements within previous successful meetings and incorporate them into the work. Thus, the group size, for instance, should be limited. According to experience, three to four families per session are the optimum. There must be an intensive and well-prepared moderation through experienced counsellors that are qualified to deal with the respective ideological, practical, specific and religious contexts. There is no room for a lack of content-specific knowledge and resulting mistakes in meetings with advise-seeking relatives in the realm of Islamic radicalization. In the worst case, an escalating meeting could result in a breach of trust between the counselling team and the relatives and be counter-productive to a successful support of an individual.

The sequence of meetings is strongly dependent on the course of counselling and its effect on participants. Experience showed that emotional impressions need to be first processed in individual counselling sessions. Ideally such a group meeting should take place every three months. A huge difference in severity of cases should be avoided since it is frustrating for relatives with persons in militant-radical environments to exchange with others who’s children are ‘solely’ engaged in dogmatic religiously-based negative attitude or action. Moreover, experiences with militant radicalization can lead other parents to feel discouraged or, on the contrary, to overreact.
The respective atmosphere within meetings is also crucial: There must be sufficient time and space for each and every family to have the feeling that their concerns are adequately addressed. At the same time, a good and cautious moderation needs to make sure that no case is dominating the group session. Depending on topicality, a particular case can be extensively addressed in a group session as long as there is regularity in meetings with the exact same participants. However this should not take place in a first encounter or with pending participants. The atmosphere in conversations is crucial as well: to talk on par with someone is of utmost importance. So, there must not be any judgment or prejudice since the moderation of these meetings is a vital factor for success.

The meetings can be also connected with local services (e.g. youth welfare offices, local authorities, integration officers and other partners) as it is often important for families to be noticed and recognized by state officials through their presence. In case families have no or only marginal relation to Islam it might also be an advantage to include a Muslim partner if the moderating person is not Muslim him/herself. This way, relatives can direct their questions around religion at an authentic representative and thereby learn to differentiate between faith and Islamist radicalization.

The moderation should also be also competent around the analysis and evaluation of the radical environment and if necessary answer concrete questions or intervene in case of false estimations. This however must not dominate the meeting since the emphasis should lie on the exchange of experiences between the families and, thus, an emotional strengthening in order to be able to go through the lonsome process with the necessary motivation. As a result of such a group meetings, often direct relations/friendships emerge and a self-initiated contact might follow. This is a meaningful addition of the continuing, direct counselling with the individual families.

**HAYAT’s First Two Years Of Work**

HAYAT started to work at the end of 2011 as the first non-governmental institution working on nationwide family counselling in the realm of Islamic extremism. Reachable 24h a day, the service since then provides (anonymous) counselling completely free of charge and
without any limitations regarding time and contents. The counselling is offered in different languages (German, Turkish, Arabic, English) through designated experts on Islamic extremism.

Since the launch of the counselling service, 53 cases (until December 2013) from all over the world (mostly Germany, but HAYAT was also asked to take over cases from Sweden and Canada) were handled, many with a ‘Foreign Fighter’ background. In 22 cases the advice-seeking persons firstly contacted the hotline provided by the BAMF and were then directed to HAYAT. In the remaining 31 cases initial contact was made with HAYAT directly. The advice-seekers were often being made aware of program by friends and acquaintances (which partly were already receiving counselling themselves), were looking for counselling services online or heard of HAYAT through media coverage (TV documentaries, newspaper articles of and about employees of HAYAT). Currently (December 2013) there are 39 active counselling cases with a very high degree of diversity regarding the intensity and security relevance. In at least eight cases there is a very high security relevancy and danger given for the respective person involved. In these cases activities in terrorist organizations has occurred, attacks have been planed or at least some form of highly illegal action was preeminent. In 16 cases a foreign country relevance, including the three above mentioned types of ‘Foreign Figthers’ was detected. This category however, also included persons who might want to leave to Egypt to learn Arabic or live in Turkey. A clear ‘Foreign Fighter’ background (according to the above mentioned types) was relevant in eight cases. One case was a domestic terrorism case.

The contacting (directed to the BAMF as well as HAYAT) was carried out mostly by women (mothers, sisters, teachers, friends) in 33 cases (i.e. 62%), of which about a 25% had an immigrant background. 11 men, three couples and eight institutions (e.g. schools) contacted the counselling team. The majority of cases dealt with male radicalized or radicalizing persons (sons, brothers, fathers: 38, i.e. 71%) and in 12 cases with daughters, sisters or mothers of advice-seekers. The age spectrum ranged from 12 to 46 years. Generally, in the majority of cases there has been an advanced to high level of radicalization with links to internationally operating and violent Salafi networks.
In several cases an additional problematization or a negative acceleration of the situation was initiated through a disproportional media coverage and by interferences of security agencies (e.g. by house search, travel ban, preliminary proceedings without concrete results). On the one hand, this required an extra effort, very comprehensive problem solving competence and flexibility on the side of counsellors. On the other hand, there also needed to be increased efforts in order to raise awareness of the problem as well as the willingness to cooperate on the side of security agencies and the media.

In many concrete cases the lack of local support networks has been highly problematic as well. Professional partners (youth welfare service, family counselling, psychotherapists etc.) were either absent or had insufficient knowledge on Islamist-Salafist radicalization and were simply overwhelmed. For this reason another method designed by the ZDK became very important, if not essential, for the counselling service of HAYAT: the ‘Community Coaching’ (see: Berczyk, 2013 for an in depth article about the method). ‘Community Coaching’ is a method developed to create local community level networks designed around a specific radicalization problem (either right-wing or Islamist) in the area. Together with all relevant and available institutions the ZDK designs, monitors and coaches the problem targeting network and subsequent action. As one of the oldest and most widely tested community based counter-terrorism and anti-extremism tools (since the late 1990s the method has been applied in 35 municipalities), the experience of forming local networks as a cornerstone of counter-terrorism has been of essential value for HAYAT. As the program counsels families from all over Germany (and even other countries), the option to use or build strong and reliably partner networks around the families on the ground has proven to be most effective.

Effect

Of course the outcome of deradicalization and prevention programs is hard to evaluate and an in depth discussion needs to take place how these programs can be assessed regarding their effect. At this place however, some numbers can be given for a first impression of how HAYAT might impact on the highly problematic ‘Foreign Fighters’ situation.
In two ‘Foreign Fighter’ cases the emigration could be prevented. In two additional cases it could be proven that the emigration was harmless. In six cases the emigration already happened, when HAYAT was contacted. In 15 cases the risk of the situation was very much mitigated through a pacification of the initially conflict-laden situation, the reestablishment of emotional bonds and communication as well as a subsequent deceleration of the radicalization process as a basis for dealing with other dimensions involved. The advice-seeking persons could have been strengthened in dealing with the respective situation. Seven cases have been closed successfully, meaning that neither the families, nor the counsellor saw any further need for counselling. 30 cases are still active and pending. One case was a failure and had to be handed over to another partner program.
Literature


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