
Of Alienation, Association, and Adventure: Why German Fighters Join ISIL**By: Dorle Hellmuth¹****Abstract**

This article provides an analysis of German foreign fighters who have left for Syria and Iraq since early 2012 and make up the second largest contingent among Western foreign fighters.ⁱ It draws on statistical information about German foreign fighters, but also uses case studies in an attempt to shed more detailed light on their motivations and why they became radicalized. Drawing on recently released government data, trial documents, and media reports, the article seeks to contribute to new research on the prevailing mechanisms of Jihadi radicalization. To facilitate this kind of comprehensive analysis, McCauley and Moskalenko's *Friction* framework is applied to fourteen prominent German fighters, including Denis Cuspert (who served as medium-level ISIL propaganda official), Philip Bergner and Robert Baum (responsible for ISIL suicide attacks in Iraq and Syria), Kreshnik B.ⁱⁱ and Harun Pashtoon (among the first returning fighters convicted of ISIL membership and other terrorist activities). The article concludes with a discussion of countermeasures used to prevent foreign fighters from leaving Germany, deradicalize those who have started to embrace violent ideas and/or actions, and deal with returning foreign fighters.

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Violent Radicalization Literature and the *Friction* Framework

The literature on violent radicalization offers numerous explanations, approaches, and theories, illustrating that there is no common profile or trajectory that we can rely on to identify those most likely to embrace jihadi violence.ⁱⁱⁱ When sorting through the growing array of literature, a few common denominators become apparent. First, the radicalization process may involve an individual or a group setting. When it comes to individual radicalization, psychodynamic, cognitive, and identity forming explanations focus on personality traits and attitudes and may be connected to early childhood development, deficient cognitive skills, or vulnerable teenage identities.^{iv} Radicalization that occurs within a group setting has been addressed by social movement and network theories.^v Second, violent radicalization may be caused by either internal or external factors. The former refer to a personal desire and/or search for identity, home, status, adventure, or money. The latter includes grievances involving economic, political, or social conditions that are imposed by others. The French sociological school, *inter alia*, has focused on these kinds of structural factors, but always in the context of globalization leading to confused identities that clash with life in modern Western societies.^{vi} All of these categories may also overlap, that is to say that both individuals and group members can be affected by internal or external factors.

Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko's *Friction* framework captures many of these schools of thought and their various strands and is therefore particularly well equipped to identify and analyze radicalization processes. While relying on psychological theory and contemporary as well as historic case studies, McCauley and Moskalenko also integrate various overlapping facets of the existing approaches mentioned above. As part of their comprehensive framework, McCauley and Moskalenko distinguish between three radicalization settings: Individual, group, or mass. The six mechanisms of individual radicalization include personal or group grievances (threats or harm inflicted upon self, loved ones, groups, or causes), slippery slope (political engagement that radicalizes individuals to participate in larger struggle), love (emotional ties to someone already radicalized), risk and social status (radicalization happens to those attracted to adventure and fame) and unfreezing (the loss of social connections makes individuals open to new ideas and identities).^{vii} Group radicalization may involve polarization (agreement among like-minded people reinforces more extreme positions), competition (with other radical groups), or isolation (separation

from others will intensify group dynamics and groupthink).^{viii} Finally, masses can be radicalized by means of jujitsu politics (agent provocateurs who bait governments into overreacting and thereby mobilize whole population segments), hatred (enemies are perceived as less human), or martyrdom (those sacrificing their lives for a cause rally others to join the fight) mechanisms.^{ix} Summing up, McCauley and Moskalenko's comprehensive framework serves as a potent instrument for determining radicalization pathways of German foreign fighters who have left for Syria and Iraq; it not only incorporates individual and group radicalization but also covers internal factors as well as external grievances.

The next part applies the *Friction* framework to 1) German government statistics on individuals who left Germany for Iraq and Syria as well as 2) case studies of some of Germany's most prominent foreign fighters.

Germany's Foreign Fighters: Stats and Cases

Why and how do German foreign fighters become radicalized? According to a German intelligence report that was released in December 2015, a total of 677 German nationals have left for Syria and Iraq since 2012.^x (The report only analyses travel departures up until June 29, 2015; the current official estimate puts the number of departees at 790). On average, the departees featured in the report were 26 years old and first became radicalized at age 22. More than three quarters were male.

Most were considered German in the sense that they were either born in Germany, or spent significant time growing up in Germany (having moved to Germany before age 14). The majority was well educated and/or in the process of obtaining a high school diploma, university degree, or completing an apprenticeship.

What is noticeable is the significant number of petty criminals: One third of the departees broke the law before leaving for Syria/Iraq, with the percentage of politically motivated crimes rising once the radicalization process commenced. Interestingly, almost 20 percent were converts to Salafism. Also important for this analysis is the fact that most of them radicalized through personal contact with family members, friends, and schoolmates, or else by means of personal engagement at Salafi mosques, events, and activities.

Group dynamics certainly mattered for travel movements: Available data on 86 percent of all departees shows that almost 50 percent left together with friends.^{xi} While 32 percent also traveled with family members, 30 percent traveled alone. Most importantly, the report offers clues regarding the motivations of those who left; often there were multiple reasons at play. Based on available data (on 79 percent of the departees), most wanted to join the Jihad (70 percent), and, to a lesser degree, wanted to live in the caliphate (24 percent) or provide humanitarian assistance (23 percent). Revolutionary objectives (9 percent) and marriage plans (6 percent) ranked last.^{xii} Interestingly, the declaration of the caliphate in June 2014 appears to have had an effect on the motivations of all those who left for Syria and Iraq after the proclamation, as there was a significant raise in numbers of those wanting to emigrate so they could live the Jihadi utopia in the Islamic State as well as an increase in women seeking marriage between June 2014 and 2015. By contrast, humanitarian objectives declined.^{xiii}

In terms of evident *Friction* mechanisms, group polarization appears to have played a role in the sense that most Germans left in groups of friends and relatives, suggesting that they also became radicalized together. In addition, group grievances could have mattered for all those who were motivated by humanitarian reasons. Finally, love may have been a driving factor for women seeking marriage in the caliphate.

But the role of statistical reports is limited. Statistics can offer a broad overview and help illustrate certain trends but lack the details needed for analyzing radicalization processes, warranting a more detailed case study analysis of prominent German foreign fighters. The cases were selected based on the availability of public data which was often determined by one or more of the following factors: German foreign fighters 1) held positions within ISIL; 2) died in combat or committed suicide attacks while in Syria or Iraq; 3) were among those prosecuted and/or convicted upon their return to Germany. Of the fourteen fighters thus surveyed, eight died fighting in Syria or Iraq (among them five suicide bombers), and six were arrested and/or convicted upon their return to Germany.

Denis Cuspert: Cuspert was arguably Germany's most prominent foreign fighter in Syria, serving as ISIL operative responsible for German language propaganda. Born in Berlin, Denis did not know his father, who was from Ghana and returned to his home country when Denis

was still a baby. His relationship with his stepfather, an American soldier, was severely strained so that Denis did not spend much time home growing up. He joined the gang life at an early age and frequently got arrested for violent crimes. While serving a prison sentence in his late twenties Denis became interested in rapping. Deso Dogg (Deso stands for Devil's Son) developed a regional reputation, but his career as a hip hop artist never took off. However, friends noted that frequent prison terms seemed to make him more religious.^{xiv} By 2007, Denis was considered a devout Muslim.^{xv} A car accident in 2008 represented a defining moment after which he fully embraced Salafism. He started serving as guest speaker at Islam seminars by 2010 and now sang religious fight songs, so-called nasheeds, instead of rap songs.^{xvi} In 2011, Denis co-founded Millatu Ibrahim, an extremist Salafist network; the group was banned a year later for staging violent Salafi demonstrations in Bonn and Solingen.^{xvii} Denis left for Egypt and Syria soon after. Now calling himself Abu Talha al-Almani, Denis frequently posted videos from Syria, encouraging his brothers, "to join the jihad" because "This is freedom! Life is great here. It's fun. Jihad is fun!"^{xviii} According to those who knew him, he was seeking respect, fame, and admiration.^{xix} He "was always searching for something," but most importantly, wanted to "desperately belong," be that to an American street gang, the Kurdish nation, Alevi tradition, or rap culture. He finally found belonging in the Jihadist *ummah*.^{xx} According to U.S. government and media reports, Denis Cuspert was killed by U.S. airstrikes in October 2015.

Burak Karan: The son of Turkish parents, Burak was born and raised in Wuppertal. He was recruited into the German national youth soccer team, where he played together with Kevin Prince Boateng and Sami Khedira who moved on to international soccer fame.^{xxi} According to his coach, Burak was a "calm, disciplined and reliable player, who really wanted to become a soccer professional."^{xxii} He also observed his religious duties when playing for the national team, praying regularly and taking part in fasting during Ramadan.^{xxiii} Other players note that Burak was a fun-loving guy. However, an injury forced Burak to give up soccer as well as any dreams of a professional soccer career at age 20. He played his last soccer game in 2008, and quickly became radicalized afterwards, spending many hours at a mosque in Wuppertal. Among those attending the mosque was a small group which attended a terrorist training camp along the Afghan-Pakistani border in spring 2010. While Burak left together with his

mosque friends, there is conflicting information about whether he actually went to Waziristan.^{xxiv} According to his sister, Burak could not stop talking about jihad once he returned from the training camp. He was also suspected of having ties to Cuspert's Millatu Ibrahim group. His brother Mustafa painted a slightly different picture of Burak, noting that "money and (having a) career were not important things to him. Instead he constantly searched the internet for videos of war zones. He was desperate, and full of compassion for the victims,"^{xxv} identified with their suffering and their political predicament. Burak left for Syria together with his wife and children and died in combat fighting for Al-Qaeda in 2013.

Kreshnik B.: Born in Bad Homburg to Kosovar parents Kreshnik used to play soccer at the Jewish TuS Makkabi sports club in Frankfurt. He completed his *Realschule* diploma (the mid-level secondary school track) and began pursuing his *Gymnasium* high school diploma (the highest of three possible secondary school tracks in Germany) in structural engineering at a vocational school in Frankfurt, in order to attend university at a later point. At the new school, Kreshnik started becoming interested in Islam through his new friends who had long conversations about the conflict in Syria.^{xxvi} According to former classmates, the Middle East conflict was a hot topic between classes, and students were handing out Qurans. Kreshnik became invested in the Syrian conflict, and, as he explained during his trial, wanted to help his "Muslim brothers" fight the oppression and tyranny of the Assad regime.^{xxvii} In summer 2013, Kreshnik stopped coming to school and left for Syria. Together with six of his friends, at least three of them classmates, he took the bus to Turkey and then crossed the border to Syria. While in Syria, Kreshnik kept in touch with his sister. Apart from the action and fun factor, he told her he was determined to fight for the caliphate and sharia, and also hoped to fall as a martyr. "I'm chillin', fighting, doing my job for Allah. I take my Kalashnikov and bismillah."^{xxviii} He also told his sister about combat and his weapons training. In fact, Kreshnik was hoping to make a difference as a sharpshooter, a career arguably more easily obtainable than studying for the high school or college diploma back home in Germany. However, since he was from Europe he was not asked to join the front lines, but mostly put on guard duty. Kreshnik explained to a German court that he did not care which group he would fight for. He ended up joining ISIL, one of only few terrorist groups willing to take unskilled Western men without combat experience, linguistic, or cultural knowledge as Westerners can

still serve as cannon fodder or suicide bombers.^{xxix} However, Kreshnik was unwilling to serve as the latter. After five months in Syria, he returned to Germany, disappointed and disillusioned, and was arrested upon his arrival. Kreshnik became the first German to be convicted of membership in ISIL and was sentenced to three years and nine months in prison.

Philip Bergner: Philip was born and raised in Dinslaken, a blue collar town in North Rhine Westphalia, and converted to Islam in 2009. Growing up, he played soccer for SuS 09 Dinslaken, enjoyed breakdance, but did not obtain his *Hauptschule* diploma, a common secondary school degree (but lowest of three possible tracks) because the school expelled him due to drug dealings. Philip became a drifter, living off welfare and occasional jobs. He committed petty crimes with his gang, and dreamed of becoming a gangster-rapper. By age 16 he was fully addicted to drugs; he was subsequently diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and lived in a half-way house for the mentally ill until he was 19 years old.^{xxx} During this time, he committed various crimes, including larceny, robberies, and battery. His life gained structure and purpose, however, once he made the personal acquaintance of a Salafist preacher, Mustafa Topal, and converted to Islam. He grew a beard, started wearing traditional garb, stopped drinking alcohol and smoking, demanded that his female relatives cover up, and tried converting his mother to Islam. Still living off of welfare, according to his mother he “despised any artisan or technical jobs,” he delivered pizzas and worked in a call center.^{xxxi} Philip became the leader of the so-called Lohberg group (named after their neighborhood in Dinslaken), a circle of about 25 school friends and Salafists who between 2011 and 2013 regularly met for discussion, lectures, and prayer at Topal’s Dinslaken Institute for Education (which, ironically, was located right next to the office of the local Dinslaken commissioner for integration). He got married to a Muslim woman, but the marriage broke apart very soon because Philip’s wife did not follow sharia to his liking. Afterwards, Philip moved in with his aunt for some six months and developed a close friendship with his cousin, Nils Donath. Philip departed for Syria in 2013, together with his Lohberg brigade friends.^{xxxii} Now calling himself Abu Osama, Philip was the first German to be featured in an ISIL video in November 2013. In one of his clips he gloated that “we have everything here: food, beverages. Everything. More and better than in Germany;”^{xxxiii} and men could even marry up to four wives. When Philip suffered a severe injury in early 2014, preventing him from serving in

combat, he signed up for a suicide mission. In summer 2014, he drove a truck bomb into a Kurdish base near Mosul.^{xxxiv}

Nils Donath: Nils was also from Dinslaken. He decided to follow his cousin, Philip Bergner, to Syria in October 2013, where he stayed for a total of 13 months.^{xxxv} He was close to his two-year older cousin and thought of him as a brother. Nils was lazy and below average in school, completing the lowest secondary school track of *Hauptschule*. According to his trial documents, things went south during his teenage years: When Nils was 15, his parents separated, his father moved in with the best friend of his mother, and Nils fathered a daughter with his 16-year-old girlfriend. By now he regularly drank alcohol and consumed drugs, and also dealt with marihuana. He quit his apprenticeship, never held a real job, and became an aimless drifter, not interested in anything, just “partying.” Once his cousin Philip converted to Salafi Islam, Nils also became intrigued by the religion, started reading the Quran and watching online videos. Like his cousin, he changed his lifestyle, converted to Islam in August 2011, found new meaning in life, and joined the radical Salafist circles in Lohberg. The Lohberg group met regularly, for lectures, discussions, video sessions, and, over time, its members were increasingly considering joining Jihad.^{xxxvi} Nils, however, still had to serve an eight month prison sentence for burglary. Upon his release and following cousin Philip’s encouragement, he followed his Lohberg friends to Syria.^{xxxvii} Once in Syria, Nils not only joined the Islamic State but he also served in ISIL’s secret police, a position rarely attained by Western foreigners, participating in arrests and possibly torture and executions. Nils went back to Germany after Philip’s death where he was arrested on terrorist group membership charges in January 2015.^{xxxviii}

David Gaeble: David was born and grew up in Kempten, a small but wealthy town in southern Bavaria. He completed his *Realschule* degree but was not a good student, which may explain why he did not find an apprenticeship right away. His friends note that he seemed lost at this point in life.^{xxxix} David finally opted for a practicum with an electrical engineering company, which ended up offered him an apprenticeship. Around the same time, he converted to Islam, at age 16, and his outlook on life started changing; he told his family he had now found the meaning of life.^{xl} David started spending time with local Muslim families and his

new Muslim friends in Kempten. An avid boxer, he began viewing the sport incompatible with Islam; he continued for a little while longer, but finally quit in August 2013. A few weeks earlier, in July 2013, David also quit his apprenticeship. He changed his name to Abdullah Dawud al Almani, and, according to his family, explained that he “did not belong here, because everybody is different.”^{xli} By now, David slept on the floor, read vast quantities of Salafist literature, poured over the lectures of Salafist hate preachers, and studied Arabic whenever possible. He also started an internet platform for radical Salafist videos and often traveled to Dinslaken, where he spent time together with Philip Bergner and other Salafists, especially after he was no longer welcome in the moderate mosque of Kempten. In Dinslaken, he became close to Mustafa Topal, a drug dealer-turned-Salafi preacher and recruiter, who encouraged plans to go to Syria. However, David and a friend from Kempten were stopped at Munich airport on route to Turkey - David’s name was on a no-travel list after his parents had contacted police in an effort to prevent him from going to Syria. Determined to make his way to Syria, David opted to take the train instead, two weeks later, together with his best friend Mustafa. In an email to his family David later commented on the delicious banana cocktails he enjoyed for very little money as well as his possible move into a luxury mansion.^{xlii} He was 19 when he died fighting in Syria in 2014.^{xliii}

Robert Baum: Robert left for Egypt and Syria in fall 2012, together with his best friend, Christian Emde. He was from the small town of Solingen, where his father died of cancer shortly before Robert’s thirteenth birthday. Robert went on to complete *Hauptschule* and joined the German military when he was 17, but was discharged for disseminating right-wing extremist propaganda. He had wanted to join the German troops in Afghanistan and take part in the combat mission, however, he ended up doing administrative work and got bored, spreading Nazi propaganda on the internet and in his barracks room. He went back to school and completed his mid-level secondary school degree (*Realschule* diploma). Afterwards, Robert started an apprenticeship in logistics, but his company did not keep him on once he completed his training because he was considered unreliable and difficult. By now, Robert had converted to Islam; reportedly he first became interested in the religion through an information flier.^{xliv} Robert changed his name to Abdul Hakim, repeatedly went to Egypt to learn Arabic, and spent all his time at a small mosque in downtown Solingen which was

regularly frequented by some of Germany's most prominent Salafist preachers (for example, Abou Nagie and Pierre Vogel), as well as Christian Emde. He also changed his physical appearance, wearing traditional garb, avoiding alcohol and pork. Due to these changes, and because he demanded his mother cover up and wear a veil, he moved out from home and into an apartment. When Robert and his new friend and fellow convert, Christian, traveled to the UK in July 2011, British customs officials discovered files on how "build a bomb in your Mom's kitchen" and "39 Ways to Support Jihad" on their hard drives. They were arrested, prosecuted, and spent six months at Belmarsh prison, even sharing a cell at times. While in Belmarsh, they regularly participated and engaged in Islam courses, Quran studies, and Friday prayer sessions, and also bonded with British Jihadi inmates.^{xliv} Back in Germany, they visited known Salafist hate preachers and also joined Cuspert's Millatu Ibrahim. Uthman al-Almani, as he became known in Syria, died as the first German Muslim convert suicide bomber on the Syrian battlefield in early 2014, at age 26.^{xlvi} Christian Emde continues to serve ISIL in Mosul.

Harun Pashtoon: Harun's parents were from Afghanistan, but he was born and raised in the wealthy city of Munich. Based on his testimony, Harun had a bad relationship with his father, who was very religious and often beat him. Harun also engaged in self-mutilation, "to relieve pressure," cutting his arms so they required stitches.^{xlvi} Until his late teens he led an otherwise normal social life, drinking alcohol, going to bars and dance clubs. He managed to obtain the *Hauptschule* diploma, but did not complete any of the three apprenticeships he started after school. He was fired from two of them due to tardiness and quit one of them because he found it to be too much work.^{xlvi} When Harun and his Turkish girlfriend lost their baby daughter shortly after it was born in 2008, Harun started having serious anger issues and spent time in prison on battery charges. According to court documents, Harun became very religious in 2012 and radicalized by spring 2013: He openly called for violent jihad and threatened to decapitate the non-believers. Six months later he left for Syria, at age 25. Like most Western fighters, Harun received weapons and martial arts training, in addition to a few Arabic lessons.^{xlvi} However, he soon grew bored with camp routines and could not wait to join combat, because "there is real action." Life in Syria did turn out as expected, however, and Harun spent his time mostly "bored to death;"¹ he eventually decided to return to Germany.

There he was arrested upon his arrival and subsequently convicted on murder charges, with a prison sentence of eleven years.

Rachid Benamar: The German-Moroccan held dual citizenship, but was born and lived in Frankfurt. He was raised Muslim, attending mosque regularly and fasting during Ramadan. Rachid also went to parties, drank alcohol, and led a Western lifestyle. He loved playing soccer, but had to give up any serious soccer ambitions when he suffered a severe injury in early 2008, forcing him to take a break of 18 months.^{li} After obtaining his *Abitur* (the highest of all secondary school diplomas) Rachid went to university in Wiesbaden, majoring in environmental engineering with a focus on renewable energies. At the university he mostly hung out with Turks and Arabs, however, his older brother, Hafid Benamar, a committed Salafist, appeared to have played the most instrumental role in Rachid's radicalization.^{lii} Beginning in 2011, Rachid grew a beard, changed his behavior toward women and his soccer teammates, and started wearing traditional garb. He moved in with his older brother and Salafist sister-in-law at the end of 2012, and their relationship was considered close. Through his brother, Rachid met prominent Salafi preachers and took part in their events and seminars; he also started frequenting Salafist mosques. Both brothers left for Egypt in 2013.^{liii} From Egypt they traveled to Syria via Turkey in 2014 and joined ISIL. Rachid was featured in an ISIL propaganda video on "al-Furqan," where he talked (in broken Arabic mixed with German) about his dream of dying as a martyr. He obtained an opportunity to do just that when the sickly Rachid, who already suffered from various illnesses due to the rough climate along the Syrian-Iraqi border, also injured his foot.^{liv} The 27-year old died driving a truck bomb into a building on an Iraqi army base in Ramadi in August 2014.

Ahmet Cetinkaya: The 21-year old detonated a suicide bomb at a checkpoint in the Iraqi capital of Bagdad in July 2014, killing 54 people. Born in Witten to Turkish parents, he grew up in the small town of Ennepetal located in North Rhine Westphalia where his father ran a falafel restaurant. Ahmet obtained German citizenship when he was 20 years old and was a dual citizen of Turkey and Germany. While he was raised Muslim by his parents, he did not speak Arabic.^{lv} When his parents separated, Ahmet lived with his mother and took care of his little sister. Ahmet played soccer, led a Western life going to the boxing gym and dance clubs,

drinking alcohol, and dating women. According to his former soccer team mates, he cared a lot about the club camaraderie and his own standing within the group.^{lvi} He also spent much time with his close friend Tahir Guendogan, whom he met in elementary school. However, he was never able to succeed much in secondary school and, after dropping out of *Realschule*, only obtained a *Hauptschule* diploma. He went back to *Gymnasium* in pursuit of his *Abitur*, but was expelled from school after hitting a teacher. Ahmet switched to a trade school but had to leave it due to poor grades. He enrolled in a vocational preparatory course at a community college, but dropped out after only six months. During this time, he repeatedly engaged in violent behavior and received two sentences for assault and battery. He also started taking an interest in online Jihadi propaganda and became radicalized within months. Noticeable changes in 2014 included growing a beard, participating in extremist Salafist events, attending radical mosques, wearing traditional garb, abstaining from alcohol and partying, issuing religious and political statements on facebook, and refusing to work at his father's falafel shop which he did not deem halal.^{lvii} His social network changed, too, as he sought out known Salafist leaders and contacts, such as the father of his long-time friend Tahir Guendogan. In June 2014 he left Germany together with a friend and made his way to Syria. Only six weeks later he carried out a suicide attack.

Sofian Khebbache: Born to a German mother who converted to Islam when she got married to his Algerian father. Sofian was raised religious to learn the culture, language, and faith of his father, but “prayed more than people his age,” and “took that very seriously.”^{lviii} Sofian was born in Wolfsburg where his parents were employed at the Volkswagen headquarters. His parents separated when Sofian was 19. Growing up, he committed petty crimes (larceny and burglaries) together with his two childhood friends, the Taieb brothers, because he was “bored,” spending one month in a youth penitentiary. Sofian went to elementary school with Mohamed Taieb and would remain close to the brothers throughout his teens, also living with them at times. After his prison experience he turned his life around, mostly in response to his father's disappointment. In Braunschweig he completed an apprenticeship as a salesman and continued working in this capacity. When he was offered a permanent position, however, he did not take it, much to the consternation of his mother. He last worked as a trainer at a high rope course. Sofian also had two-long term relationships with girls. According to an internal

government report, his radicalization was greatly influenced by the Taieb brothers, both of whom are known radical Salafists, and started as early as 2005 when he attended an Islam seminar with a known Salafist preacher, and was considered radicalized by 2008. He finally was recruited for Jihad in Syria by Yassin Oussaifi at the Wolfsburg Ditib-mosque in 2014, where he also found a new social network. However, in contrast to others he never changed his appearance.^{lix} He left for Syria in late May 2014, together with Ebrahim B. and Ayoub B. While in Syria, he initiated facebook and whatsapp contact with his sister and mother. Because his sister was too critical of his endeavors he stopped communicating with her, but maintained regular contact with this mother, sending her pictures of Kinder-chocolates and Pepsi soda available to ISIL fighters.^{lx} Sofian died in a suicide attack in Iraq, on a bridge in Ramadi, the first week of August 2014.

Ebrahim B.: He was born in Wolfsburg, Lower Saxony, to Tunisian parents, but his mother soon decided to return to her northern African home, together with Ebrahim and his siblings. Ebrahim returned to Germany in his teens, completed his *Hauptschule* diploma in Wolfsburg, followed by an apprenticeship in massage-therapy. He had “practically nothing to do with religion,” rarely attended mosque, but led the typical teenage life - smoking, drinking alcohol, going to parties, and dating girls.^{lxi} He also became a member of the Social Democratic party. When his relationship with his girlfriend was on rocky terms because her parents did not approve of Ebrahim, he made the acquaintance of a Salafi preacher. *Inter alia*, this preacher promised that joining ISIL in Syria would allow him to get married to four women and drive expensive cars. Ebrahim started growing a beard and enjoyed belonging to a group of fellow-minded men; he left together with two of them, Ayoub B. and Sofian Khebbache, in May 2014, when he took a flight from Hanover to Turkey, and then crossed the border to Syria. Once he joined ISIL, he decided to sign up for their suicide bomber cadre, but eventually changed his mind. After three months in Syria, Ebrahim returned to Germany where he was arrested in November 2014. He was convicted of membership in a terrorist group and currently serves a three-year prison sentence.

Ayoub B.: Together with Ebrahim B. and Sofian Khebbache, Ayoub left for Syria in late May 2014. He was also born in Wolfsburg and, like Ebrahim, of Tunisian heritage; Ayoub’s father

served as vice chairman of the German-Tunisian integration association. He was not religious growing up, played soccer, but did not do well in school, barely finishing his *Realschule* diploma. He did not start an apprenticeship after school and struggled to find a job, took drugs, gambled, and had a falling out with his parents. While receiving treatment for his drug and alcohol addiction, Ayoub made the acquaintance of a Salafi preacher. He quickly became more interested in radical Islam once he met Yassin Oussaifi and became his confidant, gaining respect and status.^{lxii} His parents, concerned about his changes, contacted the police. Ayoub B. worked at the Volkswagen factory at the time and reportedly had his first contact with Islamic extremists at work. While he had planned on taking vacation in August to go to Tunisia and get married, Ayoub changed his mind in April 2014 and submitted his vacation slip early, leaving for Syria instead.^{lxiii} He stayed there until August when he escaped from his military training camp in northern Syria and returned to Germany. Ayoub was arrested in January 2015, subsequently tried, and received a four-year sentence for joining a terrorist group.

Harry S.: Harry did not experience the proverbial happy childhood. His Christian parents emigrated from Ghana to Germany, but separated once they settled in a blue-collar neighborhood of Bremen, a large city in Northern Germany. His American stepfather was arrested by German police when Harry was four years old. The biological father rejoined the family but regularly beat the children. Harry's mom worked late hours. His older stepbrother was shot to death when Harry was a teenager. Despite all of this, Harry still managed to qualify for *Gymnasium* (the highest school track), where he received good grades. Harry did not care much for school, however, since he wanted to become a professional soccer player; he played pick-up games with neighborhood friends every day but eventually started falling in with the wrong crowd. He committed his first crime at age 12 and was quickly involved in burglaries, car thefts, and drug trafficking. Desperate for him to change, his mother enrolled him at a prestigious private school in Bremen. Harry soon dropped out of school, looking for easy money and eager to lead the gangster life together with his criminal friends. In an effort to save him from more prison time, his mother decided to move to London. Once in London, Harry made an attempt to turn his life around and enrolled in college. The family had less money than in Germany though, and struggled to make ends meet. While homesick for his

Bremen gang, Harry stayed for his mom. She also convinced him to switch to a technical college, where he met his first Muslim friends. Fascinated with the religion he converted to Islam soon after, a decision that led to serious conflict with his mother, a devout Christian. Harry ended up living with his British Salafist friends, studying the Quran and learning Arabic. He eventually decided to reconnect with friends in Bremen and returned to Germany. Once in Bremen, he returned to his criminal ways, but also became more radicalized. As a regular at the Groepeling Masjidu-Furqan mosque he became close friends with fellow Salafist convert, Adnan S. At the end of 2013, Harry served another prison sentence for robbery. According to German security services, he likely developed and hardened his Jihadist convictions while talking to a fellow inmate known for spreading al-Qaeda propaganda and foreign fighter recruitment. After his release from prison, Harry left for Syria in April 2014, together with Adnan.^{lxiv} In Syria, he underwent weapons training, participated in combat, but also participated in the filming of an ISIL propaganda movie designed to recruit German foreign fighters and encourage terrorist attacks in Germany.^{lxv} In July 2015 Harry returned to Germany and was arrested at Bremen airport. He is accused of membership in a terrorist organization and murder and currently awaiting trial.

What *Friction* mechanisms are at play?

Five mechanisms can be identified, some more prevalent than others:

	Group Grievances	Slippery Slope	Risk & Status	Unfreezing	Group Polarization
Denis Cuspert**			X	X	
Burak Karan**	X	X			
Kreshnik B.	X		X	X	X
Philip Bergner*				X	X
Nils Donath				X	X
David Gaeble**					X
Robert Baum*				X	X
Harun Pashtoon			X	X	
Rachid Benamar*				X	X
Ahmet Cetinkaya*			X	X	X
Sofian Khebbache*			X		X
Ebrahim B.			X		X
Ayoub B.			X	X	X
Harry S.				X	X

* died in suicide attack

**died in combat

Group Grievances & Slippery Slope: When individuals start caring about a group or cause that appears to be threatened by others, their group grievances may push them toward violence.^{lxvi} Burak Karan appears to fall in this category; according to his brother, Burak “searched the internet constantly for videos of war zones. He was desperate, full of compassion for the victims.” He may have started embracing violent jihad at an Al-Qaeda training camp in Pakistan, but eventually found his cause in response to political events in the Middle East. When the Syrian civil war started in 2011 Burak became consumed with the conflict and began identifying with Syrian victims. He may also be considered an example of the slippery slope phenomenon, feeling so strongly for a political cause that he eventually radicalized over it. In any case, Burak gradually became more committed to the cause. He eventually left for the Turkish-Syrian border, supposedly to deliver food, drugs, and other donations to Syrians. According to others he left to join Al Qaeda until he was killed in a bomb attack, with his Al-Qaeda commanders praising him because “he fought like a lion.” However, in this context it is also worth noting that Burak’s brother, Mustafa, did not believe in the militant portraits of his brother and went to Syria in search of Burak’s supposed involvement in humanitarian projects. Kreshnik B. also started caring about the conflict in Syria and Syrians being threatened by the Assad regime, which was a constant topic among Kreshnik and his classmates at school.

Risk & Status: At least four of the German fighters must be considered thrill seekers and risk takers: Denis Cuspert, Harun Pashtoon, Kreshnik B., and Sofian Khebbache were looking for adventure and fun when arriving in Syria. At the same time, they also sought increased status, prestige, and social standing. None of them did well in school; none of them were interested in taking traditional educational routes in Germany and instead wanted to make a name for themselves as fighters and sharpshooters in Syria. Sofian Khebbache, already engaged in petty crimes throughout his teenage life because he was bored and looking for excitement (already working as a high rope trainer before his departure), was also drawn to action in Syria. Ahmet Cetinkaya did try various conventional educational routes. However, he did not have enough discipline and smarts to go beyond a *Hauptschule* diploma and became interested in obtaining status through other means. Ebrahim B. also falls into the status category; the learned massage therapist was rejected by his girlfriend’s parents and

subsequently lured by tales of fancy cars and polygamy. By a similar token, Ayoub B. gained status and respect from others through his close relationship with Yassin Oussaifi, who convinced him to go to Syria. In addition, Denis, Harun, Ahmet, and Sofian had violent pasts and/or spent time in prison. McCauley and Moskalenko illustrate how men are naturally inclined to seek status and risk-taking; young males with troubled backgrounds like Denis and Harun turn to violence in order to gain status among peers. As they had neither money nor good jobs to impress women, who are naturally looking for providers and protectors, their ranking among male peers is an important indicator of their success. Violence, risk-taking, and militant Jihad thus serve as opportunities to climb the social ladder and find a place in society.

Unfreezing: When individuals experience a crisis in life that leads to loss or unfreezing of social attachments and everyday commitments (because of the loss of a loved one or relocation to a new, foreign environment) they become open to new relationships (man is a social animal and wants to belong and therefore forms ties with new friends), and thereby new ideas and identities. Several of the fighters experienced such shocks in their personal lives: Robert Baum and Harun Pashtoon lost their father and daughter, respectively. While Robert did not embrace violent Jihad immediately, the loss of a father figure in his life contributed to a sense of confusion and extremist behavior in support of Nazi propaganda. A dishonorable discharge from the army was a second disconnect he suffered. The loss of his job represented the final straw which he coped with by converting to violent Salafism. Harun appears to have suffered a serious trauma through the death of his daughter; trial documents include a picture of his daughter's name Ilara "written" in brass bullet casings.^{lxvii} According to a recording of his last will, he determined that his money should be used to take care of his daughter's grave site at a Munich cemetery.^{lxviii} Ahmet Cetinkaya's recurrent educational failures pushed him to the breaking point, both physically and emotionally; he became violent and available for violent Salafist ideology. Burak Karan's life was dominated by soccer until he forced to quit, likely due to an injury he suffered, leaving a massive hole he sought to fill with radical Islam. Similarly, Rachid Benamar suffered a traumatic soccer injury which took 18 months to heal. Trying to fit in with new circle of classmates, Kreshnik B. fell in with a new radical crowd after switching to his vocational school. Harry became unfrozen when his mother decided to

move the family to London; his (criminal) social ties were cut off and he felt lonely in London - until he met new Muslim friends and converted to Islam. Once he returned to Germany, he sought out the Salafist community and gradually became radicalized. Ayoub B. was at his most vulnerable while receiving treatment for drug addiction when he met his radical Salafist preacher and new mentor, Yassin Oussaifi at the Wolfsburg Ditib-mosque. Philip Bergner also was at the lowest point of his life while being treated for drug addiction and schizophrenia, and therefore easy prey for the Jihadist network around Mustafa Topal, promising new structures and ideas. While there is overlap with the group polarization mechanism (see below), prison experiences arguably represent a drastic break with everyday routines and social networks. Denis Cuspert and Nils Donath spent time in prison, where, at the very least, they became more religious and converted to Islam. Baum and Emde were able to harden their radical views while sharing a cell and talking and praying with their Jihadi inmates in Britain. Similarly, Harry S. also appears to have been influenced by fellow inmate and Al-Qaeda propagandist.

Most of the foreign fighters were first-generation immigrants, including Burak (Turkish), Harun (Afghan), Kreshnik (Kosovar), Rachid (Morrocan) and Harry (Ghanese). According to *Friction*, they may have experienced a feeling of disconnection due to discrimination based on their foreign origin - first and second generation immigrants are between a rock and a hard place because they do not belong to their parent's country but are also not fully accepted in the country they were born in. "So they drop out, join gangs, get involved in petty crime and drugs and then sometimes turn to radical Islam as the explanation of their plight."^{lxix} The latter argument does not seem to gain much traction in the case of Burak, Kreshnik, or Rachid, as Burak played in the German national youth soccer team and Kreshnik pursued a high school diploma and university degree. Rachid not only completed the highest high school track of *Gymnasium* but went on to study at the university. It is also difficult to make in Harun's case, as he completed the quite common *Hauptschule* diploma and was offered three different apprenticeships. However, it could be argued that the death of his daughter brought a sense of frustration and disconnect because Harun did not know how to bury the daughter according to Islamic rituals.^{lxx} The alienation-discrimination connection does seem to have mattered in the case of Harry S., though, who complained about racism throughout his school career and eventually dropped out of both public and private schools to

pursue a criminal career. While other factors were at play as well, feelings of alienation based on discrimination appear to have played a role in Denis Cuspert's case, too, who addressed racism in his rap songs. In any case, he seemed desperate to belong and become part of a group, activity, or cause. David Gaeble was also looking to belong; he found the meaning of life once he joined the global *ummah*.

When the German foreign fighters actually decided to leave for Syria, they did not travel alone, but rather in the company of their new social "support groups:" Philip Bergner led his Lohberg group and was soon followed by his cousin Nils Donath, who could not join the original wave because he was still in prison; the Wolfsburg group included Ebrahim B., Ayoub B., and Sofian Khebbache. Likewise, Kreshnik B. left amidst his new group of friends; Robert Baum together with his best friend, Christian Emde; Harry S. with his close friend, Adnan S.; Burak Karan with his spouse and children; Rachid Benamar with his brother; Ahmed Cetinkaya with a friend; and David Gaeble with his best friend Mustafa Topal.

Group Polarization: Philip Bergner's Lohberg group meetings represent an excellent example of group polarization. The latter occurs when discussions among likeminded people (e.g. Salafists) influence individual group members to take on a more radical, extremist view, regardless of their initial opinions. Nils Donath and David Gaeble also joined that circle, the latter making regular trips from Kempten to Dinslaken. Similarly, Kreshnik B. became radicalized through a new circle of friends and long discussions in the school yard. Ebrahim B., Ayoub B., and Sofian Khebbache were not only friends but belonged to the Wolfsburg group around recruiting preacher Yassin Oussaifi. At the same time, family members and ties (those to a cousin and brother) played the most significant role in the radicalization of Nils Donath and Rachid Benamar. Ahmet Cetinkaya sought Salafist contacts and found an important mentor in the father of his best friend whom he had known since elementary school. The extremist Salafi Millatu Ibrahim network, before it was banned in 2012, became a similar focus of group interactions and discussions for Denis Cuspert, Burak Karan, Robert Baum, and Christian Emde. Baum and Emde formed the smallest of groups, but the two friends arguably became more polarized when exchanging thoughts and ideas while experiencing radicalization, prison time in Great Britain, as well as their departure for Syria together. Similarly, Harry S. formed a close association with fellow convert Adnan S. Prisons are a

typical setting of group polarization, as inmates participate in so-called prison universities: They have unlimited time to discuss and compare best practices and lessons, thoughts and ideas, intensify their commitment to a certain cause, as well as network and form new ties. Both Denis Cuspert, Nils Donath, Harry S., Robert Baum, and Christian Emde intensified their extremist beliefs or converted to violent Salafism while in prison.

Countermeasures & Conclusion

Statistics of German foreign fighters suggest that group dynamics and association matter for radicalization processes; few Germans end up traveling to Syria and Iraq alone. The motivations for travel are manifold, ranging from wanting to join jihad, engage in combat, offer humanitarian assistance, get married, to living in a caliphate. Additional determinations can be made when applying the *Friction* framework to more detailed case studies (even if the cases only represent a small fraction of German fighters). Unfreezing and group polarization were by far the two most common mechanisms, followed by adventure and status (and possible cases of group grievances and/or slippery slope). The majority of German fighters analyzed above became radicalized having experienced a shocking event, loss, or disconnect in their lives, so much so that they became open to new, radical influences, and group ties. Group association played a prominent role as well, as radicalization occurred and intensified in personal interactions with fellow “radicals.” Last but not least, joining the battle in Syria and Iraq promised action, fun, and prestige for those who had little to lose, been looking for a shortcut to success, and were no strangers to violence in the first place.

What do these cases tell us about existing countermeasures and programs, designed to prevent radicalization in the first place or deradicalize those who have started to embrace violent ideas and/or actions? What else could have been done to stop German foreign fighters from leaving Germany?

German authorities rely on both “soft” assistance and “hard” security measures when it comes to preventing and countering violent radicalization and dealing with emerging and returning foreign fighters. On the security side, German authorities have opted to confiscate passports to make it harder for potential departees to travel or mark their German identity cards so they become invalid outside of Germany (travel within the European Union and

neighboring states like Egypt and Turkey is possible using the ID card). These administrative measures have not been applied consistently though; at least fifteen individuals left for Syria in 2013 and 2014 as part of “Wolfsburg wave,” and even though multiple parents contacted law enforcement services in a desperate attempt to prevent their children from leaving.^{lxxi} Not surprisingly, the German government reported that only few departures, “in the low double digits,” could be prevented by early 2014.^{lxxii} However, as David Gaeble’s case illustrates, radicalized individuals determined to leave will not be deterred by these measures. David ended up traveling to Syria using fake travel documents. Putting individuals suspected of wanting to leave for Syria and/or Iraq or commit violent crimes upon their return under surveillance serves as another option - however, apart from those looking to travel to Syria, the German Federal Criminal Police Office estimates that there are currently 420 potentially dangerous Islamists living in Germany and more than 200 fighters have already returned from Syria (almost one third of those who have left since the beginning of the Syrian conflict),^{lxxiii} putting considerable strains on security services. Surveillance also did not work in David’s case, whose family alerted law enforcement and domestic intelligence services to his radicalization and possible departure. Even though David’s phone was tapped and his general whereabouts monitored, German authorities did not manage to stop him from leaving Germany.

Returning fighters have been tried and convicted for membership in ISIL or committing crimes while in Syria and Iraq. These prosecutions may help deter some from going in the first place. The German media has covered these trials and as much of the fighters’ backgrounds, radicalization stories, and Syria/Iraq experiences as is available, thereby contributing to the building of a counternarrative in selected cases (if only indirectly): Some of the fighters arguably returned because they did not find the adventure, status, and fulfillment they were looking for; several talked about being disappointed with their foreign fighter experience. For the first time, one of the returned fighters, Ibrahim B., was willing to share his story of disillusionment in a nationally televised interview as well as various other media outlets.^{lxxiv} While a good argument can be made that he may have been interested in a reduced prison sentence, Ibrahim’s story also feeds into a powerful counternarrative urgently needed to counter Jihadist propaganda and prevent other young people from wanting to join the Jihad and the Islamic State caliphate. The reduced sentences that have been applied in

various foreign fighter cases also indicate a willingness on behalf of the German government to distinguish between die-hard Jihadists and those who have become disillusioned or even traumatized due to their experiences in Syria. This, in turn, represents an effort to rehabilitate those who “made a mistake,” allow for the reformed and deradicalized ones to re-take a place in society, and steer against new prison radicalization, as well as the creation of new martyrs.

In terms of “soft” approaches to foreign fighter dilemmas, parents, siblings, relatives, and friends are considered invaluable for constructing positive alternatives to violent extremism, for building community bonds, and for countering growing ties to the Jihadi milieu; usually, they are also the first to notice radicalization symptoms. At least ten of the fourteen Germans profiled in this analysis showed noticeable changes in behavior and physical appearance. According to the aforementioned German intelligence report on foreign fighters, at least half of all German departees surveyed changed their appearance and one third their behavior.^{lxxv} Families and friends can seek help by means of the BAMF (Federal Office for Migration and Refugee Affairs) counseling network that funds NGOs in four German cities and surrounding regions, including Bremen, Berlin, Stuttgart, and Bochum. The Hayat Counseling Center in Berlin, run by the *ZDK Gesellschaft Demokratische Kultur*, is the most prominent of the centers due to its long-time experience with exit-assistance programs for right-wing extremists. Since January 2012, this public-private partnership thus provides nation-wide assistance to families of radicalized individuals. Families in need can call the BAMF Counseling Center Radicalization for advice, and the cases are then referred to the respective local NGO which engages in professional counseling, mentoring, and targeted family-assisted interventions. The various centers provide practical, emotional, and ideological assistance for families, help break with old routines, offer counternarratives, and also psychological support for those in need.^{lxxvi} In many ways, this family counseling network represents the core of German deradicalization efforts. It is in high demand, illustrating that, if nothing else, it has been successful in reaching a large target group of affected families. Specifically, since 2012, the nationwide BAMF hotline has received more than 4,000 calls, resulting in more than 1,500 counseling cases. In fact, it effectively replaced a formal exit-program for radicalized individuals, which was run by the domestic intelligence service until September 2014 and did not gain much traction. In addition to families, relatives, and friends, other potential gatekeepers include teachers, social workers, sports coaches, and

apprenticeship trainers, who need to be better educated about radicalization symptoms and how to counter them, as many of those who become radicalized are young and lead “normal” lives playing soccer, going to school, or completing apprenticeships.^{lxxvii}

The BAMF counseling center was not able to provide much help in the case of David Gaeble whose family contacted the hotline in early 2014, only to receive an information brochure on radicalization.^{lxxviii} In fact, the overall effectiveness of existing programs is far from clear and has yet to be assessed or measured. In addition, Germany’s sixteen states offer various different programs that range from awareness outreach in public schools, vocational training and job placement services, to exit-programs for individuals wanting to leave the Jihadist circles. Likewise, it is not clear how much these initiatives have succeeded in preventing violent radicalization and recidivism, or permanently changed violent behavior and/or ideologies. Despite the existence of the nationwide family counseling network and various other state initiatives, the number of German Syria and Iraq departees continues to rise.

Endnotes

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- ⁱⁱ The last name of criminal defendants and convicts is often withheld from the public due to German privacy laws.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Alan Travis, "MI5 Report Challenges Views on Terrorism in Britain," *Guardian*, August 20, 2008; Faiza Patel, "Rethinking Radicalization," Brennan Center for Justice (2011), 8-9.
- ^{iv} Daalgard Nielsen, "Studying Violent Radicalization in Europe II," Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Working Paper no. 2008/3, especially 12-13. Jerrold Post, "Terrorist Psycho-Logic: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Psychological Forces," in *Origins of Terrorism*, ed. Walter Reich (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1998).
- ^v Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (August 16, 2010). See also Daalgard Nielsen, "Studying Violent Radicalization in Europe I," Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Working Paper no. 2008/2, 9. Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Introduction: Islamic Activism and Social Movement Theory," in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Q. Wiktorowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004) and Mark Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Edwin Bakker, *Jihadi Terrorists in Europe* (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, 2007).
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- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, 145-189.
- ^x Analyse der den deutschen Sicherheitsbehörden vorliegenden Informationen über die Radikalisierungshintergründe und -verläufe der Personen, die aus islamistischen Motiven aus Deutschland in Richtung Syrien ausgereist sind," December 12, 2014, 4. Hereafter referred to as Foreign Fighter Analysis.
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- ^{xii} Foreign Fighter Analysis, 23.
- ^{xiii} Foreign Fighter Analysis, 31-32.
- ^{xiv} Mehmet Ata, "Der Teufel reitet uns, Bruder," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, November 30, 2014.
- ^{xv} Berliner Verfassungsschutz, "Denis Cuspert - eine jihadistische Karriere," Lageanalyse, September 2014, 9.
- ^{xvi} Ata, "Teufel."
- ^{xvii} Florian Flade and Martin Lutz, "Das unheimliche Netz der Salafisten," *Die Welt*, June 6, 2012.
- ^{xviii} Lothar Gorris, Elke Schmitter, Romain Leick, and Oezlem Gezer, "Bruder, Kaempfer, Dschihadist," *Spiegel*, November 17, 2014.
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*
- ^{xx} Karen Krueger, "In Allah's Gang," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, October 27, 2013.
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