

Mum, I'm Fighting for Allah Now

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Articles & Testimony

A detailed look at how European youths are being transformed into jihadists, and how families, teachers, social workers, and religious leaders can work together to stem the problem.

Around 200 young people from Germany have joined the civil war in Syria, but there are thousands more who dream of going down in history as Muslim heroes. "I don't recognize my son anymore. I don't know how else I can help apart from breaking off contact with him," says Mathilde M. on the telephone, sobbing. Her son has become a radical Islamist. He has discarded his German name, and from now on will only answer to a new name of his choosing. In search of help, Mathilde M. has called the Centre for Democratic Culture's (ZDK) Berlin helpline, "Hayat."

Organizations like ZDK are encountering an increasing number of cases like this. It is usually the mothers who call; the fathers have often been absent in these families for a long time. Most stories begin in a similar way to that of Mathilde M.'s son. There is a new friend on the scene who invites the boy to come along to the mosque. They listen to presentations about Islam, and soon enough they are praying together. Old friends are written off. Jeans, t-shirts, and baseball caps are swapped for cotton trousers, a long robe, and a small crocheted cap. Music and alcohol are taboo. He no longer shakes hands with his aunt or female cousin. That's haram, he says, unclean. He has also stopped eating together with the family -- he says the same pans have been used to cook pork. There are arguments. The mother finds her son's new way of life threatening, and the son no longer agrees with the Western lifestyle of his mother and siblings.

These stories, which might sound foreign to the majority of society, are actually all very similar. The parents are unable to cope, and are often deeply hurt to have been rejected in this way. And, of course, they are also concerned for their children. Some parents break off contact; others make desperate attempts to get their children back.

Yet it is often the case that the child has been unhappy and frustrated for years, and in search of some kind of meaning in his or her life. Such children have felt estranged from their families for a long time, but the parents have only just begun to notice this estrangement. From the Islamists, the son, or occasionally the daughter, gets

something that he or she has never had from parents, school, or society: attention and recognition. The parents cannot dispute this.

Even so, advisers tell parents to stay in contact with their child. They first encourage parents to determine whether it is a harmless case of their child changing beliefs, or whether radicalized tendencies are behind the behavior. Before they can confront their son or daughter with critical questions, the parents first have to re-establish a sense of trust and an emotional connection. They have to be very patient; they should avoid confrontation on the one hand, but maintain a firm stance on the other. They have to learn to pose open questions, without imposing anything on their child. Ideally, this is done with the help of advice and support from psychologists, social workers, or other professionals in the field.

CONSERVATIVE MUSLIM PARENTS OFTEN RECOGNISE THE SIGNS TOO LATE

Muslim parents call the helpline, too. The difference is that the traditional, conservative families often get in touch with us only when their child has become completely estranged from the family, and they are practicing their faith not only dogmatically, but also in an extremely politicized way. These conservative Muslim families often respond to early indications that their child's religiousness is getting out of hand with approval and a sense of pride. Their son is adhering to Muslim dietary requirements; their daughter is not only wearing a veil, she is also covering her entire body: "What exemplary children we have!"

Yet the parents are embarrassed, and attempt to solve the problem within the family, or, at most, they place their trust in their Imam. Sometimes this helps for a while, but in many cases it can also be counter-productive since many imams rely too much on the power of their religious authority, and thereby ignore the young people's completely ordinary desires.

In the worst cases, radicalized young people travel to training camps run by radical Islamists in North Africa, Pakistan, or Afghanistan. According to German security authorities, already over 200 so-called "foreign fighters" from Germany have gone to Syria to join the civil war. Eight of these people are reported to have died there. How has the situation escalated in this way? Why would young people from Germany want to swap the luxury of safety and prosperity for the brutality of war?

The advertising campaign is sophisticated, refined, and precise. It is usually online that young people first come into contact with Islamist pro-war propaganda. They see disturbing videos in which defenseless children are massacred, or in which they speak of witnessing the murder of their entire families. Through this sort of propaganda, the whole conflict is reduced to a battle of unbelievers against Muslims. The young person's sense of justice makes them highly susceptible to this message; as a good Muslim, they must fight against "evil," and for a more just world. Such propaganda works exclusively in terms of black and white: there are only victims and enemies.

Emotionally charged content appeals particularly to young people who have experienced violence or injustice themselves. As Muslims, they identify with the role of the innocent victim that is presented to them; they become hopeful because, in Islamist circles, they will no longer have to struggle "alone against all the evil of this world." This, together with a tendency toward violence or a low frustration tolerance, makes certain young people easy targets for the so-called Holy War.

Offline, it then comes to encounters with Islamist preachers who pass themselves off as, say, social workers. The preachers speak of the civil war in Syria as a showdown between Muslims and disbelievers -- a kind of Armageddon that will result in a new world order. With this apocalyptic or redemptive kind of "endgame," the young people are promised front row seats. "You may be present when the guilty fall."

THE DEBATE ABOUT RADICALIZATION NEEDS TO TAKE PLACE IN SCHOOLS

Through the radicalization process, school dropouts, the unemployed, and those without any future prospects fantasize about being people who can make history. Finally, they get the recognition they otherwise lack as educationally deprived or socially excluded immigrants, or as Germans who are or feel excluded from the system.

They long even for death, which they connect to mystical visions, since martyrdom brings with it eternal life in paradise, with 72 virgins and access to everything that they might never have in this life. The ideology works like a drug, which explains why they find it so easy to abstain from alcohol, sexual relations, and other pleasures.

It is an ideology that is also promoted by a part of the Muslim milieu that does not identify outright with radical Islamism, but that often expresses, indirectly, a certain respect for it. The war crimes and bombings in Syria are romanticized as "adventures" not only in numerous internet videos, but also in the sermons of certain imams who are not Islamists themselves. The image of a global fight against "the Muslims" is also cultivated by some Muslim organizations. Yes, there might be general assertions against radicalization or armed violence. But in order to really fight against extremism, the organizations need to do more than refuse Salafi preachers entry into their mosques. The important thing is to actively confront Salafi ideals, thereby assessing one's own views, and include the young people in this process.

200 disillusioned jihadis from Germany have taken up arms abroad. That number might not seem so high. But alongside these people, there are several thousand more young people who dream of taking a similar path. For this reason, the debate about radicalization must take place in society as a whole. It should not just be something that is addressed in relation to security concerns or integration issues -- this "you-vs.-us" discourse, together with the young person's lack of prospects, is a breeding ground for Islamists.

Furthermore, social workers, and teachers in particular, need to be made aware of the issue and sensitized to it. Only then will they be in a position to recognize radicalized tendencies early, and intervene immediately. They are in a position to show their pupils alternatives, and to encourage them to think critically. A person who has learned to critically question his or her own opinions is much more effectively immunized against extremists who demand that their followers blindly adhere to them, and simply repeat their prayers. Achieving this requires money, training opportunities, and long-term engagement. Half-hearted, short term projects aren't going to save anyone.

Ahmad Mansour, a psychologist, is a program director at the European Foundation for Democracy in Brussels and a research associate with ZDK's Astiu Project, where he works to confront Islamic extremism and Turkish ultranationalism. This article originally appeared on [Fikra Forum \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=4599\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=4599). ❖

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