

## ‘Muhajirun’ from Austria. Why they left to join ISIS and why they don’t return.

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### Abstract

After the proclamation of the so-called Islamic State in June 2014 thousands of Europeans, including hundreds of Austrian residents, went to fight and live with ISIS or other extremist groups in Syria or Iraq. Austria is one of the European countries with the highest per-capita share of foreign fighters. The article gives a broad overview of the situation in Austria: Who are the different groups relevant in this field? How did young people who grew up in Austria become radicalised, and what is their current status? The data from two Austrian commissioned research projects and one EU-funded project are supplemented by the findings of recent research in northern Syria focusing on the current situation of Austrian foreign fighters and their families and supporters in the region.

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### Introduction

ISIS and other jihadist groups use an old Arabic term for migrant, ‘Muhajirun’, to refer to those who migrated to the ‘Islamic State’ or to other jihadi-controlled territory in Syria. In the self-conception of male and female activists, this term covers both armed foreign fighters, their wives, and various civilian supporters of jihadist groups. The region still has those Muhajirun who did not die in combat or return to Europe, many are detained by Iraqi, Syrian, or Kurdish forces.

Between 2014 and 2016, an estimated 27,000 to 31,000 individuals from 86 different countries travelled to Syria and Iraq to join violent extremist groups (Soufan Group, 2017: 4). The 200 to 300 Muhajirun from Austria were only a small part of this army of mercenaries

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and volunteers but, compared with other EU countries, Austria has one the highest per-capita share of ‘foreign fighters’. The research of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) indicates that Austria placed second, after Belgium, in a ranking of EU countries from where foreign fighters travelled to the Middle East (Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016: 51). Most of these jihadists joined the so-called ‘Islamic State’. At the time of this research, some Austrian citizens remain with Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham and other jihadist groups in north-western Syria.

Although many foreign fighters came from Austria, the country has not yet faced any terrorist attacks carried out by the so-called Islamic State. However, jihadists have been arrested under the allegation that they planned terrorist attacks in Austria.

### *Empirical basis and methodology*

This paper presents a summary of the findings from two Austrian research projects (Hofinger & Schmidinger, 2017a+b) and uses data from the EU funded project DECOUNT<sup>2</sup>. That material is supplemented by recent research in northern Syria.

The national projects were commissioned by the Austrian ministry of justice in 2016 and 2017. The first study was designed to evaluate the ministry’s measures to fight prison radicalisation and to promote deradicalisation. It involved 39 problem-centred interviews (Witzel 2000) with inmates and parolees convicted of membership in a terrorist organisation, as well as with other prisoners deemed to hold extremist ideas. We additionally spoke to various experts working in the prison system in different positions, from prison directors to the prison guard ‘on the ground’. We interviewed social workers, probation officers, deradicalisation experts, representatives of the intelligence service, and many more. In total, we conducted more than 100 interviews; we also had access to court files as well as to reports of the prison system (Hofinger & Schmidinger 2017a). The second national research project was a follow-up study that focused on ‘pathways into radicalisation’ (Hofinger & Schmidinger 2017b). This research built on ten extensive case studies of juveniles

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<sup>2</sup> Decount: Promoting democracy and fighting extremism through an online counter-narratives and alternative narratives campaign, Grant Nr 812617.

sympathising with ISIS. We analysed their biographical backgrounds, their motives for radicalisation, the places where they were recruited, and the response of the authorities towards their radicalisation.

This article also builds on a project funded by the Internal Security Fund of the European Commission. This project develops online resources to prevent extremism. Field research provided an evidence base for these prevention tools (Pisoiu et al. 2019). This article draws on 18 interviews with Islamist extremists in prison, on parole or in open youth work, especially on the six interviews conducted by Veronika Hofinger, focusing on factors that made some interviewees more resilient to radicalisation than others.<sup>3</sup>

In order to provide up-to-date information on the current situation of Austrian Muhajirun, we present evidence from research in the self-administrated region of north-eastern Syria (see esp. chapter on ‘preventing return’): Thomas Schmidinger conducted interviews with people responsible for the custody of foreign fighters and their relatives and with the female Austrian inmates of the detention camps in al-Hol and Roj in 2019 and 2020. To guarantee their anonymity, no further information on the circumstances can be given. Schmidinger also visited a third camp, Ain Issa, that held female relatives of foreign fighters until October 2019 but had no Austrian citizens.

All respondents were informed about the methods and the goal of the respective study; it was pointed out explicitly that participation is voluntary and that consent to participate can be withdrawn at any time. We took far-reaching measures to guarantee anonymity. For example, we refrained from presenting detailed biographical information in order to avoid the attribution of statements or pathways to specific individuals. Because respondents did not feel comfortable in giving their names and signing declarations, we did not request written informed consent.

In the following sections, we will, first, give a broad overview of the situation in Austria: Who are the different groups, individuals, and networks relevant in this field?

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<sup>3</sup> The sample sizes of the different studies should not be added up to a total number of distinct respondents because overlaps between interviewed persons from the different projects are possible.

Secondly, we will present findings on why and how young people who grew up in Austria became Islamist extremists, and why some turned away from the radical ideology. Thirdly, we will give information on the current situation of Austrian Muhajirun and returnees.

### **Jihadist networks in Austria**

Jihadist groups are a relative recent phenomenon in Austria. For many years, Austria has had organisations of mainstream political Islam related to the Muslim Brotherhood, the Turkish Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi of President Erdoğan, or purist Salafī movements. Many of these groups still dominate Muslim organisations and mosques. However, until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only a few small groups had connections to political-Salafi or jihadist groups in the Balkans or the Middle East. Only after 9/11 did international jihadism become attractive for some young Muslims of second-generation immigrants. Since then, at least three different networks and milieus of jihadist Salafism developed in Austria.

#### *The Balkan connection*

One group was connected with South Eastern European Salafi and jihadist groups mainly based in Bosnia and the Sandžak of Novi Pazar. The civil war in Bosnia led to the presence of international jihadist fighters in Bosnia and to the creation of transnational political Salafi and jihadist networks with supporters in Bosnia, the Sandžak of Novi Pazar, and the Slavic Muslim diaspora in Austria. Salafi and jihadist preachers of Bosnian and Sandžak origin in Vienna, like Muhamed P. or Nedžad B. (Ebu Muhammad) and his Kelimentul-Haqq group, significantly contributed to the spreading of political Salafi ideas in Austria, as well as developed larger networks of political Salafism in the Balkans (Schmidinger & Larise, 2008: 205). Especially Nedžad B., who follows the tradition of the jihadist intellectual Abū Muhammad al-Maqdisī, contributed to the radicalisation of young Austrian Muslims of mainly Slavic descent.

The networks of Mohammed P. and Nedžad B. extended far beyond the Austrian borders and played an important role in Germany as well as in Bosnia, Serbia, and Kosovo

(Hečimović, 2008: 200f). Mohammed P. influenced Gorani migrants in Vienna who brought back his ideas to their mountainous regions on the borders of Kosovo and Albania. P. visited Kosovo several times and gave lectures in the Gora region (Schmidinger, 2013a: 55). Furthermore, the networks of P. and B. were in close contact with extremist groups in Bosnia who established their own villages such as Gornja Maoča. In Bosnia and Kosovo, Vienna was seen as a major hub of political Salafi and jihadist activities in South Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> Even the Grand Mufti (Reisul-ulema) of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mustafa ef. Cerić, protested that Bosnian extremists could use Austria as a haven for their activities in Bosnia (Bećirević, 2008: 87).

These South Eastern European Slavic Salafi and jihadist groups are further connected to a younger generation of German-speaking politicalised Salafis. Mirsad O. (Ebu Tejma) who was, like Nedžad B., born in the Sandžak came as a child to Austria, where he did most of his missionary activity (*da'wa*) in German instead of Serbo-Croatian. Until his arrest in 2014, he played a significant role as a political Salafi preacher for a large network of younger German-speaking Muslims in Austria and Germany from which many found their way to the so-called Islamic State or other jihadist groups in Syria. YouTube still has hundreds of videos featuring Ebu Tejma. Even while incarcerated, he remains a star for young Salafi activists in all parts of Austria. His harsh sentence of 20 years in prison gives him an additional importance for many of his young followers who partly see him as a martyr of the secular state.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See press reports e.g. <http://www.fokuspress.com/u-fokusu/1919-u-becu-vlada-strah-od-balkanskih-salafista-sve-se-vrti-oko-nedzada-balkana> or <https://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Bec-centar-salafista-iz-BiH/275827> (retrieved 10-10-2018).

<sup>5</sup> At least, this was how some young Salafis talked about Ebu Tejma when Schmidinger visited the Ummet Mosque in Feldkirch in summer 2018. The young Salafis refused to give a formal interview but spoke about Ebu Tejma with high respect and said he was an example of how unfairly the Austrian justice system treats 'Muslims'. This Salafi mosque closed down in fall 2018. However, the fact that young Salafis in a small mosque on the other end of Austria praise Ebu Tejma demonstrates his supra-regional importance as a preacher and as a symbol of 'unfair treatment' of 'the Muslims' by 'the state'.

*Jihadis of Chechen origin*

Exiles from Chechnya who came to Austria as refugees mainly after the second Chechen war 1999/2000 form another relevant group. Since the early 2000s, Austria has one of the largest Chechen diasporas in Western Europe with about 30,000 Chechens living in all parts of Austria. Chechens organised their own associations and mosques often affiliated with different political currents of the Chechen resistance (Schmidinger, 2009).

The ‘jihadisation’ of the Chechen resistance against Russia led to splits in 2007 between the Chechen guerrilla groups fighting the Russian military. While the Chechen nationalists still pretended to act as the government of the exiled Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, most of the active fighters in the region founded in October 2007 the Caucasus Emirate under the leadership of Doku Umarov (Askerov, 2015: 74). Jihadi internationalists supporting the armed struggle in the Caucasus also established Chechen contacts with other international jihadis. However, fighters of the Caucasus Emirate joined other armed struggles abroad long before the civil war in Syria started in 2011. Gordon M. Hahn, an analyst specialised on international jihadism from the Geostrategic Forecasting Corporation in Chicago, claims that ‘we have evidence that Caucasus and Chechen fighters have been in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and other global jihadi fronts’ (Gordon, 2014: 223). Moreover, Chechen supporters of the Caucasus Emirate were also involved in the ‘Sharia4Belgium Plot’ that led to the arrests of potential terrorists in Belgium in 2010 (ibid. 226). Although Hahn discusses an involvement of the Caucasus Emirate in the Boston Marathon bombing of April 2013 (ibid. 232f.), no direct involvement of the Caucasus Emirate has been proven in any terrorist attack outside Russia. Even more, ‘leaders of the Caucasus Emirate were adamant in disassociating themselves from any international terrorism after the attack of the Boston Marathon’ (Pokalova, 2015: xi).

The Chechen diaspora in Austria has rivalries between supporters of the exiled nationalist leadership under Akhmed Zakayev, supporters of the pro-Russian president Ramzan Kadyrov, but also supporters of the jihadist resistance of the Caucasus Emirate. All three groups have informal networks within the Austro-Chechen diaspora. In December 2014,

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the Caucasus Emirate started to disintegrate when the Dagestani regional commander of the Caucasus Emirate, Rustam Asildarov (Abu Mukhammad al-Kadari), who was still appointed as the emir and vali (governor) of the Vilayat Dagestan of the Caucasus Emirate by Doku Umarov (Matveeva, 2013: 267), retracted his oath of allegiance to Umarov's successor, Aliaskhab Kebekov, and pledged allegiance to the so-called Islamic State and its 'Caliph' Ibrahim. After most of the other regional commanders of the Caucasus Emirate shifted their loyalties, the so-called Islamic State formalised its advance into the Caucasus. In July 2015, ISIS-spokesman Muhammad al-Adnani officially announced the creation of the Caucasus Vilayat, i.e. a province of the so-called Islamic State (Youngman, 2016: 195).

In fall 2014, the supporters in Austria of the Caucasus Emirate seemed confused about the split of their organisation back home and started to divide among themselves with some even denouncing each other to Austrian authorities. Supporters of the emirate who did not approve Asildarov and the field commanders pledging alliance to ISIS even started 'deradicalisation' activities, some distanced themselves from their former association with the emirate. However, some supporters of the Caucasus Emirate followed Asildarov's line by also beginning to endorse ISIS. Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war enabled Chechens to fight their Russian enemy on Syrian soil. Chechen fighters primarily made up different jihadi-inspired militias like Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar or Junud al-Sham. The media focus on ISIS ignored other jihadist groups that included many Austrian Chechens. Some probably still fight with Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham or some of the pro-Turkish militias in the Turkish-occupied zones of northern Syria.

### *'Homegrown' jihadis*

Finally, a third 'pioneer' group of young jihadists grew up in Austria and were mainly radicalised without direct connection with jihadist groups from the Balkans and Chechnya. The most prominent of these young extremists was Mohamed M., a young jihadist activist arrested with his spouse in September 2007. Mohamed M. was the first Austrian jihadist convicted in 2008 for belonging to a terrorist organisation (§ 278b Austrian Penal Code) (Hofinger & Schmidinger, 2017a: 4; Penz et al., 2008). His prison sentence gained him street

credibility; after his release, he used this to build an important network in Germany and Austria. Mohamed M. published several authorisations (*ijaza*) from jihadist preachers and scholars, permitting him to preach and teach in their names (Lohlker, 2016: 92). With this authorisation and his reputation as a former prisoner, jihadist circles soon began to call him a sheik. In May 2012, Germany forbade his organisation Millatu-Ibrāhīm. Together with Denis C. and some other German and Austrian supporters, he later reappeared in the so-called Islamic State as one of its most brutal protagonists.

Young Austrians were already active in the Deutsche Taliban Mujaheddin (DTM) group 2009/2010 in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Schmidinger, 2013b: 95). Since early 2012, some fighters already fought with different groups in the Syrian civil war. However, the big increase in active and militant participation in jihadist groups started in 2014 with the establishment of the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. From 2012 until 2013, key figures of jihadist Salafism in Germany and Austria, like Mohamed M. and Denis C., were actively distributing jihadist propaganda. However, when Denis C. went to Syria in 2013 and when Turkey refused to extradite the arrested Mohamed M. to Austria and allowed him to cross into Syria in 2014, the German and Austrian jihadis started much more efficient propaganda from within the so-called Islamic State to their supporters in Europe. From there, they continued to use social media to reach their supporters, as they did earlier in Europe (Lohlker, 2017: 93).

The self-proclaimed caliphate attracted men – and to a certain extent also women – from all three groups and led to an influx of mainly young jihadis going to fight in the ranks of ISIS. Until Kurdish militias conquered the town of Tal Abyad in June 2015, young Europeans could relatively easily enter Syria through Turkey. This influx of young Europeans finally stopped only when Turkish troops, Kurdish militias, and the Syrian army cut the access from Turkey to ISIS in late summer 2016. Since then, the pressure of the state authorities and the losses of ISIS in Syria and Iraq made it less attractive and more difficult to migrate to the self-proclaimed caliphate.

However, not all Austrian residents who went to fight or live in Syria joined ISIS. Some also went to Idlib and other regions controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra (today: Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham) and other rival jihadist groups like Ahrar ash-Sham. In spring 2020, evidence indicates that some Austrians remain inside these territories controlled by rival jihadist groups.

### **Young jihadists in Austria: Why did they join ISIS?**

#### *Background and socialisation*

Interviews conducted in Austria revealed that the young extremists of the current wave of jihadism do not exclusively belong to one of the groups described above but have multiple connections to these networks and milieus. For example, a young man from the Chechen community was influenced by preachers from the Balkans and also by individuals like Mohammed M.: M.'s video calling all 'real Muslims' to join the war in Syria was found on his smartphone when he was arrested. Another young Austrian whose parents immigrated from the Balkans was inspired to convert to Islam by a Chechen inmate he befriended in prison and then further radicalised due to internet preachers from the Balkans and Arab countries, most of them preaching in German. He then influenced other juveniles in Germany whom he made acquaintance with on social media. Thus, the distinctive networks and milieus amalgamate in the individual biographies.

Aside from these multiple connections to diverse milieus, Austrian adolescents convicted of membership in a jihadist terrorist organisation share striking similarities, especially regarding their socioeconomic background and their descent from Muslim immigrant families. Unlike some other European countries, earlier and current waves of Austrian Islamists came from low-income families and tended to have very low educational backgrounds (Hofinger & Schmidinger, 2017a: 24). In almost all our case studies, the young people's parents had very low socio-economic positions in Austrian society. This does not mean, however, that only marginalised people are susceptible to extremist ideas but rather

suggests that marginalisation increases the risk of being convicted for one's extremist ideas. Interestingly, the family backgrounds reminded us of other juvenile delinquents, combining a precarious financial situation of the family with further problems such as serious illnesses or divorce of the parents, violent or absent fathers, or early traumas and attachment disorders.

However, there are single, but noteworthy exceptions. For example, a young woman from a native Austrian middle-class family suffered from serious psychological problems when she converted to Islam and departed to Syria to join ISIS. Nevertheless, this is a rare case.

Many Chechen-born youth suffered war traumas incurred during their most formative first years. The experiences of escape and migration shaped their entry into Austrian society, where they felt marginalised in schools as non-German-speaking newcomers. Others experienced exclusion by having been sent to special-needs schools (*Sonderschule*) or by being jailed because of juvenile delinquency. Interviews carried out with women in the detention camps in al-Hol and Roj in the self-administrated area of north-eastern Syria also showed women with a low level of education who just barely understand what is going on with them and who feel completely lost. One Austrian woman in the camps did not have any relatives in Austria anymore except one brother with whom she had little contact.<sup>6</sup> The jihadist propaganda exploits these feelings of alienation and exclusion and links them to the grand narrative of the persecution of all Muslims by 'the West'. At the same time, Salafist groups allow their followers not only to feel accepted with their origin and religion, but their Muslim origins are appreciated and upgraded. This phenomenon has been described as the positive reversal of negative external ascriptions (Dantschke, 2014: 98). Their experiences of exclusion and degradation help us understand their turn to jihadism as a collective solution to resolve their twin problems of status-frustration and identity-confusion (Bakker, 2008).

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<sup>6</sup> Interview in al-Hol Camp, February 9, 2020.

*Motives for their radicalisation*

In our research, we investigated the juveniles' motives and motivations for becoming a 'jihadist'. What did these young people gain by 'joining' ISIS? What was their personal benefit? In many cases, the first step in their radicalisation process was their feeling of allegiance with the Umma, the worldwide community of Muslims. Ideally, the unity of the Umma leaves ethnic differences and nationalism behind. Being part of a global community helped them to overcome the alienation and isolation of the diaspora. The interviewees described a new sense of belonging: 'Nobody asks who is Chechen and who is Arab, it's only about brothers.' Another young man with a Turkish-Alevi religious background, who had experienced marginalisation by Sunni Muslims when in school and converted to Sunni Islam, found a new, stronger identity as (Sunni) Muslim: 'In my group nobody asks me who I am or what I am. I am a Muslim, that's enough.' Thus, the jihadist propaganda provides a new identity as a 'real Muslim' regardless of where you come from and who you were before. This also allows non-Muslims and even Alevis or Shiites to become part of the new community of seemingly equal brothers. Although most Austrian recruits for membership in a terrorist organisation are from a Sunni Muslim background, there are also some examples of former Alevis, Shiite Muslims, or non-Muslims (Hofinger & Schmidinger, 2017b: 33; Schmidinger, 2017). All of them gained a new identity as part of a global collective of an imagined brotherhood within 'real' Islam. As the British criminologist Simon Cottee puts it:

In joining the jihadist subculture, the joiner undergoes a radical transformation of self: he becomes a holy warrior, a soldier for Islam, a righteous brother. He thus not only elevates himself in terms of status, but also at the same time refashions a formerly split self into a cohesive collective identity grounded in a long and prestigious, albeit imagined, tradition—the tradition of the Prophet and his companions. In addition, he arms himself with the necessary neutralization tropes with which to excuse or justify violent retaliation against the source of his

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status frustration and identity-conflict—a homogenized demonic West, populated by infidel (Cottee, 2011: 739).

This possibility of a new beginning and a new identity is especially attractive for young people in prison, usually in conflict with authorities. For these young people, jihadism offers redemption from a criminal past while at the same time satisfying the personal needs and desires that led some of them to juvenile delinquency, such as the search for power, violence, adventure, or thrill (Basra, Neumann & Brunner, 2016: 24). Cultural criminology reminds us ‘that part of the motivation behind terrorism lies in the various emotional or sensual attractions associated with doing violent acts. Preeminent among these is excitement’ (Cottee & Hayward, 2017: 966).

Belonging to the Umma made these young people feel responsible for their ‘brothers’ in Syria and Iraq with the need to help them. Some of the adolescents knew people, directly or indirectly through friends or relatives, who have joined ISIS in Syria. This call for getting involved was reinforced by the targeted propaganda of ISIS: videos showing Muslim victims of war, especially women and children in Syria. The propaganda pursued a strategy of ‘defensive mobilisation’, i.e. every ‘real Muslim’ had the duty to assist the brothers and sisters in a conflict framed as a war of defence (Malet, 2011). The conflicts in Syria were blended with Afghanistan, Palestine, Chechnya, Somalia, and other conflicts where Muslim societies were involved and seemingly or actually under attack. A young woman explained that watching videos of small children being killed by ‘the Americans’ made her feel angry and helpless. She felt guilty because of her privileged life in the West and she wanted to help. She left for Syria to become a nurse, she told us in the interview, but was stopped on her journey. Like another woman who we interviewed, she defined herself not as a fighter but more as a settler in the caliphate, dreaming of a utopian community of Sunni Muslims living together in peace under the strict law of Sharia (Hofinger & Schmidinger 2017b).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> We are aware that women have manifold roles in jihadism and one should not naïvely stereotype a female jihadist. We can state, however, that our female interviewees mainly fell into a category we labelled ‘settlers of the caliphate’. This group consisted of young men and women who wanted to start a family life in Syria. They

While those young women could be prevented from going to Syria, others successfully joined ISIS. However, they shared the same desire to migrate to a utopian Islamic State. A female ISIS-volunteer interviewed in a detention camp in north-eastern Syria also declared that they ‘just wanted to live in an Islamic State’ and did not want to fight at all. Two of the women held in Roj- and al-Hol-Camp claimed that Austrian racism and especially reactions towards wearing the niqab led to their wish to live in an ‘Islamic State’.<sup>8</sup> Of course, this narrative can be understood as a subsequent repression of guilt but, at least in their own narrative, anti-Islamic resentments and restrictions against what they considered to be Islamic clothing influenced their decision to leave Austria for the jihadist controlled territories of Syria. Jihadist propaganda’s use of legal restrictions against the niqab can be seen from the fact that a detainee with limited contact to Austria knew about Austria’s ban on niqab issued in 2017, when she had already lived in the so-called ‘Islamic State’ for more than three years. She even mentioned this bias as a reason why she no longer wanted to permanently live in Austria.

Our interviews (Hofinger & Schmidinger, 2017a+b) revealed motives such as gaining status, the need for belonging and for guidance, and the search for a sense of life as powerful, interrelated incentives to join jihadism. These findings are congruent with other studies on the causes of and motives for radicalisation (see Bakker, 2008; Benslama, 2017; Cottee, 2011; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Kruglanski, 2014; PISOIU, 2017; SLOOTMAN & TILLIE, 2006). For example, belonging to a Salafist group increased the young people’s status and gave them safety in the group. The need for protection increases in hostile environments like prisons. Jihadism presents a simple answer to young people in search of meaning and, with its strict rules, offers orientation in contemporary pluralised societies with their potentially confusing liberties. Moreover, Salafism/jihadism is one of the few ideologies that offers a radical

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had, without being apolitical, almost romantic images of the life in the so-called Islamic State. Our typology derives from the study of Austrian jihadists in prison (Hofinger & Schmidinger 2017a) and is available in English at: <https://www.irks.at/en/research/security-studies/deradicalisation-in-austrian-prisons.html> (retrieved 10-10-2018). For the diverse categories and motivations of female affiliates to the so-called Islamic State see Cook & Vale (2018: 23ff.).

<sup>8</sup> Interviews in Roj-Camp on January 11, 2019 and in al-Hol on April 24, 2020 and on February 9, 2020.

alternative to today's mainstream. In our interviews, the young women seemed to understand their turning to jihadism as liberation from their own patriarchal family. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the conversion to jihadism can also be a coping strategy to overcome an adolescent identity crisis (Benslama, 2017).

In Austria, a disproportionately high percentage of those convicted of terrorism come from Chechnya. No other European country has produced so many foreign fighters with a Chechen background (Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016). As with other descendants of Muslim immigrants to Europe, many Chechen youth undergo the social pressures highlighted in the first chapter of this article and in the previous paragraphs. However, the Chechen diaspora in Austria shares what has been called 'collective grievances' originating from the oppression and the subjugation by Russia, particularly in the current pro-Russian regime in Chechnya of Kadyrov. This enables a narrative of victimisation and may lead to simple and powerful emotional reactions which may then be exploited by violent extremists (UNODC, 2016: 59). A young Salafi woman very emotionally told us: 'I think they are terrorizing the Muslims so that they fight back. I believe in that. I do not believe in terrorists, I believe that there are poor people being attacked and when they defend themselves, they are called terrorists.'

#### *Why ISIS and not other terrorist groups?*

All the juveniles and young adults convicted for terrorist offences seem to have been involved in ISIS and not in other jihadist groups, such as Al-Qaeda or Ahrar ash-sham.<sup>9</sup> The apparent lack of involvement of young Austrian detainees/returnees in other groups could be because the territories controlled by other jihadist forces are not yet reconquered.

This leads to the question why the juveniles we interviewed decided to join ISIS and not other groups. The specific enthusiasm of the known cases for ISIS presumably occurred for the following reasons.

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<sup>9</sup> This finding does not hold true for adults. Adult terrorists in prison supported very different terrorist groups. Even the support of the Shiite Popular Mobilization Unit (Arabic: al-ḥašd aš-ša'bi) officially registered in Iraq as part of the Iraqi state's security forces led to the imprisonment of an adult in Austria. (Hofinger & Schmidinger, 2017a: 5, 8).

Firstly, when these young people tried to leave for Syria or otherwise supported ISIS, it was the most successful jihadist organisation at aggressively and adeptly recruiting new followers. By using youth-cultural elements in its propaganda, ISIS addressed many more adolescents and young adults than other jihadist movements.

Secondly, the proclamation of the caliphate in June 2014 was a massive propaganda success. Anyone who saw re-establishing a caliphate as a central political goal could scarcely escape this myth's attractiveness. The women we interviewed were particularly attracted to building an Islamic State and living in a caliphate. With its control over a large territory, ISIS was a real migration option, which was relatively easy and cheap to reach via Turkey by June 2015 via the Akçakale/Tal Abyad border crossing and, by August 2016, via Jarabulus.

Thirdly, ISIS was simply the best-known group and most highly 'branded'. The strong media coverage of ISIS was especially important for adolescents. Young people with no connections to Syria or Iraq probably barely noticed other jihadist actors in the region. Also, young adults in contact with ISIS then facilitated access to ISIS territory for young people in Vienna. Similar personal ties to other jihadist groups were non-existent.

Finally, for some of the young men the possibility of exerting sexualised violence (e.g. against captured Yezidi women and girls) was one of the attractions of an ISIS force that offensively proclaimed the legitimacy of violence against 'unbelievers'.

#### *Places of radicalisation: internet, mosques, and prisons*

The in-depth analyses of ten cases, including interviewing young jihadists and their families as well as examining their court files (Hofinger & Schmidinger 2017b), showed that even if all cases involved personal contacts with other extremists, all cases also shared the very important element of online radicalisation. The web played a role in two different ways: Firstly, the young people watched the propaganda videos of ISIS and spent many hours listening to radical sermons. Although Austrian authorities imprisoned some of the most influential preachers, such as Ebu Tejma, recruiting for jihad or propagating a Salafi/jihadist ideology, many of their videos remain online. Their messages and YouTube clips from

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German preachers like Abu Dujana or Abu Abdullah influenced the radicalisation process of some of the adolescents. Secondly, they contacted other extremists via social media and these online relations had a substantial impact on their offline actions: they planned terrorist attacks or became engaged or even married to someone they had met only via internet. Interestingly, the distribution of roles – who recruits others and who is being recruited – was quite blurred. Only a few cases involved direct communication with a person from ISIS.

Even if no one was only radicalised in the virtual world and international studies suggest to not overestimate the role of the internet compared to real world influences (see Stevens & Neumann, 2009; Dalgaard-Nilson, 2010: 810), the effect of online content and of virtual relations should also not be underestimated. In our case studies, the internet considerably accelerated and intensified radicalisation (Stevens & Neumann, 2009: 13). Online content was especially important for the young women in our sample, because they were reached by the online propaganda in a way they would not have been by recruiters in the real world. Moreover, in some cases, the contact between ‘combatants’ was taking place solely via the web. When Stevens and Neumann write that, from the extremists’ perspective, ‘the internet’s failure to provide face-to-face human interaction nullifies many of its advantages’ (ibid.), they underestimate, in our view, that young people may oddly experience virtual social relations as real: they made far-reaching plans for the future with persons they have never met in person, such as getting married or planning a terrorist attack.

While mosques played an important role for some of the young men in our study, mosques were not at all important for most of the women. It is known that recruiters have hired young men as combatants for Syria in certain mosques, most of which have now been shut down. However, it is still disputed as to the extent to which the imams of these mosques were themselves responsible for the recruitment. This study’s interviewees did not identify any specific mosques as tightly controlled organisations focused on recruiting. Instead, a political-Salafist milieu developed in a few mosques in Vienna, Graz, and Feldkirch where recruiters could mobilise young people to fight in the Syrian war and to be further radicalised and brutalised there. An Austrian women interviewed in a detention camp in Syria, for

example, came into contact with jihadist ideology at mosques in Feldkirch and Graz; she now claims that the preachers of those mosques advised young people not to leave Austria when they decided to go live in Raqqa, Syria. Although we do not know if these claims are true, we must at least consider the possibility that some of these mosques served as an ideological breeding ground rather than a place for direct military recruitment.

The ‘crime-terror-nexus’ has been called one of the most significant drivers of jihadi radicalisation and recruitment today (Basra & Neumann, 2017: 5). Research suggests that prisons are generally places of vulnerability (Neumann, 2010) but that the risk of prison radicalisation depends on the specific conditions of detention (see Liebling, 2014; Jones, 2014; Hamm, 2009). Although the situation in Austria cannot be compared to the challenges in other European countries, such as France, our study identifies existing problems. Respondents who have served a prison sentence all came into contact with extremist ideas or inmates there, but most of them were not radicalised in jail. Their feelings of exclusion and discrimination as well as their anger against the state increased while in prison. Many of the motives mentioned above – such as the need for meaning and a sense of belonging, but also the need for protection – may be reinforced in a prison. In their study of a high security prison in the UK, Liebling and Arnold discovered that the growing community of Muslim prisoners offered more solidarity than other groups and provided far-reaching loyalty for in-group members (Liebling & Arnold, 2012: 416 ff.).

Various researchers note that the conversion to Islam should not be seen as problematic in itself (see Hamm, 2009; Hannah et al., 2008). However, the problem is that ‘prison Islam’ is often compatible with a Salafist interpretation of the Quran and may therefore develop into jihadism. For example, a young man accused of having planned an attack in Europe had converted to Islam in prison: ‘I was desperate. Reading the Quran gave me strength. I was in my cell for 23 hours on some days. Nothing to do, not even TV (...). I shared the prison cell with someone who read the Quran all day and prayed a lot. (...) I have thought before that there must be a deeper meaning of life. There must be more than drinking and party. He explained the five pillars of Islam to me, and then I read the Quran and

converted by persuasion.’ Only after negative experiences upon release did he radicalise because of internet preachers. The conversion in prison was the first step towards radicalisation. In other cases, however, the turn to faith helped to endure the pains of imprisonment; the role of religion decreased again after release, without any radicalisation.

*Families – places of radicalisation or resilience?*

Although families could be places of radicalisation, our study never identified cases of parents directly responsible for their children’s radicalisation. To the contrary, the children’s turn to jihadism always involved severe conflicts with their parents, especially for the girls who tried to free themselves from the traditional patriarchy with this new, strong, and in their eyes, superior ideology. One female interviewee explains: ‘In Chechnya, a man is free to do whatever he wants. In contrast, a woman is not allowed to do anything. (...) In Chechnya, everything is forbidden for women. A man may drink alcohol, but a woman may not. A man may cheat on his wife, but a woman may not. And in (Salafist) Islam, I found all the answers and I saw that this is not how it is meant to be.’

Nevertheless, a familial influence exists in the political dimension: families who have fled from Chechnya to Austria are not only generally resistant towards state authorities but they share the deep conviction in the full legitimacy of armed resistance against the ‘enemy Russia’. For some, Syria’s civil war became an extension of the conflict in the northern Caucasus region because Russia and Chechnya’s pro-Russian puppet regime directly support the Syrian government.

Analysing the biographies of those on the brink of radicalisation but turning away from extremist ideas revealed the power of support from family members. These interviews showed that it was mainly family ties that prevented these young men and women from doing further harm to themselves and to others. The interviewees told us that they were stopped by family members when trying to depart from Austria for ISIS. They spoke about sisters successfully intervening to stop their brothers’ departure. A father called law enforcement to stop his son. A sister helped her sibling to break with the ideology of jihadism. These more

resilient young people spoke about long conversations with their sisters, mothers, and fathers who offered alternative religious interpretations. They told us about family members introducing them to imams who advocated a moderate reading of the Qur'an. One of the male interviewees puts it quite poetically: 'My sister built the rails, my father put the train on them, and the imam was the train driver'. Likewise, a female interviewee clearly gives the credit for her being saved from a life under the ISIS regime to her family: 'I was right on the doorstep. But although I hated my family at that time, they tried to get me out of the scene. They didn't care how bad I behaved towards them. They loved me and they respected me.' Furthermore, these more resilient young people were able to build new, positive relations with their immigrant communities as well as with local youth workers or their probation officers, relations that strengthened their 'straight' path. These positive accounts of family actions differ very much from those by interviewees who ended up in prison despite massive interventions by their desperate and overburdened parents. The unsuccessful families felt helpless and without a public support system at that time, and they failed to stop their children's radicalisation by using physical violence and house detention.

### Legal situation and criminal justice responses

Already in 2002, Austria passed an anti-terror law stipulating, inter alia, that membership in a terrorist organisation is punishable by one to ten years in prison (§ 278b (2) Austrian Penal Code). This 'membership' includes not only travelling to Syria or Iraq but also merely attempting to travel: Austria's Supreme Court ruled that, in the context of a departure towards the combat zone, even promising a recruiter to be willing to join ISIS or a similar organisation can be regarded as 'psychological support' for the organisation and thus as 'membership'.<sup>10</sup> This provision also penalises the (attempted) travel to Syria aiming at supporting a combatant, for example, as his wife. Several other regulations prohibit, for example, teaching how to

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<sup>10</sup> Available at:

[https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokument.wxe?Abfrage=Justiz&Dokumentnummer=JJR\\_20141119\\_OGH0002\\_0120\\_OS00143\\_14T0000\\_001](https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokument.wxe?Abfrage=Justiz&Dokumentnummer=JJR_20141119_OGH0002_0120_OS00143_14T0000_001) (retrieved 10-10-2018).

commit a terrorist offence (e.g. sharing online instructions on how to build a bomb) or publicly approving terrorist activities. This led to a very diverse population of jihadists in Austrian prisons, from a pregnant woman who tried to travel to Syria, to young people who allegedly planned attacks in Europe, to men accused of having killed others in Syria.

Another recent change to the Austrian criminal law (Strafrechtsänderungsgesetz 2018) introduced a new paragraph explicitly penalising ‘travel for terrorist purposes’ (§ 278g Austrian Penal Code). After public debates on the risks of such provisions<sup>11</sup>, other countries introduced comparable regulations following the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) and the EU Directive 2017/541 of 15 March 2017 on combating terrorism<sup>12</sup>.

A law in 2014 prohibited the symbols of ISIS and Al-Qaeda.<sup>13</sup> A later amendment expanded the list of prohibited symbols of extremist organisations.<sup>14</sup> A ‘face cover ban’ prohibiting the wearing of a niqab or a burka came into force on October 1, 2017.<sup>15</sup> While obviously targeted against Muslim women wearing a niqab or a similar covering, the law had to be designed as non-discriminatory towards Muslims. Thus, the ‘Anti-Face-Veiling Act’ generally prohibits hiding one’s face in public in a way that they are no longer recognisable. This broad formulation of the law has led to bizarre penalties of citizens covering their faces with a muffler to keep warm and of mascots being fined for covering their faces with a plush mask.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For Germany, see: <https://www.bundestag.de/blob/366048/7925e5e255ed657dd244b1c0debf1f50/gazeas-data.pdf> (retrieved 10-10-2018).

<sup>12</sup> EU-Directive 2017/541 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2017 on combating terrorism and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA and amending Council Decision 2005/671/JHA, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017L0541&from=DE> (retrieved 10-10-2018).

<sup>13</sup> Available at: [https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBLA\\_2014\\_I\\_103/BGBLA\\_2014\\_I\\_103.pdf](https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBLA_2014_I_103/BGBLA_2014_I_103.pdf) (retrieved 10-10-2018).

<sup>14</sup> Available at: [https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBLA\\_2019\\_I\\_2/BGBLA\\_2019\\_I\\_2.pdf](https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBLA_2019_I_2/BGBLA_2019_I_2.pdf) (retrieved 30-01-2020).

<sup>15</sup> Available at: [https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBLA\\_2017\\_I\\_68/BGBLA\\_2017\\_I\\_68.pdf](https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBLA_2017_I_68/BGBLA_2017_I_68.pdf) (retrieved 10-10-2018).

<sup>16</sup> See press reports available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/man-dressed-shark-given-fine-police-austria-burqa-ban-face-veil-vienna-a7992116.html>;

Also, the Austrian aliens' law has tightened: When those without Austrian citizenship but who have grown up in the country have been stopped from travelling to Syria, they not only face imprisonment but also lose their resident permits, such as refugee status (e.g. from Chechnya). This has recently led to attempts to deport people to countries in which they may be in danger – for example, when a Chechen convicted of a terrorist offence is deported to Russia. It is currently under debate whether such a deportation would violate the principle of *non-refoulement* according to which 'no state party shall expel, return (*refouler*), or extradite a person to another state where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture.'<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to the strict Austrian laws responding to the threat of terrorism, the Federal Agency for State Protection and Counter Terrorism and experts from civil society closely cooperated to form the comparatively progressive Austrian Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism and De-radicalisation.<sup>18</sup> This strategy not only targets jihadism but all forms of extremism. It defines the prevention of extremism and deradicalisation as a task for society as a whole – and not only for law enforcement agencies.<sup>19</sup>

### *Preventing return*

Since the proclamation of the so-called Islamic State, many (young) Europeans not only left for Syria but some also returned to Austria during the Syrian civil war. The report of the Federal Agency for State Protection and Counter Terrorism estimates that, up to the end of 2018, 93 foreign terrorist fighters have already returned to Austria,<sup>20</sup> leaving the 'Islamic State' on their own initiative because they were wounded or tired of the war. Returnees faced a criminal trial upon return. Austrian legal provisions allow for a conviction as member of a

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/27/austrian-full-face-veil-ban-condemned-failure-police-integration-smog-marks-animal-costumes> (retrieved 10-10-2018).

<sup>17</sup> Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx> (retrieved 10-10-2018).

<sup>18</sup> The Austrian Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism and De-radicalisation. Available at: [https://www.bvt.gv.at/bmi\\_documents/2241.pdf](https://www.bvt.gv.at/bmi_documents/2241.pdf) (retrieved 06-11-2018).

<sup>19</sup> For an overview of governmental and non-governmental initiatives and policies in Austria, see Götsch (2017).

<sup>20</sup> Available at: <https://www.bvt.gv.at/401/files/Verfassungsschutzbericht2018.pdf> (retrieved 16-02-2020).

terrorist organisation even in cases when actual fighting cannot be proven in court (see above). Today, some of the early returnees are still in prison, others have already been released. But what happened to those foreign fighters and their families who were still living under the ISIS regime when it was officially defeated in 2019 and who then fell in the hands of their enemies?

With the defeat of ISIS, tens of thousands of fighters and their relatives were taken into custody in Iraq and Syria. According to official Iraqi sources,<sup>21</sup> no Austrian citizens are imprisoned in Iraq. At least two male fighters and four women with four children are in custody of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an umbrella organisation of Kurdish, Arab, and Christian militias in north-eastern Syria. One Austrian woman already surrendered to SDF in fall 2018. Since then, she and her child have been staying in Camp Roj. When Baghouz, the last land base of ISIS, was conquered by the end of March 2019 at least three other Austrian women and five children of Austrian women (and thus also Austrian citizens) were brought to al-Hol Camp. In October 2019, two of the children – most likely orphans – were brought back to Austria. Currently, three Austrian children remain in this camp.

The al-Hol Camp detains more than 70,000 ISIS-dependants, mostly women and children who stayed in Baghouz until the end. The two male fighters are not held in one of the detention camps, but in prisons in the self-administrated area in north-eastern Syria.

Thus, at the time of this research, in total, we know about four women, one of them pregnant, with four children being detained in the Camp al-Hol and Camp Roj. The responsible authorities in north-eastern Syria have repeatedly asked European and other countries to take back their citizens and put them to trial in their home countries. But like other European countries, Austria is denying its responsibility for its citizens abroad. A transfer of the detainees fails only because of the Austrian government's lack of political will.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Information from the Iraqi ministry of interior from early 2018 after the defeat of ISIS in Iraq.

<sup>22</sup> The former minister of the interior from the right-wing Freedom party repeatedly declared that he would oppose every initiative to take back Austrian foreign fighters, even if they were small children or babies. Moreover, the minister of foreign affairs claimed that the woman detained in Camp Roj had refused the offer that

Therefore, until the end of the Austrian coalition government in May 2019, not a single ISIS-family member was official repatriated to Austria. Only after a transitional government was formed in June 2019 because of the right-wing coalition's collapse, an exception was made for two apparent orphans. After immense public attention and a long procedure, including DNA-testing, the Austrian ministry of foreign affairs finally took back the two motherless children from al-Hol Camp in early October 2019. Until the end of February 2020 not a single adult adherent of ISIS was brought back to Austria by the authorities.

Austria is in a peculiar situation. Although it has been one of the EU countries with the highest per-capita share of foreign fighters, only very few Austrian *citizens* joined ISIS or other terrorist groups in the Syrian war. As has been described above, a large share of Austria's outgoing fighters were Chechens or other foreigners who have been living in Austria with the status of a recognised refugee.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the Austrian state and the city of Vienna are now trying to withdraw the Austrian citizenship from several male foreign fighters, including at least one of the imprisoned men mentioned previously.

Even if female ISIS adherents are, of course, not to be regarded as innocent or harmless, four women and their children may be considered a manageable number of new returnees, keeping in mind that Austria has already dealt successfully with almost 100 returnees since 2014, including children. As Cook & Vale stress, this is not only a human rights issue but also a security issue: 'repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration (as appropriate) remain the most feasible for their successful long-term monitoring' (Cook & Vale, 2019: 16).

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her child was transferred to Austria and that she had denied the possibility of returning to her home country herself (see <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000100567479/oesterreichisches-is-kind-bleibt-in-syrien>). However, when speaking with the women before and after this announcement, she clearly declared that she wanted to come back to Austria with her child. She also declared that she had never told any official that she did not want to return to Austria.

<sup>23</sup> Even if most of them would have been eligible for the Austrian citizenship because they have lived for more than a decade in Austria, the naturalisation rate amongst this population was very low.

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Hofinger & Schmidinger: 'Muhajirun' from Austria. Why they left to join ISIS and why they don't return.

Currently, these women and their children in al-Hol grow up in a jihadist universe. When walking through the camp, visitors note that nearly all women wear a niqab.<sup>24</sup> A hostile atmosphere exists towards visitors and the Kurdish guards. Both guards and women report that Hisba, the moral police of ISIS, have control of the camp. These highly ideological and brutalised women of the Hisba threaten women who deviate from the jihadist ideology. From June until the end of 2019, some women killed 24 other women inside the camp. In January 2020, another casualty added to this series of killings.<sup>25</sup> In this atmosphere of terror, even victims of ISIS often do not dare to say that they are victims and not perpetrators.<sup>26</sup> In 2020, Yazidi girls could still be found inside the camp who were too frightened to tell the Kurdish guards that they are actually victims of ISIS. If this situation will continue, the children of European ISIS-women will very likely grow up with numerous traumatic experiences accompanied by indoctrination in extremist ideology.

In Schmidinger's interviews during several trips to the region, these women expressed the feeling of being abandoned by the Austrian state. Though some had serious doubts about the ideology and methods of ISIS after its failure, they are not yet 'deradicalised'. Moreover, the idea that the Austrian state abandoned them becomes part of their narrative and a subsequent justification for their migration to the 'Islamic State'. At least for those female jihadis who did not personally commit any serious acts of violence,<sup>27</sup> this perception of rejection enables them to maintain a victim myth. Their earlier alienation from the Austrian state and society is repeated and reinforced by the clear signal that they are not welcome. Obviously, this alienation will also be passed on to the next generation.

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, a New York Times report from al-Hol via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eD7hDRTWKjY> (retrieved 16-02-2020).

<sup>25</sup> Interview with guards of al-Hol Camp from the Women's Defence Units YPJ.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with guards of al-Hol Camp from the Women's Defence Units YPJ and Interview with Abdelkarim Omar, the Co-chair of the Foreign Relations Commission who is responsible for the negotiations about the foreign ISIS-members with international governments, February 1, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Which is not the case for all female jihadis. Women were active in the Hisba and some women also were active as fighters at the end of the 'Islamic State'. Other women also committed crimes against enslaved Yazidis or Christians. However, men committed most of the serious crimes of ISIS.

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## Conclusion

Austria has been one of Europe's countries with the highest per capita share of Muhajirun joining Syrian and Iraqi jihadist groups. Foreign fighters and other Islamist extremists after 9/11 stemmed from three networks connected to distinct geographical regions such as to Bosnia and the Sandžak of Novi Pazar, to Chechnya, and to Germany. Our research showed that the different networks and milieus amalgamated in the individual biographies of young people who joined ISIS. Earlier affiliations were partly replaced by the jihadist ideology offering a new, strong identity as a 'real Muslim' belonging to the Umma and fighting disbelievers.

After the defeat of ISIS in 2019 until March 2020, no Austrian returnees except two orphan children were repatriated from the camps under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces. Yet, the annual report of the Federal Agency for State Protection and Counter Terrorism states that it is not by accident that 'a larger number of returnees after the military defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq in 2018 has not yet arrived' in Austria. Firstly, most foreign fighters from Austria do not possess the Austrian citizenship, therefore Austria cannot be held accountable for their destiny – even if some of them grew up in Austria but never naturalised. Secondly, there is no political will to repatriate Austrian fighters and their relatives despite the fact that only four women with their children are currently being detained in the camps under the authority of the Syrian Democratic Forces. As shown by the successful response to 93 returnees who came to Austria on their own efforts during recent years, the Austrian authorities could manage the repatriation of these woman and children. According to the Austrian legal situation, they can be brought to court without proof of concrete combat actions, and, in view of their small number and the small size of the country, their surveillance and supervision seems to be possible. Repatriating them is not only a fundamental responsibility of the state for its citizens, but also allows for a fair trial that considers human rights and international law. It gives, in addition, a chance to rehabilitate and deradicalise these women and to offer their children, who are not responsible for the mistakes of their

parents, a liveable future. Otherwise, Austrian children will grow up in camps used by battle-hardened extremists to raise the next generation of jihadist fighters.

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