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## Special Correspondence

### De-Radicalising Militant Salafists

by Nina Käsehage

#### **Editor's Introduction**

*In the framework of research on Salafism for a doctoral thesis at the Department of Religious Studies at Göttingen University, the author of this Special Correspondence conducted, between 2012 and 2016, a total of 175 interviews with Salafist preachers and their followers in ten countries. What started as an academic investigation soon became also a humanitarian rescue effort as 38 of the interviewees were preparing to go to Syria in order to join the jihadi group Jabhat al-Nusra (more recently renamed Fatah as-Sham). In collaboration with the interviewees' parents, the author managed – by channeling existing destructive potential into more constructive paths – to prevent the departure of 35 of them [Those radicalized militants where her crisis intervention was not successful got killed shortly after their arrival in Syria]. In the following contribution to Perspectives on Terrorism, the author shares some reflections on her conversations with three militants – two girls and one young man – each representing a different type of vulnerable person.*

#### **Introduction**

An 'outsider' not used to the militant way of thinking may see those radicalized young men and women as being caught up in an all-encompassing ideology. Yet they themselves do not feel like they are being orchestrated; on the contrary, they might be "feeling free for the first time in [their] lives." [1] However, they are not all of one type. Here are short sketches of three types of radicalized militants.

#### **Type One Militant: 'All-or-Nothing' Perspective**

*"If you want to stop me from joining the jihad, you have to kill me at once. The pathway of jihad is my predetermined way. I adore Allah, I want to live next to his residence, my death will be the key to my truthful new beginning."*[2]

This quote from Umm Safia (not her real name), a 21 year-old female student, living in a German city, illustrates her determination: if she could not follow the pathway to jihad, she would rather want to die. This kind of interviewee can be categorized as a "Type One Militant." It would appear that there exists nothing in between for her, no alternative life perspective, that living means either opting for jihad or nothing. The specific mental frame that Umm Safia has internalized by following the jihadi ideology is one of a readiness to make sacrifices, and includes sacrificing her own life for a 'higher cause' to show her devotion. [3] The question 'what could be of higher value than her own life?' remains outside her consideration, being consumed by the jihadi ideology.

A possible approach toward the Type One Militant is to question its stereotypical position and ask 'why is it better to die than to stay alive? Did Allah not prohibit the killing of other human beings?'[4] To use the term 'human beings' implies not to assess another person in terms of having the 'correct' or 'wrong' religious status, but relates to behavior toward others. Showing such a Type One Militant the different ways to interpret the Qu'ran can change their point of view.

### ***Type Two Militant: Falling in Love with a Jihadi Groomer***

*“My future husband dearly loves me. He knows which way I have to choose, because he can gauge my skills correctly. Allah, peace upon him, has sent him to me, to guide and to protect me.” [5]*

These words of Umm Nour (not her real name), an 18 year-old girl, who wanted to travel to Syria to marry a jihadi fighter ten years older whom she only knew from her correspondence via social media platforms, reflects his strong influence on her. This young woman did not question the motives or objectives of a complete stranger, when he reached out to groom her. How could he gain such a comprehensive control over Umm Nour? A few months before they met each other online, Umm Nour’s twin sister died in a tragic accident. Losing her closest relative placed Umm Nour in a situation that Quintan Wiktorowicz has described as ‘cognitive opening’: a distressing event leading to a personal crisis and the questioning of all familiar values suddenly opens the door to a new perspective. [6] In this moment of crisis, she got in contact with her “future husband” who managed to take total control over her life. Her situation is comparable with the one of vulnerable girls falling under the influence of so-called ‘Lover-Boys’ – young males who make minor girls dependent by initial acts of kindness in order to make them compliant and ultimately force them into prostitution. [7] Type Two Militant women are attracted by the attention and care they initially receive from *mujahedeen* (fighters) on the jihadi online platforms.

One possible approach to save them for going down the paths of personal ruin and to bring them back to reality is to interrupt the 24/7 influence of those militant online seducers by taking away the girl’s smart phone or her Internet access on the computer for a prolonged period of time. If the continuous impact of brainwashing on those vulnerable girls is cut off, there is the chance to open their eyes and expose the real intentions of those dangerous online seducers.

### ***Type Three Militant: Negative Sympathy***

*“Watching my enemies die, makes me feel great. The sound of their screams feels as sweet as honey to my ears. There is nothing better than to see the kuffar [infidels] suffer!”[8]*

In addition to those wishing to sacrifice themselves in a jihad, there are also those who like to see others suffer. One of them is Abu Said (not his real name), a 24 year-old Muslim, who was part of a ‘bunch of guys’ in Germany who wanted to join the jihad in Syria. To make himself feel good and increase his self-importance, the Type Three Militant has a need to feel the fear and often also the pain of others over whom he likes to exercise power. Several psychiatric examinations of radicalized militants have identified a connection between certain mental health problems and a preference for violence directed towards others. [9] In the case of Abu Said, it became obvious that he might have sadistic tendencies, as he appeared to enjoy the humiliation and the pain of his chosen enemies. Type Three Militants can be found not only in the sphere of a militant religious milieu, but also in other social milieus where they experience satisfaction by humiliating other people. Depending on how pronounced such sadistic tendencies are, it might be possible to wake the Type Three Militant up to reality, for instance by showing him that inflicting pain harms not only victims but also perpetrators in their own mental well-being. In principle, militants with this type of personality disorder are difficult to bring back from the brink and professional assistance of a psychologist or a psychiatrist might be required when dealing with Type Three Militants.

### ***Sketching Alternative Life Pathways***

In general, it is important to show the good and bad facets of life to radicalized militants in a realistic way, because many of those young adults have lost their faith in either family or their wider societal environment; they are desperately searching for something new they can believe in. Unfortunately, jihadism is often one of the first things they come across on the Internet when searching for information on Islam. Until not so long

ago, when people were googling the word 'Islam' in Germany, Salafist websites (e.g. the one of the Salafi-group 'Die wahre Religion' [The true religion], which is outlawed since the 15th November 2016), turned up on top of the Google list. In the meantime, government interventions have brought about a change to this and people are directed to websites which do not contain radical Islamist content.

By showing radicalized Salafists all the possible individual, social, political, religious and professional opportunities open to young men and women in open societies, there is a chance to reach those who have given up on their societies. Often it comes down to two things: how many arguments does a radicalized person need to be able to deconstruct the jihadi-narratives and how much time does that take? This depends on the individual and the situation itself. Sometimes my dialogues with those who wanted to travel to Syria took only two to three hours to have a positive effect; in other cases the discussions lasted more than twelve hours. Often getting genuine person-to-person interaction for such prolonged periods of time appeared to be almost as important as the substance of the deconstruction argumentation itself.

### ***Conflict Prevention–Business as Usual?***

Unfortunately, preventing vulnerable youth from joining the jihad is not the end. Often it is just the beginning of a de-radicalization process. After preventing the departure of radicalized militants, they might be safe for the moment, but no one knows what tomorrow will bring. Therefore parents and others concerned about radicalized militants ought to get in touch with de-radicalization institutions like GIRDS (German Institute on Radicalization and De-radicalization Studies – [girds.org](http://girds.org)) or EXIT (<http://www.exit-deutschland.de/english/>), which can offer professional expertise and services. Moreover, stepping out of the jihadi milieu might not automatically mean that someone will leave the Salafist environment. To be prepared for the option that a former would-be jihadi militant wishes to continue life as a quietist Salafi (as opposed to a jihadi one) might avoid disappointments on the side of parents and others concerned about him or her. More important than quitting an individual religious movement is leaving behind a destructive and life-denying way of thinking. This is possible, if civil society is supportive and fights for the life of every member at risk of going down the path of jihad.

***About the Author:*** *Nina Käsehage is a religion scientist at the Department of Religious Studies of the University of Göttingen, Germany. Her research areas include the Salafi-movement in Germany and other European countries, various other forms of religious extremism as well as de-radicalization approaches, both in theory and practice. Recently she completed her Ph. D. thesis titled 'The Contemporary Salafi Scene in Germany and its European Networks'. The dissertation was based on multi-level field research.*

### **Notes**

[1] Quote from an interview with a male militant in a city in the west of Germany in the summer of 2014; he stood on the point of travelling to Syria in order to join the Jabhat al Nusrah.

[2] Quote from an interview conducted in the spring of 2014 with a female student in a city in northern Germany; the girl wanted to travel to Syria in order to join Jabhat al Nusrah.

[3] Cf. Qu'ran 2:94.

[4] Cf. Qu'ran 5:32.

[5] Quote from an interview in the spring of 2014 in a city in the east of Germany; the girl wanted to travel to Syria in order to marry a *mujahid*.

[6] Quintan Wiktorowicz (Ed.), *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, p. 20.

[7] Cf. Günther Bubenitschek; Bärbel Kannemann; Melanie Wegel: Die "Loverboys"-Methode, Ein neues Phänomen in der Jugendprostitution, in: *Kriminalistik* (8-9/2011), pp. 537-542. Cf. URL: <http://www.stoploverboys.nu>.

[8] Quote from an interview conducted in the spring of 2014 in a city in southern Germany; this person wanted to travel to Syria in order to join Jabhat al Nusrah.

[9] Cf. URL: <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2016/07/link-mental-health-violence-160727171530602.html>; accessed 29 July, 2016.