

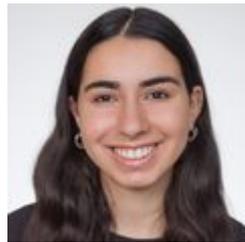


Extremely manipulated

The role of adolescence and family in the context of radicalization in Germany



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What is the role of family and the social environment in the radicalization of young people? Are there similarities in socialization with regard to Islamist and right-wing extremist violence? The article by Eylem Kanol and Berivan Kalkan describes the crucial role of socialization in the family and presents analyses from the WZB Protest Monitoring, which is part of the research excellence cluster “Monitoring System and Transfer Platform Radicalization” (MOTRA).

During a routine identity check at a Hanover train station on February 26, 2016, Safia S. stabbed and seriously wounded a federal police officer with a knife. She committed the assault in Germany because her departure for Syria had failed and because she wanted to act in support of the “Islamic State.” Safia was only 15 years old at the time. But she is no exception: it is not uncommon for teenagers to join the ranks of the “Islamic State.”

We collected biographical data on 1,019 so-called “foreign fighters”: individuals who travelled to a conflict zone between 2000 and 2016 motivated by their radical Islamist convictions. The information on these fighters and their biographies comes primarily from publicly available sources, such as newspaper articles, reports, or books. The database covers foreign fighters from France (327 individuals), Germany (322 individuals), and the United Kingdom (370 individuals).

In addition, we are currently collecting biographies of perpetrators of right-wing extremist violence. This research is one of the activities of the WZB Protest Monitoring project, which is part of “MOTRA: Monitoring System and Transfer Platform Radicalization,” a research excellence cluster funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI). To date, we have identified profiles of 56 right-wing extremist perpetrators of lethal violence from Germany who carried out acts between 2000 and 2020. Using this comparative approach, we can demonstrate that our findings can be generalized to other forms of extremism. In our paper, we present the results of our analyses on the biographical data of the foreign fighters who left their home countries and complement them with our findings on right-wing extremist perpetrators.

The youngest fighter to travel to Syria was only 11 years old

Overall, the average age of foreign fighters at the time of departure was 25; more than half were younger than 25 when they left their home countries. The youngest persons to leave in our survey were 11-year-old Joe G. D. from the United Kingdom and 11-year-old Rayan from France. Joe’s mother, Sally J., a convert who has become a figurehead for the “Islamic State,” persuaded her son to leave for Syria. Similarly, Rayan, along with his French mother and her four children, was prompted to travel to northern Syria by his extremist stepfather, Sabri E. In both cases, parents played a key role in the radicalization of their children. The same was true with Safia S., who was raised on strict religious values by her mother. Even as a child, she was well-known among Salafist circles in Germany. There are numerous YouTube clips showing the elementary school-aged girl alongside Salafist preacher Pierre Vogel, answering questions and reading from the Koran, among other things.

More than a third of those who left were radicalized within the family

Family members and friends are [key factors](#) in the radicalization of foreign fighters. This is suggested by the context of radicalization in their biographies. We have information on the radicalization of approximately 70 percent of those who left to fight abroad. In about 31 percent of the cases we examined, the path to extremism was fostered by the family environment. In the case of right-wing extremism, the family context also plays a decisive role: Here, around 20 percent became radicalized in their families.

But how do children and young people become radicalized in their families? Socialization is a lifelong process, but childhood and adolescence are crucial. In this phase, primary socialization takes place within the family. Social expectations are learned, and basic social norms and value systems are [formed and internalized](#). This may occur through intentional intervention, that is, through young people’s upbringing and education, but also through living together in society. Stable interactions are a prerequisite for the emergence and internalization of social norms. These norms, on the one hand, have a lasting effect on the individual’s mindset and actions; on the other hand, they serve as the

basis for adolescent's character development, which is guided by the norms embraced by their parents. As they go through this development, young people are not yet firm in their values, self-image, and identity, making them more susceptible to outside influence. Radical religious ideas, values, and norms may be passed on to them just like more general values and norms.

For a more specific analysis of the role of religion at home, we looked at parents' religious behavior and ideology. We distinguished between three categories: non-practicing parents, practicing parents, and radical Islamist parents. The first describes parents who do not practice their religion at all or are secular. Religious parents practice their religion, for example, by attending a mosque or by wearing religious clothing, e.g., a headscarf. Parents were only assigned to the third category when the sources explicitly indicated that they were known to be followers of radical Islam, Islamists, or Salafists. If the parents of those who travelled to become foreign fighters belonged to the Islamist spectrum themselves, it is fair to assume that they contributed significantly to their children's radicalization by acting as an authority in their socialization. In 240 cases (24 percent), at least one parent was religious. In more than a third of these cases, a religious parent was described as a follower or adherent of a radical interpretation of Islam.

A similar picture emerges when analyzing the biographies of the right-wing extremist perpetrators. Here, we distinguished between right-wing extremist and non-right-wing extremist parents and were able to retrieve information on nine cases (15 percent). Of these cases, about one-third had a right-wing extremist parent. Given the relatively large share of individuals about whom we do not have information, these results should be interpreted with caution. That said, our findings do suggest that parents are instrumental in right-wing extremist radicalization as well.

Overall, the biographical data results show that a high share of the so-called foreign fighters have indeed been brought up and socialized in Islamist families. The German Office for the Protection of the Constitution estimates that there are approximately [25,000 potential Islamists](#) in Germany. According to these estimates, Islamists make up less than 1 percent of the Muslim population in Germany (for estimates of the number of Muslims living in Germany, see the analysis by Anja Stichs: *How Many Muslims Live in Germany?*). When considering that one-third of foreign fighters have at least one Islamist parent, they disproportionately often come from Islamist families.

Other factors that make adolescents vulnerable to radicalization

What else contributes to the radicalization of youth? Adolescents are at a critical stage in their development, marked by multiple life-stage-specific factors. Aside from family socialization, social relationships play a formative role. Weak social ties and interactions with friends and family, as well as having no or only a marginalized sense of belonging to the community, can lead to "a desire for revenge and violence" and thus [contribute to radicalization](#). In addition, the group of adolescents is distinct from other social groups and society-at-large because of specific attributions and characteristics. Young people

tend to embrace idealistic attitudes, that is, attitudes that give meaning to their lives, and they are more willing to take risks. Compared to adults, they are more likely to cross boundaries and engage in more impulsive and risky [behavior](#).

To adolescents, making risky decisions is a key part of their journey towards finding their identity and becoming independent young adults. Adolescent risk behavior has been the object of multiple studies, some of which refer to neurological aspects, for example, emphasizing that the developing brain [plays a crucial role](#). Thus, adolescents are more tolerant to situations with uncertain outcomes. On the one hand, they are less willing to gather information [to assess the risks of their behavior](#); on the other hand, they think less of the consequences of their decisions. They are also more open to new ideas and experiences, and hence more likely to be driven by the search for new experiences.

The aforementioned aspects of socialization and the values and norms passed on in young people's family and environment can have a strong effect. The phase of adolescence is characterized by an interplay between socialization and age. This phase is clearly a transformative time involving a high potential for stress, which may facilitate radicalization. In our empirical study of biographies, we examined the contexts of radicalization and the role of parents in the radical-religious socialization of youth. In summary, our findings suggest that family context is a risk factor for radicalization across phenomena. Unfortunately, our current data do not allow for specific analyses of the additional stress factors described above. However, in combination with problematic socialization, these life-course-specific factors may further promote radicalization among youth. In the next steps of the MOTRA project, we will address these issues in cooperation with the University of Hamburg based on a representative survey of young people in Germany to better understand this interplay of stress factors

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