

Frankfurter Rundschau – Politics, August 8, 2015

ISLAM – ISLAMISM

## **Islamism – The Unknown Enemy**

By Susanne Schröter

**We do not know enough about Islamism – that’s why we are unable to find an antidote against it. Susanne Schröter, an expert on Islam, explains strategies of prevention. A guest essay.**

Some 20,000 foreign volunteers from 74 countries, including 700 or so from Germany, are currently fighting in the troops of the “Islamic State” (IS). Youths aged between 16 and 25 commit gruesome human rights violations in Syria and Iraq and carry out deadly attacks outside the so-called caliphate, such as those in Copenhagen, Paris, Kuwait City, Tunis, Sousse, Saint-Quentin-Fallavier; it is likely that they were also responsible for the bombing in the Turkish town of Suruç. Hence, good strategies of prevention and deradicalization are bitterly needed – in Germany as well as in other places.



Verteilung des Korans in Berlin. Foto: REUTERS

However, the question arises as to the nature of these strategies. There is no lack of political will to take measures, but this is not enough. Even countries such as Denmark and Great Britain, which have many years of experience in prevention projects, have not yet been able to come up with any efficient remedy against the appeal held by Salafism and Jihadism for Muslim youths. Nor have they been able to reduce the number of people who leave these countries to join the jihad. Why is this?

The first thing that becomes apparent in international comparison is that social actors involved in prevention and

deradicalization do not share a common notion of the causes of Salafism and Jihadism. Instead, there is a multitude of assumptions, most of which are not based on academic research but on political reasoning. While leftists view radicalization basically as a result of Islamophobia and the discrimination of socially marginalized (post-)migrant youth, conservatives put the blame on unregulated multiculturalism, arguing that this results in the self-imposed isolation of whole groups of the population, and in the emergence of parallel societies.

### **DISAGREEMENT ON THE MEANING OF ISLAM**

Proponents of the first perspective vote for more investment in social and youth work as well as in anti-discrimination measures. Conservatives, in turn, count on repression and control. Both strategies are not really new, and each is fraught with some unresolved problems. Police measures are tainted by being undemocratic, and trigger protest on the part of those who view them as a threat to open society. In addition, such measures are suspected of stigmatizing Muslims as a group.

Youth and social work, on the other hand, is viewed as inefficient by many. While it is hailed as the key element of prevention, a closer look leads to the impression that additional financial means are just provided for something that, rather than having been devised last year, has already existed for a long time.

There is also disagreement as to the meaning of Islam. Some people emphasize that Jihadism has nothing to do with Islam, and they object to the term “Islamism”, fearing that it casts a slur on all Muslims. Others think that the crimes of the IS are lent legitimacy by the Qur’an and Sunna; they call for a critical debate on these texts or even for a reform of Islam.

There is still another question that has an impact on the measures to be taken: does religion actually play a role in the Salafist-Jihadist mobilization? Or is that mobilization ultimately about the formation of exclusive “in-groups”, adventure, and power? If we think that youths are attracted by the Salafist-Jihadist ideology, counter-narratives may be an option; if not, such narratives are not needed.

There is also the basic question as to who is “radical” in the first place. Is it just people who propagate violence, like the former rapper Deso Dogg who is up to mischief in Syria? Or is it also people like the Salafist preacher Abdul Adhim Kamouss who rejects violence and warns against the IS in his sermons? Should quietist Salafists be integrated into prevention work, or should they be isolated because they provide the mental breeding ground for the Jihad? And, talking about mental breeding ground: What about the segment of the Muslim mainstream that ultimately aspires to an Islamic state, too, but postpones that goal to some vague time in the future? Are those Muslims part of the solution or part of the problem?

These and other questions are answered in diverse ways by those who are in charge in prevention programs and state institutions. They base their decisions on their respective convictions. This is why we are dealing with a patchwork of measures that are of only limited compatibility –in Germany and elsewhere. There is currently a lack of many things, including reliable data on the backgrounds and causes of Islamic radicalization. Research is a must in that sphere, but it is still in its infancy – not least because the subject was long considered disreputable at the universities, where there was instead a focus on Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism.

## LACK OF EVALUATION

Another deficit is the lack of evaluation of measures, both new and old, that have already been implemented. Let us take the example of youth work, which does not have the desired effect of preventing radicalization. This may be due to insufficient human and financial resources, wrong concepts, or simply to the fact that Jihadism cannot be prevented by such measures. So far, no indicators exist that can be used for assessing the success of programs, nor are independent evaluations being planned.

In order to counter Islamism efficiently, not only a concerted, research-based program is needed but also a broad perspective. We are not just dealing with individual youths undergoing a life crisis but with general issues related to the immigration society: options of participation, city

planning, collective identities, the yearning for a “home” of one’s own, the challenges posed by a complex modernity and, last but not least, credible foreign policy.

Whoever exports arms to Saudi Arabia, the main financier and ideological primordial bog of global Islamic terror, is not in a position to make a good case for fighting the caliphate of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The doubles-dealing of German diplomacy plays into the hands of the jihadists who argue that the jihad is a legitimate struggle for justice. Foreign and internal policy need to be conceptualized as a whole, as it is obvious that conflicts outside Europe have repercussions in our own society.

Holger Münch, the head of the German Federal Criminal Police Office, has called for a master plan to combat Islamic extremism. He is absolutely right. If the goal is more than symbolic policy and superficial reassurance of the public, a conceptual framework is needed instead of many small individual measures.

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