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**HOW DO RELIGIOUSLY EXTREMIST ACTORS USE
ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS FOR RECRUITMENT -
AND WHAT CONCLUSIONS CAN BE DRAWN FROM
THIS FOR POLICE PREVENTION WORK?**

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1. Introduction, objectives, and methodology

1.1 Introduction to the topic

Today, the recruitment of young people by religious extremist actors takes place to a large extent in digitally mediated communication spaces (RAN 2022). Social networks, messenger services, and video platforms enable extremists to reach very different target groups in a short period of time, build relationships, and gradually integrate them into radical milieus (Gill et al. 2017; RAN 2022). This raises the question for practitioners in the police, security agencies, and civil society of how online recruitment actually works and where effective interventions are possible (RAN 2022).

The 225 security-related cases from 2016 to 2018 evaluated as part of a Bavarian exit program already show that social media platforms represent the entry point into Islamist extremist radicalization for a large number of those affected (Schüler 2017). In many cases, the process begins with the consumption of propagandistic preacher videos, for example by Salafist actors, whose content specifically addresses patterns of reception in youth culture (Schüler 2017). Building on this, contact is established with members of the scene via social networks, which in some cases can lead to massive changes in attitudes, conflicts in the parental home, and security-relevant behavior within a few weeks (Schüler 2017).

his is impressively illustrated by the case of 13-year-old „Marie K.“ (pseudonym), who grew up in a small Bavarian town without a family migration background. After a phase of intensive use of computers and smartphones, her mother noticed significant withdrawal and changes in attitude. The trigger for concern was ultimately a heated argument in which Marie called her mother a „kuffar slut“ – a term that her mother was only able to identify after conducting her own internet research. Research revealed that Marie had initially entered the scene via online ser-



mons by a Salafist preacher and had then specifically contacted relevant actors via social networks.

Within about two months, she had developed a superficial but security-relevant interest in Islamist extremist content, which required rapid intervention by counseling centers and the police (Schüler 2017).

The intertwining of online communication, the world of young people, and extremism becomes even clearer in the case of 18-year-old „Tim K.“ He posted a message in a school WhatsApp group chat saying that his „lifelong dream“ was to „die in jihad“ and, at the same time, carved the logo of the so-called „Islamic State“ into school desks. The subsequent investigation revealed intensive online engagement with jihadist propaganda and online preachers, as well as contacts with individuals at so-called Koran distribution stands (Schüler 2017). The case exemplifies how online recruitment impulses—propaganda and establishing contact—can intersect with youthful rebellion, status seeking, and provocative behavior and lead to situations that require police intervention (Schüler 2017).

At the same time, case studies show that online recruitment rarely happens in isolation (Schüler 2017; RAN 2022). In almost all cases examined, personal contacts within the extremist milieu were found—often after initial digital engagement—which stabilized and deepened the process. For example, 15-year-old „Lisa-Marie A.“ initially used social media platforms to compensate for loneliness after moving to a rural area, where she made contact with Salafist actors. This led to the development of romantically coded online relationships that facilitated her entry into a Salafist lifestyle and made it difficult for her to distance herself from it for years (Schüler 2017). These and other cases underscore that while online recruitment is often the visible trigger, the lasting consolidation of radical attitudes is almost always linked to relationship building—both online and offline (RAN 2022).



Empirical syntheses by the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) come to similar conclusions (RAN 2022). The central RAN report „Online Radicalisation – What we know“ emphasizes that the internet should primarily be understood as a catalyst and amplifier of already established radicalization processes, enabling propaganda, networking, recruitment, and organizational functions at high speed and range (RAN 2022). At the same time, RAN highlights the limited evidence available and the need to always consider online radicalization and recruitment in conjunction with individual vulnerabilities, social contexts, and offline relationships (RAN 2022; Gill et al. 2017).

1.2 Objectives and methodology of the article

Against this background, this article pursues two objectives.

First, it aims to identify how religious extremist actors specifically use online environments for recruitment: Which communication spaces and platforms are used, which narratives and aesthetic forms dominate, and what role do peers, „micro-influencers,“ and personal relationships play? (RAN 2022; RAN 2021).

Second, based on RAN findings and academic literature, it aims to develop practical implications for prevention and intervention that are particularly relevant for the police, security authorities, exit programs, and other first points of contact (RAN 2022; El Difraoui et al. 2021).

The article combines three strands of knowledge:

- RAN publications on online radicalization and the role of digital communication spaces in recruitment processes.
- The international state of research on online extremism, social media-based recruitment strategies, and radicalization processes in jihadist religious extremism.
- Practice-based case studies from a Bavarian exit program, which have already been published in edited form and provide concrete insights into the dynamics of online recruitment and deradicalization.



2. Terms, context, and framework

2.1 Online recruitment

In the following, online recruitment refers to the use of digital communication spaces, in particular social media, messenger services, forums, video and gaming platforms, to systematically introduce individuals to religious extremist scenes, bind them to these scenes () and, in the long term, win them over for supportive or activist actions (RAN 2022; Gill et al. 2017).

It involves more than simply „exposing“ extremist content: the decisive factors are the transition from general online propaganda to the targeted identification of vulnerable individuals, personal contact (often via direct messages or closed groups), and the establishment of stable, usually emotionally charged relationships (RAN 2022).

Case studies from Bavaria show that social media plays at least three roles: as a medium for public information and propaganda, as a stage for rebellion and status communication, and as an amplifier of emotional appeal and relationship building (Schüler 2017). In many cases, the development begins with the consumption of relevant videos (e.g., sermons by Salafist actors), continues with participation in comment columns, groups, and chats, and culminates in individually tailored contact and offers of commitment (Schüler 2017). Complete radicalization and recruitment processes without real-life contacts remain the exception; the internet is primarily an accelerator and range extender, not the sole cause (RAN 2022; Schüler 2017).



In a narrower sense, online recruitment is therefore understood as a sub-process of online radicalization: it follows on from initial exposure to extremist content, uses digital spaces to create a sense of belonging and identity, and often prepares the transition to offline networks (RAN 2022).

2.2 Religious extremism, Islamism, and Salafism

For the present analysis, it is essential to clarify terminology, as terms such as „religious extremism,“ „Islamism,“ and „Salafism“ are not used uniformly in academia, practice, and the public sphere (Pfahl-Traugher 2019; El Difraoui et al. 2021).

Following the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, extremism is defined as an effort to eliminate the fundamental values of the free democratic basic order (BfV 2017). In addition, social science literature emphasizes that extremist ideologies are typically characterized by a worldview that is understood as superior, an absolute claim to truth, rigid friend-foe schemata, and the subordination of the individual to a supposedly higher collective interest (Neumann 2016; Abou-Taam 2014).

Islamism can be understood in Pfahl-Traugher's sense as a collective term for political views and actions that seek to establish a social and political order legitimized solely by religion in the name of Islam (Pfahl-Traugher 2019).

The goal is a theocratic order in which Islam is not only an individual way of life, but also a binding guideline for the state and society (Roy 2003). The use of violence is not a mandatory feature; Islamist actors can act in a legalistic, missionary, or charitable manner, while violence-oriented movements can be classified as jihadist terrorism (Neumann 2016; Doosje et al. 2016).

Salafism, on the other hand, represents a specific variant of Sunni Islamism that is particularly relevant in Germany (Bauknecht 2018; Abou-Taam 2014). Salafist actors propagate a return to a supposedly „original“



form of Islam, reject Western concepts of democracy and human rights, and proclaim that they represent „true Islam“ (BfV 2012; Neumann 2016). In Germany, the Salafist scene has developed within a few years from a small network of preachers into a movement shaped by youth culture, which is particularly appealing to teenagers and young adults due to its media-savvy communication, simple answers, and strong group identity (Abou-Taam et al. 2016; El Difraoui et al. 2021).

Religious extremism in the narrower sense is understood here as an umbrella category within which jihadist Islamism and, in particular, violent Salafism play a central role (Doosje et al. 2016). This article therefore focuses on online recruitment processes within this spectrum, without ignoring other forms of religiously motivated extremism.

2.3 Radicalization and the online dimension

Following on from your own work and Schüler, radicalization can be described as a process in which individuals gradually become more receptive to extreme ideologies and, in some cases, develop a willingness to accept violence as a legitimate means of achieving political and religious goals (Schüler 2017). There is no such thing as „the“ typical path to radicalization or a uniform set of standard factors; rather, models such as those developed by Moghaddam, Silber/Bhatt, Precht, Sageman, and Borum show a variety of possible trajectories and influencing factors (Moghaddam 2005; Silber/Bhatt 2007; Sageman 2004; Borum 2011). It is crucial to understand radicalization as a dynamic, context-dependent process with individual, social, political, and ideological dimensions (Doosje et al. 2016).

In his qualitative study of the radicalization processes of Islamists, Schüler identifies key areas of influence, including religion/ideology, sense of community, reference persons, political perceptions, propensity to violence, personal prerequisites, and specific contexts such as prison, the internet, and targeted recruitment (Schüler 2017).



Particularly relevant to online recruitment are the findings on community spirit and initial contacts with the scene: many respondents were experiencing identity or life crises before turning to the Salafist milieu, seeking orientation, belonging, and clear rules, and found these in the dichotomous worldview of Salafism (Schüler 2017; Pfundmair/Schmidt 2019). The internet often served as an entry channel and a space for initial contact with like-minded people (Schüler 2017).

In Schüler's work, as well as in your anthology contribution, the online dimension is described as an important but not solely decisive factor (Schüler 2017; Schmidt 2018). The internet and social media contribute to the removal of geographical boundaries, identity-forming networking, and the emotional staging of conflicts; at the same time, the evaluation of case files and interviews shows that purely virtual radicalization processes are rare and that personal contacts play a central role in consolidation (Schüler 2017). This assessment is consistent with RAN findings, according to which the internet primarily acts as a catalyst that facilitates propaganda, community experience, and recruitment without replacing offline relationships (RAN 2022).

2.4 RAN as an analytical and practical framework

From 2011 to 2024, the European Union's Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) provided the overarching framework for this analysis (RAN 2022). During this period, RAN brought together practitioners from the police, judiciary, social work, education, research, and civil society across Europe with the aim of pooling knowledge on radicalization, prevention, and deradicalization and making it accessible in the form of papers, handouts, and collections of practices (RAN 2021). The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) was gradually replaced by the EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation as the new central EU structure in the course of 2024 (Start Insight 2024).



With regard to online recruitment, two RAN strands are particularly relevant:

The thematic report „Online Radicalisation – What we know,“ which synthesises empirical findings on the role of the internet in the radicalisation process and distinguishes between functions such as propaganda, networking, recruitment, and operationalisation. Among other things, it emphasizes the limited quality of evidence, the hybrid nature of online and offline, and the need to situate online phenomena in broader social contexts (RAN 2022).

The work of the Working Group Communication & Narratives (RAN C&N), which deals with extremist narratives, online communication, social media strategies, and counter and alternative narratives, and provides a practical planning and evaluation grid for communication campaigns with the GAMMMA+ model (RAN 2021).

RAN does not view online recruitment as an isolated technical process, but rather as a communicative and relationally embedded practice of extremist actors (RAN 2022). The conceptual definitions used here—for online recruitment, religious extremism, Islamism/Salafism, and radicalization—are therefore based on RAN concepts, but are concretized by your own empirical case analyses and Schüler’s qualitative results (Schüler 2017; Schmidt 2018). This is to ensure that the rest of the article is both compatible with the European discourse and remains directly anchored in German prevention and deradicalization practice.



3. State of research on online radicalization and recruitment

2.1 Online radicalization: overview

Early work on terrorism on the internet described the web as a multipurpose tool for psychological warfare, propaganda, data collection, fundraising, recruitment, mobilization, networking, and operational coordination (Conway 2006; Sageman 2004). As early as 2004, Sageman warned of the possibility that online communities could create close bonds between individuals and virtual scenes—facilitated by instant feedback, the absence of moderating countervoices, and seemingly simple ideological solutions (Sageman 2004).

Current syntheses—such as the RAN report „Online Radicalization—What We Know“—paint a much more nuanced picture (RAN 2022). Violent groups systematically use the internet to disseminate information, build networks, recruit, finance, and gather information (RAN 2022; Gill et al. 2017). At the same time, the evaluation of case studies shows that the role of the internet depends heavily on the individual case : in some biographies, the online dimension is central, in others it is more complementary, and in still others it is hardly relevant (RAN 2022).

Whittaker and others therefore typically classify the functions of the internet in the radicalization process into several categories: information provision (propaganda), community building and identity formation, recruitment and mobilization, logistical support, and information gathering (Whittaker 2022).

It is important to note that online radicalization is usually not a linear, solely digital process, but remains closely intertwined with offline experiences of marginalization, personal crises, group affiliation, and physical contacts (RAN 2022; Gill et al. 2017).



3.2 Social media and radicalization: findings from reviews

Several systematic reviews examine how social media influences radicalization processes. Akram and Nasar synthesize 82 peer-reviewed studies on „radicalization through social media“ and identify two central topics: determinants of radicalization on social media platforms and measures to contain and deradicalize content (Akram/Nasar 2020). Their analysis shows, among other things, that political interests, loss of trust in state institutions, and actively searching for radical content are important drivers, while mere exposure alone is typically not enough (Akram/Nasar 2020).

The review also emphasizes that social media primarily promotes three effects: first, the dissemination of propaganda and conspiracy narratives with a wide reach; second, the formation of echo chambers and homophilic networks; and third, easier contact between like-minded individuals and potential recruiters (Akram/Nasar 2020). At the same time, the authors identify significant gaps in research: the effects vary depending on the regional context and target population, and experimental or intervention-oriented studies are rare to date (Akram/Nasar 2020).

Another overview on „Online extremism: Research trends in internet activism, radicalization, and countermeasures“ shows that violence-oriented organizations use online tools primarily for propaganda, recruitment, logistics, financing, and hacking, while individuals use the internet primarily for socialization, learning, and identity formation (Conway et al. 2019). Existing research confirms that the internet can facilitate radicalization, but at the same time points out that clear causal relationships—in the sense of „the internet causes radicalization“—are difficult to prove empirically (RAN 2022; Conway et al. 2019).



3.3 Online recruitment in religious extremism

With regard to religious extremists, especially jihadists, online recruitment can be described as one of several core functions of Internet use (Gill et al. 2017; RAN 2022). Both the RAN Online Report and various empirical studies show that organizations such as the so-called „Islamic State“ made intensive use of social media platforms to generate international reach and target sympathizers (RAN 2022; Conway et al. 2019).

According to estimates, there were at times tens of thousands of IS-supporting Twitter accounts, and fighters who had left their countries „streamed“ their lives in conflict zones to their countries of origin in near real time (Berger/Morgan 2015; RAN 2022).

Case studies and individual case analyses illustrate typical recruitment channels: First, broad, often aesthetically appealing propaganda is disseminated via open platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, TikTok), appealing to emotions such as outrage, pride, belonging, and a thirst for adventure (Gill et al. 2017). Interested or vulnerable individuals are identified through likes, comments, and shared content and then transferred to semi-public or closed communication channels (e.g., Facebook groups, Telegram channels, private chats) (RAN 2022). There, recruiters and members of the scene intensify the relationship, respond to personal crises, answer religious and political questions, and convey a sense of exclusive community (Gill et al. 2017; RAN 2022).

The Bavarian case studies underscore this process logic: in the vast majority of the 225 cases examined, social media platforms initially served as a medium for propaganda and contact before personal contacts were established in the real world (Schüler 2017). In the case of „Marie K.,“ for example, sermon videos by a Salafist preacher, combined with social media contacts, led to a clearly perceptible ideological shift and severe family conflicts within two months, without there already being any established involvement in physical networks (Schüler 2017). Other cases, such as „Armin O.,“ show that online recruitment can also lead to profound ideo-



logical radicalization in individuals without direct access to local scenes—in his case, to the point of actively supporting jihadist fighters by creating and maintaining social media accounts (Schüler 2017).

Schüler's qualitative interviews with dropouts and experts confirm that the internet and social media often provide the initial contact with the Salafist scene and play an important role in recruitment (Schüler 2017). However, his evaluations show that fully developed radicalization processes are almost always stabilized by personal references, local groups, or charismatic leaders (Schüler 2017). Online recruitment thus appears to be a „door opener“ and accelerator—the decisive factor remains whether and how these contacts are transferred into real networks of relationships (Schüler 2017; RAN 2022).

3.4 Evidence, limitations, and controversies

Both RAN and scientific reviews emphasize that, despite a growing body of literature, the evidence on online radicalization and recruitment remains limited and heterogeneous (RAN 2022; Akram/Nasar 2020). Many studies are based on publicly available online data, case studies, or expert assessments; systematic longitudinal or intervention studies are rare (Conway et al. 2019). Methodological challenges arise from data protection, ethical issues, access restrictions to closed groups, and the difficulty of clearly assigning online interactions to individual persons or biographical histories (RAN 2022; Gill et al. 2017).

RAN explicitly points out that the role of the internet as a „driver“ of radicalization has often been and continues to be overestimated (RAN 2022). The report emphasizes that online factors must always be viewed in conjunction with individual vulnerabilities (e.g., identity crises, psychological stress), social contexts (family, peers, school, community), and political conditions (experiences of discrimination, conflicts) (RAN 2022; Doosje et al. 2016). Individual perpetrators who are purely „radicalized online“ remain the exception; far more often, online and offline experi-



ences overlap—a finding that is confirmed in particular by the evaluation of radicalization biographies (Schüler 2017).

The following topics are particularly controversial in the literature:

How strongly social media should be weighted as an independent risk factor compared to existing radicalization tendencies (Akram/Nasar 2020; RAN 2022). Whether certain platforms or formats (e.g., gaming environments, encrypted messengers, short video apps) actually open up qualitatively new recruitment opportunities or rather dress familiar patterns in new technical guises (Whittaker 2022; Conway et al. 2019). To what extent measures such as content takedowns, algorithmic filters, or counter-narrative campaigns can measurably influence radicalization and recruitment processes (RAN 2021; Gill et al. 2017).

For practitioners, this means that the current state of research provides a range of reliable information on the functions of the internet and typical recruitment paths, but only allows cautious statements to be made about the causality and effectiveness of individual measures (RAN 2022; Akram/Nasar 2020). This makes it all the more important to combine empirical findings with practical case studies—such as those from your exit program—in order to gain a realistic picture that neither dramatizes nor downplays the impact of online recruitment (Schüler 2017).



4. Mechanisms and practices of online recruitment

4.1 Communication spaces and platforms

Today, the online recruitment of religious extremists takes place in an ecosystem of open, semi-public, and closed spaces (RAN 2022; Conway et al. 2019). Open platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and public Facebook pages serve primarily as showcases for propaganda, sermon videos, campaigns, and symbolic performances (Gill et al. 2017). Semi-public and closed communication spaces—such as messenger services, group chats, or private channels—are used to filter out those users who appear particularly receptive from the mass of users and transfer them to more intensive communication (RAN 2022).

The Bavarian case studies clearly illustrate this (Schüler 2017). „Marie K.“ became involved in Salafist-influenced content through sermon videos distributed online and then used Facebook to make contact with members of the scene who were specifically looking for young people like her (Schüler 2017). „Tim K.“ used a school WhatsApp group chat to post a jihadist coded message („My life’s dream is to die in jihad“); in addition, he conducted an intensive online search for preacher content and contacts via social media (Schüler 2017). In both cases, open and semi-public spaces served as a recruitment platform and as an environment in which initial signals could be sent and picked up (Schüler 2017).

A more recent development concerns gaming platforms and streaming-related services (Europol 2023; RAN 2022). In the case of the 18-year-old perpetrator of the attack in Munich on September 5, 2024 — who attempted to attack police officers and, presumably, the diplomatic mission near the Israeli Consulate General and the NS Documentation Center — investigators found, among other things, older computer game videos with Islamist content and symbols of the group Haiat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) on his devices (Bayerisches LKA 2025). The young man had already used corresponding HTS symbols in a computer game at the age



of 14; seized clips showed how Islamist scenes of violence were playfully processed (Bavarian State Office of Criminal Investigation 2025). The case shows how gaming contexts can function as entry points where extremist symbols, scenes of violence, and narratives are initially taken up in a supposedly „ironic“ or experimental way and then ideologically transformed (Europol 2023).

Europol and other actors point out that gaming and streaming platforms are now being misused to a considerable extent for the dissemination of extremist content and for recruitment, especially of young people (Europol 2023; RAN 2021).

Staged reenactments of terrorist attacks in 3D gameplay, accompanied by extremist music and symbols, are recorded, edited, and then disseminated on mainstream platforms (Conway et al. 2019). This shifts part of the preliminary stages of recruitment to spaces that have long been largely ignored by prevention practitioners and security authorities (RAN 2022).

4.2 Narratives, aesthetic forms, and emotional appeals

RAN publications and empirical studies show that online recruitment relies heavily on narratives and emotional appeals (RAN 2021; RAN 2022). Typical examples include dichotomous „us versus them“ narratives, victim narratives („the global umma is being oppressed“), heroic stories of fighters, and promises of salvation and meaning (Doosje et al. 2016; Neumann 2016). This content is translated into aesthetically appealing formats: high-gloss videos, music, memes, short clips, and story formats that deliberately pick up on youth reception patterns (Conway et al. 2019).

The case studies examined show how such narratives tap into individual needs (Schüler 2017). „Marie K.“ was looking for validation and guidance; through videos of a prominent Salafist preacher, she encountered simple, absolute truths, clear rules, and an offer of belonging to a supposedly „pure“ community (Schüler 2017). „Sarah F.“—marked by loneliness,



mental instability, and a lack of family stability—used social networks to connect with people who were discussing traveling to Syria and Iraq and presented her with an idealized Salafist lifestyle, including romanticized images of partnerships and families (Pfundmair/Schmidt 2019). In her case, the need for love, protection, and belonging was combined with online narratives of religious chosenness and communal strength (Pfundmair/Schmidt 2019).

„Lisa-Marie A.,” who suffered from loneliness after moving to a rural area, initially used social networks to compensate for her lack of contacts (Schüler 2017). Using several accounts, some of them anonymous, she formed relationships, fell in love online with a Salafist man from abroad, and became increasingly drawn into a Salafist parallel world in which love, loyalty, and religious duty were intertwined (Schüler 2017). This shows how online recruitment specifically combines youth cultural themes (love, relationships, rebellion) with religious extremist motives (RAN 2021).

Emotional and social factors also played a central role in the Munich case of February 13, 2025, in which a 24-year-old Afghan asylum seeker drove a vehicle into a Verdi demonstration, injuring dozens of people (Bayerisches LKA 2025).

According to investigations, his radicalization began about six months before the attack, triggered in particular by growing debts, a lack of prospects, and massive integration problems (Bavarian State Office of Criminal Investigation 2025). In the absence of viable real-life contacts, he increasingly withdrew into online forums, where he encountered extremist content and Islamist ideologies; His online communications contained references to Islamist motives, but no firm organizational ties could be proven (Bavarian State Office of Criminal Investigation 2025). The case underscores how online narratives can provide meaning in situations of subjective overload and at the same time legitimize violence as a supposedly logical response (RAN 2022).



4.3 Roles of recruiters, peers, and „micro-influencers“

Online recruitment is rarely the result of anonymous mass communication; as a rule, specific actors intervene who act as recruiters, peers, or „micro-influencers“ (RAN 2021; Gill et al. 2017). In Schüler’s study, which he conducted with the support of the Bavarian State Criminal Police Office, and in his own case studies, three groups repeatedly appear (Schüler 2017):

- Ideologically trained scene actors who deliberately seek out vulnerable individuals and approach them via social media, messenger services, or gaming platforms.
- Peers of the same age who share, comment on, and normalize content, thus acting as door openers into scene milieus.
- Prominent preachers or influencers whose videos and posts create a kind of „ideological background noise“ that personal contacts then build on.

In the case of „Marie K.,” this structure is clearly recognizable: the initial influence of a prominent preacher, the subsequent networking with scene actors via Facebook, and the attempt to draw her into a more radical bubble (Schüler 2017). In the case of „Tim K.,” the peer-communicative dimension comes to the fore: the message in the class chat was clearly aimed at provocation, status gain, and distinction—embedded in an online context in which jihadist content was already present (Schüler 2017).

Based on current findings, the perpetrator of the Munich shooting attack on September 5, 2024, appears to have been „inspired“ rather than organizationally involved (Bavarian State Office of Criminal Investigation 2025).

Although authorities found evidence of Islamist symbols and content in computer games and on his cell phone, they found no reliable evidence of direct control by a group (Bavarian State Office of Criminal Investigation 2025). In the case of the vehicle attack on the Verdi demonstration



in 2025, investigators currently assume that the perpetrator acted alone and that his online communications indicate Islamist-motivated radicalization, without any clear links to specific organizations being detectable (Bavarian State Office of Criminal Investigation 2025).

These constellations—loosely inspired lone perpetrators who become ideologically charged in online environments without any fixed organizational ties—pose particular challenges for prevention and law enforcement (RAN 2022). At the same time, your exit experiences show that even in the case of supposed „lone actors,“ there are often at least temporary online relationships with radicalized individuals or groups, for example in the form of closed chat groups or supporter communities (Schüler 2017).

4.4 Process logic of online recruitment

Based on RAN material, international studies, and your case analyses, a typical—though not necessarily linear—process logic of online recruitment can be outlined (RAN 2022; Gill et al. 2017).

Exposure

First contact with extremist content via open platforms (videos, memes, posts, gaming scenes), often during periods of personal searching, crisis, or boredom (RAN 2022). In the case of „Armin O.“, this included online videos of a Salafist preacher, and in the case of the perpetrator of September 5, 2024, Islamist-coded gaming content (Bayerisches LKA 2025).

Resonance and identification

Certain narratives or symbols trigger resonance: a sense of justice, belonging, rebellion, strength, or spiritual meaning (Doosje et al. 2016). In the cases of „Sarah F.“ and „Lisa-Marie A.“, loneliness and the search for love and belonging were central points of connection that were addressed by online community and relationship offers (Pfundmair/Schmidt 2019; Schüler 2017).



Establishing contact and selection

Interested individuals are identified through likes, comments, shared content, or direct messages (Gill et al. 2017). Recruiters or peers make contact, invite people to chats, groups, or channels, and check their reactions (RAN 2022). In many of the cases studied, communication quickly shifted from open platforms to messenger services such as WhatsApp (Schüler 2017).

Intensification and support

The relationship is deepened in semi-public or closed spaces: permanent availability, answering religious/political questions, emotional support, building a sense of „togetherness“ (RAN 2022). Case analyses show that in some cases, hundreds of messages were sent per day to emotionally bind those affected (Schüler 2017).

Transfer to offline structures or more conspiratorial online networks

Where possible, face-to-face meetings are arranged (e.g., at Koran stands, in mosques, apartments), or contacts are transferred to structures that are more difficult to access (encrypted messengers, smaller cells) (Gill et al. 2017). In the case of „Anna B.," for example, an online order for a Koran led to Salafist activists appearing at her accommodation and beginning intensive offline relationship-building work (Schüler 2017).

Mobilization to action

In a final step, this can lead to mobilization for concrete actions – from propaganda activities and logistical support to acts of violence (RAN 2022). „Armin O.," for example, created and managed social media accounts for IS fighters, while the perpetrators in Munich carried out violent attacks in 2024 and 2025 that were allegedly legitimized online by Islamist ideologies (Schüler 2017; Bavarian State Office of Criminal Investigation 2025).



RAN emphasizes that these phases do not necessarily occur in a fixed order and may overlap; moreover, individuals may „enter“ at different stages or abandon the process (RAN 2022). The case and interview data, as well as Schüler’s findings, suggest that the transition from online to offline—i.e., from digital contacts to personal relationships—is a crucial tipping point at which prevention and intervention can be particularly effective (Schüler 2017).



5. Deradicalization and exit based on a German model – the role of the police

Bavaria's exit and disengagement work is part of the field of indicated prevention and is aimed at individuals who are already manifestly radicalized or at significant risk of radicalization (Schmidt 2018). It is essential to distinguish between deradicalization (cognitive change of attitude) and disengagement (cessation of behavior without necessarily renouncing the ideology) (Horgan 2008; Biene/Junk 2017).

5.1 Structural anchoring: Competence center for deradicalization

In Bavaria, statewide responsibility for the prevention of Islamist radicalization lies with the Competence Center for Deradicalization at the Bavarian State Criminal Police Office (BLKA) (Schmidt 2018). It is part of the „Bavarian Network for Prevention and Deradicalization against Salafism,“ in which general prevention (led by the Ministry of Social Affairs) and deradicalization (led by the Ministry of the Interior/Police) are organized on a division of labor basis (StMI/StMAS 2017).

- The Competence Center acts as a central coordination point for all security-related exit issues in Bavaria,
- a technical interface between the police, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the judiciary, youth and immigration authorities, and civil society organizations,
- and an operational unit with a multi-professional team (criminal investigators from the State Security Service, psychologists, Islamic scholars, social educators) (Schmidt 2018).

In order to cover the entire state, decentralized „deradicalization“ officers have been installed in all police headquarters to identify potential cases at an early stage and feed them into the support structure (Schmidt 2018).



5.2 Police tasks in the exit process

Schmidt describes three core roles for the police in exit work: risk assessment, case management, and access facilitation („door opener“ function) (Schmidt 2018).

Risk assessment and risk management

The police are responsible for assessing the security relevance of each individual case (threat to public safety, possible serious crimes) (Schmidt 2018). They use structured instruments such as RADAR-iTE, VERA-2R, or DyRiAS-Screener Islamism, but combine their results with case-analytical, biography-related assessments („internal logic“ of the course) and carry out concrete risk analyses (Pressman/Flockton 2012; BKA 2017; Schmidt 2018). In particular, the Competence Center uses operational case analysis, psychological behavior and problem analysis (S-O-R-C), and consistency theory considerations to balance risk and protective factors and identify windows of opportunity for intervention (Grawe 2004; Schmidt 2018).

Case coordination and interface with regulatory structures

In security-related cases, the BLKA Competence Center takes charge of case management and coordinates the youth welfare office, immigration authorities, prison services, schools, social services, and civil society organizations to avoid parallel, uncoordinated measures (Schmidt 2018). The police ensure clarity of roles (who is responsible for security, who for counseling, who for social-educational support) and continuous case monitoring throughout the entire process (Schmidt 2018).

Access to clients and motivational work

Initial contacts in the Islamist sphere often take place via the police or the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, because individuals rarely



come forward „voluntarily“ with a desire to leave (Schmidt 2018; Schüler 2017). Schmidt emphasizes the importance of early „boundary-setting conversations“: offers of discussion by the police in which legal boundaries and possible consequences are clearly stated and, at the same time, low-threshold counseling services (e.g., VPN) are provided (Schmidt 2018). In ambiguous cases where contact is not initiated at the request of the person concerned, motivational interviewing techniques are emphasized: structured cost-benefit reflection on remaining and leaving (Schmidt 2018).

5.3 Cooperation with civil society organizations

An „essential cornerstone“ of the Bavarian concept is the contractually regulated cooperation between the BLKA Competence Center and a civil society organization (Violence Prevention Network) (Schmidt 2018). The division of tasks is clear:

Police

- Hazard prevention, risk assessment, case coordination,
- involvement and information of other authorities,
- access provision (e.g., after preliminary investigations, information from institutions),
- Ensuring the safety of clients and counselors (Schmidt 2018).

Civil society organizations:

- Individual deradicalization and distancing counseling for those affected (ideological, affective, and pragmatic levels)
- counseling for relatives, coaching for institutions (schools, shelters, youth welfare services),
- outreach work and long-term support (Schmidt 2018; El Difraoui et al. 2021).



The author emphasizes the following as success factors for this cooperation: clear case responsibility, defined communication channels, coordinated handling of data protection, and mutual acceptance of the different roles (security authority vs. trusted authority) (Schmidt 2018).

5.4 The role of the police in light of Wolfgang Schüler's recommendations

Schüler qualitatively analyzes the radicalization and deradicalization processes of Islamist actors and derives concrete starting points for the police and security authorities (Schüler 2017). Key recommendations are:

Early, non-criminal intervention

Schüler uses several cases to show that early police intervention—even without any existing criminal offenses—can have a significant distancing effect if it combines setting boundaries with offering specialized counseling (Schüler 2017). At the same time, he warns against mixing repressive measures and preventive approaches by the same unit, as an approach perceived as purely punitive can tend to deepen radicalization (example P8) (Schüler 2017). From this, he derives the recommendation that approaches should be conducted via a „neutral“ police structure (e.g., a competence center, not an investigative state security agency) (Schüler 2017).

Using „periods of doubt“ as windows of opportunity for intervention

In his interviews, Schüler describes frequent phases of doubt, temporary distancing from the scene, or „timeouts“ during which those affected would have been open to discussion in retrospect (Schüler 2017). He recommends systematically using information about the scene provided by state security and constitutional protection agencies to identify such phases and make targeted and early offers of dialogue—ideally in conjunction with civilian organizations (Schüler 2017).



Special responsibility of the police in detention contexts

Schüler shows that solitary confinement can trigger distancing processes, but that the services offered in prisons often do not match the inmates' biographies and backgrounds (linguistically, religiously, milieu-specifically) (Schüler 2017). He recommends working with prison authorities and organizations to involve Muslim chaplains and credible defectors more closely, with the police and the Office for the Protection of the Constitution acting as interfaces for information and as partners in risk assessment (Schüler 2017).

Police as a catalyst for civil society resources

In cases of domestic violence in the Salafist milieu (e.g., P4, P9), the situation was handled by the police as a „normal“ victim protection case; Schüler recommends systematically referring to exit counseling (HAYAT, VPN, etc.) and publicizing the relevant contact channels in the police, youth welfare, and social services offices (Schüler 2017). Overall, Schüler thus reinforces the idea of the police as a catalyst and mediator between security agency hazard prevention and civil society deradicalization practices—a role that is institutionally implemented in the Bavarian Competence Center (Schmidt 2018).

5.5 Model-oriented practice: Pfundmair/Schmidt and psychological mechanisms

The contribution by Pfundmair and Schmidt combines a social-psychological model of radicalization and deradicalization with case work from the Competence Center (Pfundmair/Schmidt 2019). They distinguish between:

- individual processes (need for significance, loss of control, search for transcendence),
- group processes (integration into radical networks, group identity),



- catalyzing processes (desensitization, dehumanization, preparation for violence) (Pfundmair/Schmidt 2019).

Deradicalization is understood as „reversing the causes of radicalization“ on two levels (Garfinkel 2007; Laub/Sampson 2001; Pfundmair/Schmidt 2019).

Work on individual deprivation

In the cases of Ali H. and Mustafa R., the police and civil society organizations addressed issues such as loneliness, lack of family stability, lack of educational and career prospects, and the search for religious meaning (Pfundmair/Schmidt 2019). The police coordinated the cases, assessed security, and involved the youth court assistance service and the public prosecutor’s office, while the civil society organization provided outreach counseling, worked with family members, and helped the young people establish new educational and career paths (Pfundmair/Schmidt 2019).

Creating new social environments

The case of Sarah F. in particular makes it clear that simply removing someone from an extremist environment without establishing stable alternative relationships and structures is doomed to failure (Pfundmair/Schmidt 2019). Only the second, coordinated intervention—with a return to Bavaria and close cooperation between the youth welfare office, the mother-and-child facility, civil society organizations, and the coordinating police department—led to a lasting distancing (Pfundmair/Schmidt 2019).

Pfundmair/Schmidt state that deradicalization—analogueous to the concept of desistance in criminology—is not a binary event, but rather a process that must be stabilized over the long term and that depends on ongoing cooperation between the police, academia, and civil society practitioners (Gadd/Farrall 2004; Pfundmair/Schmidt 2019).



5.6 Police and security authorities in the European context

The RAN's recommendations on tertiary prevention emphasize network-oriented, multidisciplinary cooperation in which security authorities play a clearly defined but limited role (RAN 2022). The police and domestic intelligence services should primarily carry out risk assessments, provide security-related information, and ensure the protection of clients and counselors without taking on ideological or therapeutic core work themselves (RAN 2022).

In this sense, the Bavarian approach with the BLKA's Center of Excellence for Deradicalization is in line with the RAN guidelines: the police focus on risk analysis, hazard prevention, and case management, while the actual deradicalization and disengagement work is carried out by a specialized civil society organization (Schmidt 2018; El Difraoui et al. 2021). The clear separation of roles between the security authorities' coordination office and the advisory organization, the involvement of youth welfare services, the prison system, immigration authorities, and schools in structured case conferences, and a joint, case-related risk and needs analysis are in line with the „case management“ approach described by RAN (RAN 2021).

RAN and the related German specialist concepts also emphasize that security authorities should not only include dangers to the general public in their assessments, but also threats to advisors, and take preventive protective measures if necessary (RAN 2022; El Difraoui et al. 2021). At the same time, the police and the Office for the Protection of the Constitution are seen as important knowledge partners who feed their scene-specific situation reports into the networks without claiming a „monopoly on the truth“ about radicalization processes (RAN 2022). This idea of a circular transfer of knowledge between practitioners, security authorities, and researchers is reflected, for example, in the Bavarian Competence Center's links to national and European exchange formats (Schmidt 2018; El Difraoui et al. 2021).



The recommendations developed by Wolfgang Schüler specify these RAN principles at the micro level of policing: Early, non-criminal proceedings approaches that clearly distinguish between investigative mandates and preventive dialogue, the systematic use of „phases of doubt“ as windows of opportunity for intervention, and the deliberate separation between state security services conducting investigations in a „ „ manner and „neutral“ contact structures correspond to the RAN model of „early, least intrusive, cooperative“ (Schüler 2017; RAN 2021).

In this way, the police do not become „deradicalizers“ in the exit process, but rather a security authority engine and catalyst that—in line with European recommendations—opens up access, manages risks, and networks, while cognitive and biographical change processes take place primarily in civil society and social education settings (Schmidt 2018; El Difraoui et al. 2021).



6. Summary

This article has shown that deradicalization and disengagement should be understood as multidimensional, processual phenomena that encompass ideological, emotional, and everyday life levels and cannot be captured in binary categories of „radical“ vs. „deradicalized“ (Horgan 2008; Pfundmair/Schmidt 2019). Model-oriented approaches that distinguish between individual, group-related, and catalytic factors of radicalization and conceive of deradicalization as a reversal of these processes offer a viable basis for the development and evaluation of intervention strategies (Pfundmair/Schmidt 2019).

In the Bavarian approach, the police—exemplified by the Competence Center for Deradicalization—are neither marginalized nor overburdened, but rather play a specific role in risk assessment, case coordination, and access management (Schmidt 2018). Above all, through early, boundary-setting and at the same time supportive approaches, the use of biographical intervention windows, the involvement of youth welfare services, the prison system and civil society organizations, and the protection of counselors, the police become the security authority driving force behind a network-oriented exit system (Schüler 2017). In a successful, nationwide exit program, the police are therefore more of a driving force than a passenger.

The recommendations of the research (Pfundmair/Schmidt, Schüler) and the European guidelines of the Radicalisation Awareness Network are largely parallel: they call for a clear separation of roles, multidisciplinary case conferences, early, proportionate interventions, and a mutual transfer of knowledge between security authorities, practitioners, and academia (RAN 2018; El Difraoui/Trautmann/Wiedl 2021). Against this backdrop, the Bavarian approach can be seen as an exemplary implementation of a RAN-compatible model in which the police use their genuine powers—to professionally ensure security and to network actors—in the service of sustainable distancing and deradicalization processes (Schmidt 2018; Pfundmair/Schmidt 2019).



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