

# Five years after the fall of the *caliphate*

**An interim assessment of deradicalisation work  
with returnees and their children**

**A 2nd chance only for women?  
Germany in a European comparison**



# Imprint

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# Five years after the fall of the *caliphate*

**An interim assessment of the deradicalisation work  
by the counselling service *Beratungsstelle Leben* of  
the *Grüner Vogel e.V.* with returnees and their children**

## **Panel discussion:**

### **A 2nd chance only for women? - Germany in a European comparison**

Sofia Koller, Senior Research Analyst, *Counter Extremism Project (CEP)*

Thomas Schmidinger, Associate Professor at the *University of Kurdistan Hewlêr (Iraq)* and lecturer at the *University of Vienna*

Susanne Wittmann, Project Manager of the *ProKids* project of the counselling network *Grenzgänger – IFAK e.V.* Bochum

Claudia Dantschke, Project Manager & Board Executive *Grüner Vogel e.V.*

Moderator: Axel Schurbohm, *BAG RelEx*

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## Introduction

On 23 March 2019, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Baghuz, Syria, succeeded in bringing about the end of the *caliphate* proclaimed by ISIS as a territorial entity. In seven repatriation operations between August 2019 and November 2022, the German government brought a total of 27 women, 80 children and a young man, who had been brought to Syria by his mother at the age of eleven, back to Germany from Kurdish refugee camps in north-east Syria. Around 270 people (mainly men) had already returned before the end of the *caliphate*, in some cases after very short stays in Syria.

The counselling service *Beratungsstelle Leben* of the *Grüner Vogel e.V.* and the *ProKids* project of the counselling network *Grenzgänger* are nationwide deradicalisation projects funded by the *Advice Centre on Radicalisation of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF)* in the area of "Islamist extremism". Their work focuses on supporting the disengagement and reintegration of returnees from jihadist combat zones and their children.

The fifth anniversary of the end of the territorial *caliphate* was an opportunity for us to take stock of our work at a symposium in Berlin on 14 March 2024. What challenges did we face and what lessons can we learn, also with regard to future prevention measures? And what tasks still lie ahead of us, as the ISIS ideology behind the *caliphate* is still virulent? The conference concluded with a panel discussion in which Germany's work was examined in more detail in a European comparison and the question of the repatriation of men who have travelled to ISIS was raised.

This publication summarises the panel discussion. In a separate publication, we have documented the panel at the symposium, where we gave an insight into our work with returnees.

Claudia Dantschke

30.04.2024

## Presentation of the panelists

**Sofia Koller** is a Senior Research Analyst at the Berlin office of the *Counter Extremism Project (CEP)*, where she works on the prevention of Islamist extremism, in particular on the prosecution and reintegration of returning foreign fighters and supports the European Commission's *Radicalisation Awareness Network* as an external advisor. From 2018 to 2021, she was a Research Fellow at the *German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)*, where she led the *International Forum for Expert Exchange on Countering Islamist Extremism - InFoEx*. Prior to that, she worked as a

project coordinator and consultant in Lebanon and France. Sofia Koller studied International Conflict Studies at *Kings College* in London.



**Thomas Schmidinger** studied political science and social and cultural anthropology and specialises in research on the Middle East, religious extremism and the relationship between state and

religion. He is Associate Professor at the *University of Kurdistan* in Erbil and Head of the Institute for Political Science there. He also teaches at the University of Vienna and at the University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria in Linz, where he teaches on jihadist radicalisation in the social work course. As one of his main areas of research are the Kurdish regions in Syria, he has repeatedly supported parents of young female jihadists in their search for their children in Syria in recent years.

**Susanne Wittmann** studied social work and management in social organizations. She has been working in various areas at *IFAK e.V. - Verein für multikulturelle Kinder- und Jugendhilfe - Migrationsarbeit* since 2000. Since 2012, she has headed the counselling network *Grenzgänger* in the field of prevention of religious extremism. Starting in early 2024, the *Grenzgänger / ProKids* project was added, which

closes a gap in the counselling landscape by focusing on children of returnees. Susanne Wittmann is a certified DGSF systemic counsellor and professional grief counsellor.

**Claudia Dantschke** studied Arabic and French at the University of Leipzig and worked as a foreign language editor in the Arabic department of the GDR news agency ADN from 1986 to 1990. From 1993, she worked as a freelance journalist for the German-Turkish broadcaster *AYPA-TV*. Her research led, among other things, to the banning of the radical Islamist group *Hizb ut-Tahrir*. From 2002 to 2020, Dantschke worked at *ZDK Gesellschaft Demokratische Kultur gGmbH*, where she headed the *HAYAT* counselling service, which she co-founded in summer 2011, until the end of 2020. Since January 2021, she has been a board member of the newly founded *Grüner Vogel e.V.* association, where she heads the *Beratungsstelle Leben*, continuing the work of *HAYAT*. Since 2011, Dantschke has been advising relatives of people who have been radicalised by salafists and/or jihadists, as well as those who have left the scene.

**Axel Schurbohm** studied social work at Kiel University of Applied Sciences and Migration and Diversity, specialising in the Middle East/Turkey, at *Kiel University*. He is also a trained systemic counsellor (DGSF). For the *PROvention* prevention and advice centre, he trained teachers and pupils in primary prevention measures and advised those affected by religiously motivated extremism. He also helped set up the specialist centre *Liberi – Growing up in Salafist Families*. Since 2020, he has been a specialist advisor for religiously motivated extremism at the *Federal Working Group on Religiously Motivated Extremism (BAG ReEx)*.

## Panel discussion

### A 2nd chance only for women? - Germany in a European comparison

**Axel Schurbohm:** Before we address the repatriation of ISIS returnees and ask the experts whether there is a second chance only for women, I would first like to ask Ms. Koller how Germany compares in Europe in terms of the repatriation and reintegration of female ISIS returnees.

**Sofia Koller:** I have been asked to talk about the return, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees in a European comparison. I would like to do this using two examples: France and the Netherlands.

For a long time, no adults were repatriated to France, only 35 minors under the age of 21, until there was a change in policy, so that adult women were repatriated with their children in several operations beginning in the summer of 2022. Upon arrival, these women are systematically separated from their children, who are usually placed directly in foster families, where they stay for the first few months before possibly returning to their family of origin. The criminal prosecution of returnees is easier than in Germany. Most are remanded in custody and are then often sentenced to long prison terms for membership of a terrorist organisation. The average sentence is around six years. In France, prison management is similar to that for other extremist offenders, i.e. the women are first sent to evaluation units for a few weeks, where their dangerousness is assessed, and can then either be sent to the regular prison system if they are assessed as less dangerous, or they can be sent to solitary confinement if they are seen as particularly dangerous. Around a third of cases are sent to such prevention units, where the disengagement process is to be stimulated, so to speak. This is a multi-professional case management system, similar to that used in Germany, which has become established in Europe. This case management can be continued by court order even after release, but only in some large French cities, unlike here in Germany, where counselling networks exist in many places.

The situation in the Netherlands is somewhat different. Here, too, adults were not repatriated for a long time. The Dutch government was of the opinion that adults

should be prosecuted where they committed their offences. It was not until June 2021 that the first adult women were repatriated in three separate undertakings to prevent them from escaping prosecution. The Dutch courts had charged several women in absentia while they were in the Kurdish camps in north-east Syria. But the women said they wanted to exercise their rights and appear in court. As a result, the proceedings were suspended, and when it became clear that the women were unlikely to return, the courts raised the prospect of dropping the cases. To avoid impunity, the Dutch government decided to bring these women back. This is a very different motivation for dealing with returnees than in other countries. The prison sentences for women in the Netherlands are just under two years, which is significantly lower than in France. The Netherlands also has separate accommodation for women in certain prisons, mirroring the management of male prisoners. There are special security measures in the prisons and here, too, the focus is on case management, i.e. reintegration measures and initial attempts at rehabilitation.

This can continue after their release, in the so-called safety house model, which varies somewhat from municipality to municipality. But here too, it has become established that multi-professional safety and support measures are then ordered in individual cases and in all cases, the practitioners we spoke to as part of a research project were cautiously positive, saying that things are actually going quite well. As in Germany, major issues are the needs of returnee children, coping with trauma and taking responsibility for one's own actions. The interesting thing is that the danger is seen as being less about these women actually committing acts of violence and more about them returning to the jihadist scene and the associated dangers on a different level.

**Axel Schurbohm:** Thank you very much for the brief overview, we will certainly go into this in more detail in the course of the discussion. Mr. Schmidinger, we have now heard how things are going in France and the Netherlands, can you give us an insight into the situation in Austria, even though you are currently in Iraq. What are the special features from your perspective?

**Thomas Schmidinger:** When I look at the title of the discussion: "A second chance only for women?", as an Austrian I become envious. Austria does not give women a second chance either; Austria has not yet repatriated a single adult. As a political



scientist, I interpret this to mean that there has been a political decision, namely that the Austrian governing party ÖVP, which controls the Foreign Ministry, does not repatriate adults, but does not say so publicly. What is said publicly when journalists call the Foreign Ministry is that it is too dangerous to go there, that there is no contact with the autonomous administration in north-east Syria, that it is not possible at the moment, that it is not known whether the women even want to return and so on. I've always said when journalists have called me and wanted a comment, that I can't imagine that the Austrian Foreign Ministry is so much more incompetent than the German, Finnish or French, or that the Austrian police are so much more cowardly than the French, German or Finnish police and are not in a position to go where all these other European countries have sent personnel to bring the women back. In other words, I can only interpret this to mean that there was a political decision, and in discussions off the record it is also admitted that there was a political decision not to return the adults.

The only four people who were repatriated were four children. I personally searched for two of them with the grandmother of these children in the Al Hol camp, which was quite difficult, but it would go beyond the scope of this setting to describe it all. The reason why these four children were brought back is that it is assumed that the mother of the two children I was looking for is no longer alive, so they are orphans, although this is not one hundred per cent certain because there is no body of the mother. This mother was with the children in Baghuz, the last bastion of ISIS in Syria, and then the children were with another woman in the Al Hol camp and the mother was no longer with them and was not found either. In this case, after a long time, the Austrian authorities were finally prepared to return these two children to their grandparents.

In the second case, the mother of the two children is not an Austrian citizen, but the children are Austrian citizens through the citizenship of the father, who is no longer alive. In this case, the mother was prepared to hand over the children because she had other children, and then she handed these two children over to Austria without travelling with them herself. In these two cases, the Austrian Foreign Ministry was prepared to take the children back on their own. In the case of the adults, they have not been prepared to do so or claim that they are not in a position to do so for various reasons.

We don't know exactly how many Austrians are in the camps, but it's a relatively small group. I know a lot of them, but that doesn't mean I know them all, of course, but I estimate there are at most a dozen people, women and men together. The women, of course, always have several children and we know that in some cases there is also, to put it cynically, a production of children in Al Hol, which sometimes involves very young boys who are still with their mothers. This is also the case with an Austrian woman. As long as these people are not repatriated, there will be more and more European children conceived and born in these camps.

If someone comes back from Syria - a few have managed to return without the help of the Austrian Foreign Ministry - then the legal situation in Austria is such that it is relatively easy to sentence anyone who has voluntarily joined the *Islamic State* to up to 10 years in prison under paragraph 278b, membership of a terrorist organisation.

**Axel Schurbohm:** Thank you very much for your assessment of the situation in Austria and the treatment of returnees. Ms. Dantschke, how do you see the situation for women and children in Germany and what is the situation for men?

**Claudia Dantschke:** I do believe that Germany is something of a pioneer in comparison with the rest of Western Europe, because in no other Western European country is civil society so intensively involved in these structures; everything tends to take place at state level. There are also civil society deradicalisation advice centres in Austria, but I don't know whether they are involved at all. At least not like here in Germany. We have a real network of state and civil society structures and what is special is the way we deal with children. This is relevant when the children are not initially taken into care but are placed with their grandparents or other relatives, which has been successful in almost all cases, at least in the major repatriation operations. Often the mothers in Camp al-Hol had already prepared their children for this and in some cases the children knew their grandmother at least from WhatsApp photos; they are still strangers, but not completely unfamiliar.

Also the individual approach in Germany - it's not enough that I travelled to Syria to join ISIS as a woman, an act of support has to be proven, which is different in Austria, where leaving the country is enough and then you go to prison, sometimes with relatively long prison sentences. And in individual cases, we look closely at what can be proven. We have observed many trials here and I found some of them

a bit controversial, but on the whole, I think the system here is better because it is very individualised and there is a support network around every case. It seems to me that this is being dealt with in a very generalised way in other countries: This person is a returnee and there are these options for action - the individual nature of each case is lost to some degree.

**Axel Schurbohm:** Ms. Wittmann, I would like to ask you to go into the topic of children in more detail. What is your assessment for Germany? To what extent are we well prepared, what is happening to the children in your care, what is the current situation?

**Susanne Wittmann:** I believe that we have the attitude in our society that children belong to their mothers and that fathers are less important. But of course, fathers play a huge role for children. It's very important for them to find their identity, where their father is, when their father comes, what their relationship with their father is like. We saw this in our example earlier: It was a stepfather with whom the child had or still has a special bond, namely the stepfather in Syria, who also stayed in Syria. The biological father, who is at home in Germany, has a very poor relationship with the child. At some point, depending on their age, the children start to ask themselves who their biological parents are, who they are, where they come from and what kind of people they are, and for us then it's a matter of absorbing that and being with the children. We also always help the parents to see where the child stands in its development, where it is ready to understand and where it still needs a little time.

All fathers have the right to fulfil their role as a father. I hope that there will be a return of fathers at some point and then it will be about going to prison and experiencing them in their role as fathers.

**Axel Schurbohm:** Ms. Koller, if I remember correctly, some time ago it was still the case that France separated the children as soon as they arrived in Paris and they were psychologically assessed over a longer period of time, which is quite problematic from my professional point of view. But I also know from the European context that we Germans are always very good at telling others what they are not doing right. I would be interested to know where the strengths are in the Netherlands or France in particular, where you would say that we can learn something from them, something that works well there?

**Sofia Koller:** Perhaps once again about France: one of the main points of criticism was the treatment of children. That was a very controversial discussion. But when it comes to France, it has to be said again and again that French society, but also the security authorities and politics, were and are traumatised in a completely different way. France has experienced a completely different kind of trauma as a result of various, very bloody terrorist attacks over a long period of time. Every country reacts differently, every country has a different history that it brings with it and goes into this topic with a different perspective. What would we have done in Germany if the attack on the Breitscheidplatz had claimed 300 lives? We might have reacted differently.

I take a very critical view of the fact that the children are first separated when they arrive and, above all, that they are first placed in foster families for a really long time, sometimes half a year, and only then is a decision made as to whether they might be able to return to their family of origin at some point. However, this also has to do with the fact that the families of origin are often seen as the cause of radicalisation. There is a great deal of mistrust towards these families, and they are only now slowly being seen as a resource. And this brings me to the positive aspects of France: the French are very capable of learning, they take criticism from other countries seriously, especially from Germany. They are considering whether their approach was perhaps too much, whether it can be adapted. They are now considering how children can be returned to their families of origin more quickly.

In the beginning, it was easiest with the foster families in the Paris region because the children arrive at the airport and the youth welfare office that is responsible is in this airport region. And from then, of course, it's simply a question of jurisdiction, you can't ignore that. But in the meantime - also because the foster families in the region have reached their capacity and can't take in all the children - they are trying to see where the women are being detained to send the children to these regions. The women are detained in specific prisons, but you must make sure that the children are at least close by so that this physical separation is not so extreme.

The interesting thing about the Netherlands is that they do not pursue a network approach, where the players work very freely and coordinate with each other, so to speak, but that in this safety house model all players actually sit around one table and coordinate with each other. A legal basis for this exchange of information has

been created in recent years. This is always a problem in Germany, that information cannot be shared - sometimes this is also used as a bit of an excuse. Of course, it is an advantage if everyone is in the same organisation. Other European countries also show that the flow of information can work better.

**Axel Schurbohm:** There is an intensified dialogue to ensure, also in the interests of the clients, that the best possible support is provided for everyone, whether children or adults. Ms. Wittmann, Ms. Dantschke, as you work with both the children and the parents or mothers practically, I would like to ask you: What is the cooperation like in Germany?

**Claudia Dantschke:** We are always the ones caught in the middle, especially when it comes to security authorities and youth welfare offices. There are certain round tables where we ask ourselves: Why are the security authorities now involved when topics are being discussed that are more important for the youth welfare office? In one federal state, we have already argued about this because we saw no need for the security authorities to be present at one of these case reviews where no security-related aspects are discussed. But the security authorities are involved in the case, assess the risk posed by the person and, of course, have to be informed about the course of the case. And then someone from youth welfare office comes and says: No, we can't speak freely now if the security authorities are present at the case review. That is sometimes difficult. Overall, we've had good experiences. We look at which topics are discussed and how.

In the federal states where a return coordinator was in place, it worked very well because there was a clear structure. But even in the other federal states where this did not exist, the state coordinators stepped in. In this respect, our experience has been very good. In some states, you have to liaise a bit more and get involved yourself in order to get everyone round the table in certain cases or to make it clear that you also have to sit at the table when 20 people ask how things are going and then sit at the table without you and continue the discussion. But in the meantime, things have levelled out, these are all learning processes where I can say that things are going quite well.

**Axel Schurbohm:** Ms. Wittmann, you are originally coming from the field of child and youth welfare, where there are clear support plans and structures in place. How are these structures, that otherwise exist in social work contexts, organised in

the area we are talking about now, how do you perceive this in terms of cooperation?

**Susanne Wittmann:** I can see that there is still room for improvement. We are for once active in different federal states, but the youth welfare offices are organised at a municipal level; so it's not enough to contact a state youth welfare office, because every family is the responsibility of has a different local youth welfare office. It's important that every youth welfare office is prepared to work with us. We are happy to introduce ourselves to the youth welfare offices and are a voluntary service. You have to proactively invite them to work with you and open doors, otherwise it's difficult. My experience varies greatly from municipality to municipality. There are youth welfare offices where we cooperate, where we sit together at the same table to discuss the support plan and where the work is very transparent, where we can say that this is a very good case that is also going in a good direction, where we see a lot of progress/ within the children.

And then there are also youth welfare offices where we try to introduce ourselves because we know that they cover cases of returnee children, but they don't invite us, claiming that they can do it on their own. Or they say that there already so many players at the table that they don't want another one. Of course, it's extra work, another phone call, another player who has to be involved, but ultimately, it's more effective for the children and a measure of relief. I think it's the right way to involve us because of our expertise. There is also the question of responsibility, does it lie with a guardian, a foster family or somebody else. There always needs to be access and if access is created and we get in touch with the children and their guardians, then that is always the best way because we reach the children best through relationship work. However, we need to create even more transparency and openness here. We have very good cooperations with local youth welfare offices, but this is not consistent from one federal state to another, nor within them. It also depends on the personal commitment of individual employees. There are certainly youth welfare office managers who view us as a free service that they should take advantage of. Others do not. I know that some children really do regress, that the social and pedagogical family assistance (SPFH) is overburdened, that the organisation is viewed very ambivalently. I think there is room for improvement.

**Axel Schurbohm:** Mr. Schmidinger, what is your position on the repatriation of all citizens who have travelled to ISIS, regardless of gender?

**Thomas Schmidinger:** My position is very clear: European citizens must be repatriated, including men, not only for human rights reasons, but above all for security reasons. I know the region in northern and eastern Syria very well, where most of those affected are being held. The political and military situation there is extremely unstable and none of us know whether this region will still exist in one- or two-years' time. We have the option of either orderly repatriating these people and then conduct judicial procedures, or we run the risk that these people will be released unregulated in the event of an attack by Turkey, the Syrian regime, the pro-Iranian militias or other violent actors and then return on their own initiative. We must not forget that many of those affected are still highly ideologised. The ideology of the *Islamic State* still prevails in the Al Hol camp and even in the prisons not many have been deradicalised in any way. The *Islamic State* no longer exists as a state project, but as an organisation. Concluding: I consider it a security risk not to repatriate these European citizens.

The second point is the children. You must differentiate between the camps. The Roj camp is much better organised, but in Al Hol these children continue to grow up with the ideology of the *Islamic State*. They have not committed any criminal offences. If we now imagine the worst-case scenario that these women and children are held there for years and are then released at some point, then we have young people there who have Austrian or other European citizenship, who have done nothing wrong and therefore cannot be prosecuted, but who have not only grown up with the ideology of the so-called *Islamic State*, but who are also likely to return to Europe with a certain desire for revenge.

**Axel Schurbohm:** Ms. Dantschke, do you see it the same way, especially regarding men?

**Claudia Dantschke:** Let's recall the situation of the men when they were with ISIS: They were the strong ones, the powerful ones, they had everything, they were the rulers, they exercised violence. It was a sinister power that they held in their hands. And now? Now they are in a situation of impotence, some of them are crammed into mass cells with no contact with the outside world. I wonder what that does to people psychologically - not just ideologically, but also psychologically. I completely

agree with Mr. Schmidinger. I can understand that for humanitarian reasons one does not want to repatriate people who have sat on piles of corpses, mocked the victims and campaigned for the ISIS. But it would be advantageous for security reasons. At some point, these men will come, because you can't keep them there for the next thirty years. And then perhaps psychopaths will come back who can no longer be deradicalised. That's what I'm afraid of.

And what numbers are we actually talking about? There are two figures for Germany: The men who have a connection to Germany, for example, who grew up in Germany and are the fathers of German children, but do not have German citizenship. And then there is the number of German citizens. As far as I know, there are currently 36 German nationals, which is quite a manageable number. Two Germans have already died of illnesses while in custody. And then there is the number 46, that is the men who have a connection to Germany. A country with over 80 million inhabitants should be able to bring 46 men back and put them on trial here. They wouldn't all come back at once, you could start with the easier cases. I believe that we can work with them. But I assume that many of them will be so mentally unstable that we, as non-psychologists, won't be able to access them at first. We already have women who need psychological help at first.

I think everyone knows at a European level, every country, the security authorities everyone knows what a security risk this is. In six months' time, Trump might win the elections in the USA, what happens then? The Americans want to withdraw from Syria and Trump will make it happen. At the moment, I fear that everyone at EU level is looking at each other and waiting on who will take the first step, after which other countries would follow. But no one wants to take the lead.

**Sofia Koller:** Yes, I think that is a very important point, that there are these different arguments, i.e. the human rights, the humanitarian, but also the security policy aspect, where each actor can pick their own argument. What I find remarkable is this wait-and-see attitude, a very cynical attitude that says: two have already died, if we wait and see, then perhaps the problem will solve itself. I'm not talking about Germany now, I'm talking about several countries. I believe this will backfire in the medium or long term.

I wonder whether a pan-European intervention would be the right approach? Nevertheless, I have doubts, if the approaches and arguments as to why the women



and children are not returned are so different. I hear from Germany that the Kurds do not separate the mothers from the children, so if you want to repatriate the children, you have to include the women as well. The Foreign Office then says that we have already acted on humanitarian grounds before and there are also court judgements. In the Netherlands they say: we would rather take them back than let them escape punishment. I'm also not sure whether there were similar court proceedings against men or whether they didn't even try, unfortunately I don't know.<sup>1</sup> And in France the procedure was quite different: at the beginning there was a strict decision that no one would be taken back except orphans or very sick children, which were then separated from their mothers. As far as I know, some of the mothers signed papers that they would return their children to France but not leave camp themselves. That was a semi-legal approach because the situation the mothers found themselves in was not of free choice.

But what really led to the women being repatriated is that there was a growing consensus in the security policy establishment in France: Yes, we need to bring these women back. There was obviously a key player who changed his mind. Sometimes it really depends on one person's position - it's a game of time as to who is involved in the decision-making process. For instance, Macron winning the election changed the domestic political situation. In Germany, it's unfortunately not the perfect time to bring the men back from a political perspective.

What I found very interesting was that this decision to repatriate the women was made partly because they started to build capacity in the prisons a few years ago. They set up evaluation and prevention units and are continuing to expand them because they anticipate that there will be more and more female extremist offenders. The feeling of being better prepared for these returnees has also contributed to the political decision to say: OK, we dare to do this now.

I don't need to repeat the arguments as to why we should relocate everyone. But I would like to add that Germany is already very well prepared for that scenario. We have had deradicalisation and exit work for decades, we now have really extensive experience in prisons with different of groups of people. The pressure on prisons is

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<sup>1</sup> Note: So far there has been a court case, but it failed in the first instance because no danger to life and limb was seen.

decreasing, because radicalisation in prison is no longer as much of a problem as it used to be and, just as Ms. Dantschke said, they will not be brought back at once. And then there are countries like Russia, which have repatriated over 200 men. I find it difficult for a country like Russia to serve as a role model here, but Russia, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan decided to manage this differently from Western Europe due to a completely different security policy situation. And I ask myself, do we, with all the structures we have built up, really want to make Germany look so incompetent? I believe that we could really set a courageous example here and also in a European comparison. Whether such a decision will then stay a unilateral effort or other countries will follow in some sort of pan-european coordination is another question. I don't know exactly what the best approach is, because every country has different requirements. But Germany really can't avoid its responsibility.

**Axel Schurbohm:** Thank you, Ms. Koller, for drawing attention to Central Asia. I believe that no country had more people emigrate to ISIS than Kazakhstan. Facing the challenge of repatriation is a completely different dimension for Kazakhstan than for Germany where we are talking about 40 people.

**Susanne Wittmann:** I have little insight into politics and we have no experience of what the men will be like when they are here. I fear they are more ill than radicalised. It reminds me a lot of the time after 1945, when a lot more than 40 men came back from the front having seen carnage and piles of corpses. Who attended to their needs? Nobody. If we compare that to our present issue on, what to do with a handful of men, it's absurd that we don't bring them back. Especially in view of our German history, we should be aware that must to bring the men back and provide them with support.

We don't even need to look to Central Asia; in Europe, countries with a much poorer infrastructure manage to repatriate more people than we do. The only state in Europe that I know of that has repatriated all of its citizens is Kosovo, which somehow seems to manage it. Of course, it is an indictment that long-established democracies are unable to do what a state that is not even recognised by all the states of the European Union is able to do.

**Axel Schurbohm:** I would like to ask one more question: you mentioned the security issue, Mr. Schmidinger. Is there a consensus on the podium that it is safer to bring the men back than to simply leave them there?

**Thomas Schmidinger:** Yes, from my point of view, yes. But it depends on what you do with these terrorists. I would prefer to see people who are capable of attacks in Europe, under control and in prison. And perhaps after serving a prison sentence, to see how they behave and whether they are still dangerous or not, than to leave them in a chronically unstable world region with potential unregulated emigration of these people back to Europe whilst escaping prosecution.

**Sofia Koller:** This is a somewhat provocative question: What do we mean by security issues? What is the perspective? Now we have the impression: it's their own fault they're in prison, we don't have to worry about them. That's a comfortable situation for us. But in a security policy context like this, it's about much more than just averting the immediate threat posed by returnees. The question is, how do we manage to convince a person after so many years in a truly desolate situation that Germany is perhaps not such a bad country after all? There is also potential for others to become further radicalised as they observe this cynical attitude in Germany and other countries to leave their citizens behind.

I think the mental and physical condition of the people currently imprisoned also plays a role, and I would say, judging by everything I hear from the prisons that their mental state and general state of health is extremely poor. It's an issue of inhumane treatment, and there may even be future legal proceedings because Germany enabled this. I am convinced that most returnees do not primarily think about how to carry out an attack, but how to get back on their feet. Convincing these people that they have been let them down, but that you have now helped them, can also be a very good argument for deradicalisation. I would look at it in a more nuanced way: repatriation as the best of many bad options. It's not about it being the perfect solution. We missed that 20 years ago. But now we still have the opportunity to do something, and every day that goes by without us making that decision, it gets harder. What if they come back and their detention in Syria is recognised? What do we do then? Therefore I would like to emphasize that the point at which we should have taken action has already passed I do believe that there is a consensus that repatriation is still the best thing we can do in this situation.

**Claudia Dantschke:** The Kurds have repeatedly emphasised that they would actually like to put people on trial themselves, preferably before an international court. We know that this won't happen, that this is just rhetoric. On the one hand, the

German judiciary argues that the time spent in Syrian prisons cannot be taken into account in the event of a conviction by a German court. This is due to the fact that their imprisonment was not based on any internationally recognised legal procedure. The Kurds are not a state and the Kurds did not arrest the men for the purpose of prosecution, they are simply keeping them captive. But if the Kurds keep saying that they would like to bring the foreign ISIS fighters to justice themselves and the Federal Foreign Office stays inactive referring back to this wish, it is possible that in the future a judge will recognize the Kurdish captivity as term of imprisonment. In that kind of scenario, a man who was with the ISIS secret service and may have been guilty of the most serious crimes may come back and get out of prison after the trial because he has already served his sentence, because four years in Syria are counted with a factor of 1: 3 in Germany“.

**Thomas Schmidinger:** A word on the Kurdish position, because I am very often in the region of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, did a lot of research there and know the players relatively well: the Kurds' position is that they are very much prepared to hand over the IS fighters if they are prosecuted in their home countries. That has always been their condition, which they have maintained all along and communicated to the West and other states. It was not a condition for the women and children. The idea that kept coming up of holding trials in the region with international help, of setting up an international criminal court, was propagated more out of desperation, because nobody was prepared to take the prisoners back. This was never really discussed as a realistic alternative in the region itself. After all, what do you do with the convicts when there are no longer any professional prisons in north-east Syria? How do you conduct a trial in a region where there are hardly any prosecutors, judges and so on? You would then have to send Western judges and prosecutors there, who would have to live under war conditions in order to conduct a trial for years.

This idea was therefore a means of political pressure and has never really been seriously pursued. The Kurds have always said: where it is possible under criminal law to prosecute these men, that they are also prepared to return the male fighters. There were only a few states that repatriated the detainees.

**Axel Schurbohm:** I would like to return to the topic of “five years after the fall of the *caliphate*”. Where will we be in five years?

**Claudia Dantschke:** It's a question of funding, ultimately the whole civil society network has to be financed. I'm assuming that we'll all still be around and funded in five years' time. We take care of the men's relatives and I am somehow obliged to spread optimism in order to build up the parents and at some point I also believe in my own optimism. In this respect, I hope that at least the first wave of men will be there and we will be working with the men, that's my hope.

**Susanne Wittmann:** If there is funding and we can continue working, then I am positive that we will have been able to rebuild first bonds between the children and their fathers and initial meetings to get to know each other will have taken place, or perhaps even more. The children will have developed further, hopefully in a positive direction, and are also happy that they have been reintegrated here in Germany.

**Sofia Koller:** What comes to mind spontaneously is the fact that many of the children who were repatriated were very young and in five years' time, they will be older and reach puberty, perhaps also enter the workforce. It would be important to be able to continue to offer support services on a sustainable long-term basis, especially thinking of the state returnee coordinators. The project should not be cut back but should be retained as a service so that the children and young people are supported on their further path to outgrow the "returnee" label. If we manage to do that in five years, I believe we have a good chance of getting the vast majority of them into a stable life. At least that would be my hope for the women. We are still at the very beginning in terms of experience, how reintegration is going, how adaptation is going. Here too, I would hope that in five years' time, many of them will have made it through the support services and will not fall back into the radical networks but will have a feeling that they have been given a second chance. We need sustainable support, but also a society that is prepared to give them this second chance. As a deradicalisation counsellor or probation officer, you can convey as many positive things as you like, but if the employer or landlord still only has this label in mind, then it simply becomes very difficult. It's a task for society as a whole.

Concerning the men, I hope that in five years' time we are not sitting here still talking about why it would be important to finally tackle these repatriations. I would like for us to be talking about how proud we can be of Germany, that it is living up to its responsibilities and that this was the right decision. We are not naïve, there

are certainly some dangerous people among them, we must not conceal that. But must face up to this responsibility because these people have become radicalised in Germany. That is our responsibility, not of the Kurds, the Syrians or the Iraqis. I would like us to do justice to this in our narrative as a constitutional state, because otherwise it would also be ammunition for extremists: look at how Germany deals with Islamists. This discourse is not helpful in the current situation.

**Thomas Schmidinger:** Unfortunately, I do not conclude on a happy note, but I'm not that optimistic. I fear that in five years we will no longer have self-government in northern and eastern Syria and that a large proportion of the jihadists will be released and reorganise themselves. I anticipate a second wave of jihadism both here in Iraq and in Syria, because a whole generation of people is growing up here, e.g. undocumented children of ISIS fighters, who have no chance here and are a perfect target for further radicalisation. I also fear that there will be a second wave of radicalisation in Europe, also in connection with the current war in Gaza and the European positions on it. I don't know whether it will be the *Islamic State*, but I expect similar phenomena to be more virulent again in five years' time than they are today.

**Axel Schurbohm:** Thank you for that assessment, Mr. Schmidinger. I assume that in five years' time, we will definitely be smarter, in whatever direction that may be.

## Questions from the audience

**Audience:** In Germany they say the men should stay in Iraq/Syria because they are dangerous or radical. But how does that affect the people who live there? I have many relatives in Syria/Iraq who are very scared and have to stay there, even though they do not want to.

**Thomas Schmidinger:** That is of course the central moral dilemma. You can't shift the problem onto the people in Syria and Iraq. I completely agree with you that it is a total moral failure on Europe's part.

**Audience:** You have absolutely convinced me why it makes sense to bring the men back. I wonder what it's like for you when you talk to political decision-makers,

whether your background knowledge on why we need to repatriate the men influences political stakeholders?

**Claudia Dantschke:** We spoke to the Foreign Minister, Ms. Baerbock, who immediately supported this with an argument that know from the FDP (German Free Democratic Party). She made it her own: we lose credibility if we want to deport rejected asylum seekers and condemn the countries for not accepting them, but we don't take our people back. That's what the FDP always said in the opposition in the last legislative period. In opposition, the FDP and the Greens called for all Germans to be taken back. Now the FDP and the Greens are in government and at least Ms. Baerbock is saying this publicly in front of the press. There are three parties in the coalition government, but what about the SPD (German Social Democratic Party)? My theory is that the SPD is blocking further development. I think we need to ask the SPD, Minister of the Interior Ms. Faeser or Chancellor Scholz where the problems lie. I do find it interesting when parties in opposition demand that men should be brought back, and now that they are in government, we have to keep reminding them because nothing is happening. We do what we can to the best of our abilities.

**Audience:** To come back to the women, because we have now talked a lot about the men. I am concerned about whether anyone here on the podium can imagine a scenario in which the European states give a special form of asylum to the women, who are now made de facto stateless by Great Britain or other countries because the camps they are currently in are unacceptable?

**Sofia Koller:** If it is already so difficult to get two-year-old children with a very evident right to it, out of this situation, then I can't imagine someone going above and beyond for a case like Shamima Begum or likely less well-known other cases. It is theoretically possible though and we have heard time and again, that due to family constellations (i.e. binational, trinational and different family networks) a legitimate connection to Germany can be interpreted in a way, that it would then be possible for individual cases to be approved. But for that, I would say that we would need ten years of lobbying by 1,000 people who say that this woman has already lost a child and must return. That would perhaps be a case for Amnesty International.

Repatriation of terrorists does not make good press. The issue is definitely being discussed, it hasn't gone away. Everyone involved in any way is already largely in

agreement that this problem remains unsolved and I also believe that there is a general understanding that repatriation would actually be the best thing. But who is going to stick their neck out politically to make such a decision? When a released offender is imprisoned again, heads start to roll in the authorities and you need people in charge. We had the case of Tarik S., he was a returnee, spent five years in prison, was supervised in a deradicalisation counselling program and now, four years after he was released from prison and apparently did quite well - it's debatable how radicalised he really was - he was arrested in October because he was suspected of wanting to attack a pro-Israel demonstration. That's one case, and it's enough to immediately nip any seedlings of hope and political courage in the bud. And if you then take the political situation in France, the Netherlands or Germany, then I have to say, yes, unfortunately I don't have much hope that this political courage will really materialise. But as I said, things can change, the geopolitical situation can change in such a way that people will reconsider: Before we have the second *Islamic State*, we will first get rid of this constellation.

**Axel Schurbohm:** A warm thank you to the panel and the audience.





