

# Five Years After the End of the *Caliphate*

**An interim assessment on the deradicalisation work with  
female returnees and their children  
by the Counselling Service *Leben of Grüner Vogel e.V.***



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## Foreword

On March 23, 2019, the *Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)* in Baghouz, Syria, succeeded in defeating the *caliphate* proclaimed by the *Islamic State (ISIS)* as a territorial entity. In seven repatriation operations between August 2019 and November 2022, the German government repatriated 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, from Kurdish refugee camps in northeastern Syria to Germany. Around 270 people (mostly men) had already returned to Germany before the end of the *caliphate*, in some cases after very short stays in Syria.

The *Counselling Service Leben*<sup>1</sup> of the *Grüner Vogel e.V.*<sup>2</sup> and the *ProKids* project of the *Grenzgänger* Bochum counselling network are nationwide deradicalisation facilities funded by the *Counselling Centre for Radicalization of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF)*, focusing on the phenomenon of "Islamist extremism." The main focus of their work is supporting the deradicalisation and reintegration of female returnees from jihadist combat zones and their children.

The end of the *caliphate* five years ago prompted us to jointly review an interim assessment of our work at a symposium in Berlin on March 14, 2024. What assumptions and fears about returned "potential ISIS terrorists" or "ISIS brides", as they were called in the press, and their children have been confirmed or disproved? What challenges did we face, and what lessons can be drawn, especially concerning future preventive measures? And what tasks still lie ahead of us, given that the ideology behind the *caliphate* remains virulent?

The present brochure provides insights into our work, as well as our assumptions and findings from counselling female returnees, as presented at the symposium.

Claudia Dantschke

30.04.2024

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<sup>1</sup> Leben = life

<sup>2</sup> Grüner Vogel e.V. = association green bird

# 1. Women in the Context of Jihadist Movements

The departure of individuals to jihadist combat zones is a phenomenon that extends far beyond the often-cited cases of joining the so-called Islamic State in Syria/Iraq (ISIS) and has a complex history. As early as 2008, about 40 individuals, including 20% women who travelled with their partners as wives, travelled to Afghanistan to join groups associated with al-Qaeda. This trend continued with a smaller wave of departures between 2009 and 2011 to Somalia to join the Shabab militias, where around 20% of the roughly 20 travellers were women who travelled with their families.

The dynamics and role of women in these movements changed significantly between 2012 and 2017 during the large wave of departures to Syria and Iraq. Of the 1,150 official departures<sup>3</sup>, around 22% were women, many of whom no longer travelled as companions to their husbands but instead made independent decisions sometimes as young as 15 or 16 years old. This marks a significant shift in women's participation in jihadist movements and underscores the increasing complexity of this phenomenon.

The reasons for these departures and the specific motives of women joining jihadist groups are diverse and require a differentiated consideration. Factors such as ideological conviction, the search for a sense of belonging, or escape from personal problems may play a role. The active participation of women in these contexts raises important questions about gender roles, radicalization, and the prevention of extremism that need to be explored in future discussions and research.

The situation of people who have joined the ISIS and have returned from conflict zones or remain there is complex and multifaceted. Out of the initial approximate count of 1,150 individuals, a notable proportion, approximately 270, have passed away. This number includes at least ten women. Additionally, 60 adults, many of them men, are still in Syrian or Iraqi detention. To be more precise, 46 men with connections to Germany (including 29 German citizens) and 14 women (German citizens) are detained in Iraqi or Syrian-Kurdish prisons or camps in north-eastern Syria.

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<sup>3</sup> Approx. 25% joined Al-Qaeda affiliated circles, while approx. 75% joined ISIS

Returnees can be divided into two main groups. The first group, the so-called first generation or wave, comprises around 270 people who spent only a short time with ISIS, sometimes just three to four months, and returned to Germany before the end of the *caliphate*. The second group consists of about 180 people who stayed in the ISIS-controlled area for a longer period, in some cases two to four years, and witnessed the collapse of the *caliphate* on-site. This group is currently the focus of public and security policy discussions.



Claudia Dantschke

The fate of around 370 individuals, however, remains uncertain<sup>4</sup>. Some of them may still be in Syria or Iraq while others may have fled to Turkey. It is also possible that some members of this group have perished. This uncertainty reflects the complexity and ongoing challenges associated with the return and reintegration of former ISIS members. Addressing these challenges requires a careful consideration

<sup>4</sup> All figures regarding the current distribution of the 1.150 departures were compiled by the author based on information from the Federal Criminal Police Office, the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, as well as the Foreign Office, obtained through parliamentary inquiries or provided to the press.

between security measures and the necessity of providing pathways for these individuals to reintegrate into society.

The return from Syria and Iraq to Germany occurred through various routes and under different circumstances. Many returned privately, similar to how they had departed via Turkey. Some were detained there and deported back to Germany. There were also deportations from Iraq, including two individuals from Kurdish northern Iraq and two women from Baghdad. However, the latter were deported only after serving the sentences they had been convicted of in Iraq.

Particularly noteworthy is the initiative of the federal government regarding the repatriation of individuals from Syria. Between August 2019 and November 2022, Germany conducted seven repatriation operations, bringing back a total of 27 women, 80 children and a young man who had been taken to Syria as a child by his mother. These measures stem from the federal government's political decision to consider children as victims and to prioritize their repatriation. The decision to repatriate mothers along with their children was made because the Kurdish authorities in northeastern Syria rejected the separation of children from their mothers. Therefore, the Federal Government adjusted its strategy to facilitate the return of the children.

The return of women who joined the Islamic State poses challenges for society and the legal system. The majority of these women returned disillusioned, clearly distancing themselves from ISIS, but struggled to acknowledge their own responsibility and guilt. A typical example is Kim Theresa A., who was sentenced to four years in prison for operating a chat group for ISIS sympathizers in Germany while she was in Syria with other women who were also considering traveling there.

She learned how to handle an assault rifle and a Kalashnikov from her husband and always carried the loaded weapons with her, which violates the Weapons of War Control Act. She also set out "voluntarily and of her own accord"<sup>5</sup> to help build an Islamic state.

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<sup>5</sup> Der Spiegel, 29.10.2021: ISIS returnee Kim Teresa A. sentenced to four years in prison. <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/frankfurt-am-main-is-rueckkehrerin-kim-teresa-a-zu-vier-jahren-haft-verurteilt-a-db32f472-7274-4bfc-80ed-dcc6967a617e>

## Who Returns and How? - Example 1

Kim Theresa A. - 4 years imprisonment  
disillusioned, distant, relativising one's own guilt and responsibility  
(majority of returned or repatriated women)



### Reasoning for the verdict:

- In Syria, operated a **chat group for IS sympathizers in Germany** with other women, who were also considering traveling to Syria.
- **Learned to handle an assault rifle and a Kalashnikov** from her husband and always carried the loaded weapons with her.
- Set out **“voluntarily and of her own accord”** to help build an Islamic state.

In contrast, the second example is rather exceptional: Jennifer W. was sentenced to 14 years in prison after an appeal for membership in a terrorist organization abroad and crimes against humanity in the form of enslavement resulting in death. In 2015, she and her then-husband enslaved a Yazidi girl with her mother. When her husband chained the child in the blazing sun as punishment, she watched until the girl died of thirst. Her indifference illustrates the extreme consequences of ideological delusion and the serious crimes committed by German citizens in the name of ISIS.

Throughout the entire first trial, she remained unrepentant, ideologized, and connected to the radical scene, where she was known as Sister Yasmin. From prison, she wrote to this scene: *‘... It deeply moves me here in detention that you, siblings, have supported me for almost 3 years and have not forgotten. Therefore, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to you for the inquiries, visits, letters, and also for the money*

*...thank you very very much!... your sister in Islam, Yasmin’<sup>6</sup>.*

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<sup>6</sup> The original screenshot of this letter from "Sister Yasmin" to the scene, forwarded by Bernhard Falk, is available to the authors.



## Letter from prison to the radical scene, forwarded on 20.05.21 via Bernhard Falk



*„... It deeply moves me here in detention that you, siblings, have supported me for almost three years and have not forgotten. Therefore, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to you for the inquiries, visits, letters, and also for the money ...thank you very very much!... your sister in Islam, Yasmin“*

Only in the retrial, when it was about a possible increase in the prison sentence, was she somewhat confessing, probably less out of a acknowledge of guilt, but to prevent the sentence from being too high<sup>7</sup>.

These examples illustrate the complexity of the issue surrounding returnees from ISIS territories. While some women show signs of remorse and distancing, others remain deeply entrenched in the ideology. This not only poses a security risk but also requires a differentiated approach regarding resocialization measures and criminal prosecution. Society faces the challenge of finding an appropriate way to handle these women, promoting their reintegration while also ensuring justice for the victims.

The evolution of prosecuting women returning from jihadist conflict zones reflects a significant shift in how women are handled, stemming from the altered role of women in jihadist groups. For instance, about 90% of men returning from Afghanistan were arrested upon entry, while not a single woman was detained. The situation is similar for individuals who travelled to Somalia to join al-Shabab. Here, the arrest rate was 100% for men and 0% for women. This imbalance has not

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<sup>7</sup> Süddeutsche Zeitung, 29.08.2023, A. Ramelsberger: That speaks against Jennifer W., available at: [www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/prozess-is-rueckkehrerin-jennifer-w-muenchen-haft-14-jahre-1.6174240](http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/prozess-is-rueckkehrerin-jennifer-w-muenchen-haft-14-jahre-1.6174240)

significantly changed even concerning the first generation of returnees from Syria/Iraq. While an estimated 25 to 30% of men were incarcerated upon their return after a relatively short stay in the *caliphate*, women initially could return to their old lives. However, investigations led to the arrest and prosecution of women in six cases after several years.

The changing role of women in jihadist movements, particularly evident in the propaganda and recruitment efforts of ISIS, is now also very clearly reflected in the understanding of law enforcement authorities. The increasing number of arrests and prosecutions against women returning from the former ISIS *caliphate* after several years residence indicates that law enforcement authorities have developed a more differentiated view of the role of women. This shift in perception is particularly noticeable among the so-called second generation of returnees, where almost half of the women<sup>8</sup> were arrested upon entry<sup>9</sup>. It demonstrates that authorities are adapting their strategies to effectively address all forms of involvement in jihadist activities. This change in law enforcement practices also contributes to challenging and reassessing stereotypical ideas of women's roles in jihadist movements.

## 2. The Work of the *Grüner Vogel e.V.* with Female Returnees

Working with returnees from jihadist combat zones presents both a major challenge and an opportunity for reintegration and prevention. We, the staff of the *Grüner Vogel e.V.*, can draw on long-standing experience in counselling dating back to the first departures to al-Qaeda in Afghanistan (2 men and 2 women). Overall, there is experience in working with 44 returnees, 11 men and 33 women. The men we worked with were predominantly people who had joined al-Shabab in Somalia (5 men), while the returnees from Syria/Iraq included three adolescents or young adults and one man who stayed in northwestern Syria, but not in ISIS area.

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<sup>8</sup> This figure is an estimate and is based on the cases by the Counselling Service *Leben*. 15 women out of 31 returnees were detained upon entry.

<sup>9</sup> The arrest rate for men who have been in the *caliphate* for a longer period of time is 100%.

In this respect, we will concentrate on women as the basis for statements about working with male returnees who stayed longer with ISIS is too limited. In contrast, there is experience from working with 31 female returnees from the *caliphate*.

15 of these women were immediately incarcerated upon arrival in Germany. In six cases, we had to hand over the work with these women in custody to other counselling centres, although in only one case resulting from the client's decision, while the other cases were due to local responsibilities. We currently continue to work with eight of these 15 women, four of whom are still in custody, while the other four have been released on parole. Work is currently suspended in one case as some decisions are still pending.

The other 16 women were able to return to their families directly after arrival. In three of these cases, the investigations, which all returnees undergo, have led to charges. Some of the women had already been back in Germany for five years and had successfully built a new life for themselves.

The work with the remaining 13 women, against whom investigations are ongoing but no charges have been brought yet, has been concluded in 7 cases. It is important to recognize that the closure of a case does not always mean that counselling has been successfully completed. Often, it is the result of the individual decision-making of the affected women, who may choose to discontinue the counselling or see no further benefit in continuing the process. The reasons for this can be varied, such as a lack of external pressure or the emotional burden of dealing with the crime. In four out of seven cases where we have concluded counselling, the decision was made by the returnees themselves, some of whom no longer felt the need for further counselling. In three cases, we decided to conclude the counselling because the client is now managing her life independently and autonomously, and she poses no risk. We referred one case to another counselling service, and active counselling is currently ongoing with five women.

## Prosecution of the 31 ISIS female returnees dealt with by the Counselling Service *Leben*

### **Incarcerated:**

15 women                      **4 cases in prison + 4 cases on parole actively in counselling**  
1 case in prison is suspended  
6 cases taken over by other counselling centres

### **Upcoming court proceedings:**

3 women                      **3 cases actively in counselling**

### **Ongoing investigations:**

13 women                      **5 cases actively in counselling**  
7 cases concluded  
1 case transferred to another counselling centre

Counselling service *Leben* of the *Grüner Vogel e.V.* operates nationwide. Therefore, it is understandable that the 31 female returnees from Syria/Iraq, who are being supported by the counselling service, come from various federal states. Two-thirds come from the federal states of North Rhine-Westphalia, Hesse, and Lower Saxony. These are also the federal states from which most of them departed. Departures and returns from ISIS also occurred from eastern Germany, involving a total of four women. A further five women come from the city-states of Berlin and Bremen and one each from Rhineland-Palatinate and Schleswig-Holstein.<sup>10</sup>

32% (10 out of 31 women) of the women supported by the counselling service departed with children. 25 women gave birth in Syria, and in two cases, the children died in Syria. Only four women returned without children.

Of the 31 women, 51% come from families with a Muslim background, without considering the religiosity of the family at this point. 49% of the women do not have a Muslim family background, some of them do not have a migration background at all, some have a migration background of one parent but no connection to Islam.

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<sup>10</sup> 11 from NRW, 6 from Hesse, 4 from East Germany, 3 from Lower Saxony, 3 from Berlin, 2 from Bremen

In 84% of cases, the counselling relationship already existed, either directly or indirectly through the family, when the women were still in Syria. This allowed the counselling service to accompany and advise families during the time of the *ISIS caliphate*. 14 out of the 31 women sought direct contact with the case workers while they were still in Syria. This was especially prominent in the years 2020 and 2021 when the question arose about whether and when the Federal government would bring women and children back to Germany from the Kurdish camps in Syria. Another 12 women took this step after their arrival in Germany because they had already heard about the work of the counselling service through their families. Two additional woman came through contact with other returnees who were already in counselling and two women were referred to us by another counselling service. Only one woman sought counselling independently after her arrival in Germany.

The mental health of the women and their children requires special attention. The experiences described - from repeated psychological and physical violence to the loss of a husband or father to constant fleeing and hunger – can leave deep scars on the psyche of those affected. In particular, women who lived in such environments were often forced to marry repeatedly because they could not live alone in the *caliphate*, which can lead to repeated relationship breakdowns and thus attachment disorders. These attachment disorders result from the inability to establish stable and secure emotional relationships with other people and are a direct consequence of the experienced traumas.

In addition, there is the ideological indoctrination, which further exacerbates the psychological burden. Indoctrination, particularly in conflict zones, aims to influence individuals' perception, thinking, and feeling so that those affected adopt the predetermined ideology without thinking.

The constant confrontation with war, escape, and hunger - some women were on the run moving from city to city, from place to place starting from the fall of Raqqa, the capital of ISIS, in October 2017 until the end of the *caliphate* in March 2019 - represents an extreme form of traumatic stress. This state of chronic uncertainty and threat can lead to long-term mental disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety disorders.

The imprisonment of women and children after the fall of the *caliphate* by SDF forces in the completely overcrowded refugee camp Al-Hol in northeastern Syria posed an additional burden. The partially life-threatening conditions, especially in

this camp and the regime of ISIS supporters were mentally very stressful. Additionally, there was prolonged uncertainty surrounding the possibility and timing of their return to Germany and what would await them in Germany. With this uncertainty, some of the women had to live for five years in the camp. 17 out of the 31 female returnees with whom the counselling service *Leben* works have also sought psychological help after their return.

### 3. Is there THE female returnee? Assumptions and insights from working with female returnees

Julia Berczyk, Alma Fathi und Kaan Orhon

In a roundtable discussion, the three case advisors from the Counselling Service *Leben*, Julia Berczyk, Alma Fathi, and Kaan Orhon, shared their experiences and discussed the resulting assumptions and insights. Prior to this, the *Grüner Vogel e.V.* had asked several female returnees to respond to a series of prepared questions. This document outlines this professional exchange and the corresponding statements of the female returnees.



Kaan Orhon, Julia Berczyk und Alma Fathi

**Kaan Orhon:** *A popular question that used to be asked was: Is there a classic biography of someone who is radicalizing? Applied to the present and our topic: Is there a biography of the typical female returnee?*

**Julia Berczyk:** There is no such thing as a typical female returnee. There are similarities, but as we know from radicalization processes, these are very individual phenomena and exit processes are also very individual. What all the women had in common was that they felt a certain dissatisfaction in their lives and saw their needs best fulfilled and satisfied by the ideology or the group at that particular moment. The second thing they all had in common was the desire to return to Germany, and even then, the motives and triggers for this desire varied.

We can distinguish three types: Firstly, those who, even during the time of the *Caliphate*, began to question where they had ended up, had doubts, and wanted to return very quickly. But in some cases, it was not that easy. They had been on the run for years and didn't leave Germany very ideologized. There were other motives at the forefront. Then there were those who, with the increase in fighting and experienced inconveniences, or during their time in the camps - where the women sometimes spent years - began to reflect on their own roles and the group they had joined. They developed the desire to return. And finally, there were those who became increasingly disillusioned due to the circumstances, where it was less about questioning the group or the ideology, but the circumstances they found themselves in, especially when children were involved. Where there was simply a longing for a bit of security and normality.

To what extent the ideology and their own role at the time of departure were reflected upon varies greatly among the women. There are also those who do not return because they do not have German citizenship, even though they departed from Germany. Additionally, there are individual cases in the camps who might have the right to return but do not want to, because they are afraid of being separated from their children upon their return, or still hoping for a miracle that ISIS will free them from the camps after all. However, we remain in contact with them as well.

At some point, they might come to the realization: Yes, I want to return. And we definitely want to be there when that happens.

**Kaan Orhon:** *I believe part of the question about the typical biography always includes the desire to have a neat box to put women into. For me, this is also*

*somewhat evident when you look at the narratives in the media. For a long time, we heard about women as appendages of men, as objects of male decision-making power from husbands, brothers, fathers, etc. People spoke of wives, that is, women exclusively in relation to men. Then that changed. A dramatization of the discourse began with the return. Now it was about the return of terrorists, of whom it was unclear how dangerous they were and how to deal with them. What were the concrete experiences in working with the women, and to what extent were they autonomous actors?*

**Alma Fathi:** Of course, the women were acting subjects and there were certainly individual cases where one or the other followed her husband. But ultimately, each woman made the decision to leave Germany, leave her family behind, go to a war and crisis zone, and join a jihadist terrorist group. The motives are very different, even though there are similarities. However, these commonalities cannot be generalized. There are often cited reasons such as experiences of discrimination, war trials, the search for identity, hostility towards Muslims, unstable parental homes, and much more, but all these factors must also be seen in the context of personal resilience. This is because many people experience racism or come from unstable parental homes and do not join a terrorist group. In our practical work, although there is no empirical data on this, we were able to establish that experiences of racism and othering processes appear to play a greater role in the radicalization process for Black German women than for other groups. The narrative of a racism-free society of equal people living without prejudice in the Muslim community is a very attractive narrative in jihadist ideology that strongly attracts these women.

What was new about ISIS was that it explicitly directed its propaganda at women, which led to women traveling alone without male accompaniment or with other young women who were not previously married, always with the aim of marrying someone there once they arrived.

**Julia Berczyk:** The knowledge and degree of radicalization of the women who travelled abroad were very different. Some knew exactly what they were getting into. They had dealt intensively with the topic and also accepted the fact that war could break out on the ground, with everything that comes with it. Others had only dealt with it roughly. They knew what was happening in Syria and were familiar of certain groups, but some of them had ideas about the situation on the ground that were completely unrealistic. And then there were unfortunately women or girls who



travelled there with very little prior knowledge. But the statement, "I knew nothing!" is certainly not something everyone can claim for themselves. When working with the women, it very quickly becomes clear what the initial situation was like for each individual.

## What motivated you to travel abroad back then?

- My husband, I followed him. At that time, I wanted to make a fresh start and I was curious about Islam.
- The conviction that it is the right place for me to live as a Muslim.
- I believe it had a lot to do with him, but also with life in Germany. I re-learned Islam and then I involved in this scene, these Muslim groups that think this way. I watched those videos back then. Through my partner, I learned more and got involved. Before that, I knew nothing, I was very different, I had a completely different life.
- I actually didn't want to leave Germany; I was happy and content living here because I had no problems. But because my husband wanted to move, I followed him. I thought we were moving to a normal Muslim country where we could practice our religion more freely. I didn't know what kind of organization it was or what was really behind it. I saw videos and photos of restaurants, of families eating ice cream in the park. And then you think, ah, that's a normal life too.

Responses from female returnees

**Julia Berczyk:** This shows what the main task in our work with the women is, namely, to encourage them to reflect on their own role. Even if, at least according to their own statements, they didn't play a more active role on the ground than running the household and raising children, they were still part of the ISIS system; they played a role for and within ISIS. And most women still find it somewhat difficult to admit their personal involvement, even if they didn't leave Germany as highly radicalized individuals.

**Alma Fathi:** Besides promising the opportunity to live a supposedly Islamic life, the propaganda also promised women that they could actively help Muslims on-site after their departure. They were told in very emotional videos that they could fight against an unjust system. These videos featured rapid scene changes, theatrical film music, and showed a lot of suffering, dead civilians, injured children. And these

videos were always linked to a call to action, emphasizing that Muslims must become active. Both men and women were attracted to these videos and this propaganda.

ISIS propaganda explicitly targeted women, suggesting that they could play a leading role within the organization when it comes to caring for widows and orphans. Women were led to believe that they could be trained as nurses and work as doctors on-site in the field of medical care. In reality, the situation was very different. They were confined to the domestic sphere, having one child after another, and unable to move freely. However, most women had a phone and could communicate with the outside world. Many used this initial euphoria to contact friends via social networks or WhatsApp. They explained how wonderful life in the *caliphate* was, that they could go out for ice cream and enjoy nice trips with their families. In this way, they tried to recruit their friends. Recruiting women by other women was a key element in the ISIS system, as due to gender segregation, women could only be recruited by women, since men were forbidden to contact women, they could potentially marry. Therefore, women played an active and decisive role.

Because the women also had contact with their families, they could naturally share their impressions and express their doubts. This was a crucial part of our deradicalisation work through the social environment, that we advised families to maintain the emotional relationship with their children, to constantly remind them where their home is, to occasionally send them photos of the cat, a birthday cake (even if the birthday is not celebrated), their favourite stuffed toy and other things, and to always stay in contact and communication. Ideological and religious topics should be excluded to ensure the communication doesn't break down. This was an essential part of our work. It enabled us to influence the women when the first doubts arose.

**Kaan Orhon:** *Even though we talked a lot about eating ice cream and going on excursions, there is one question that is of particular interest to the media here: Do these women pose a danger? We also asked the women about this:*

## What did you expect before your return to Germany?

- I don't know. I expected the worst, that I would spend my life in prison, that I might lose my children.
- Prison and difficulties with child services.
- Fear of being separated from my children and not knowing what to expect. The reaction of people scared me.
- Actually, I thought that I would end up in prison here in Germany as well. And when my lawyer said, "Your family is waiting for you outside," I cried tears of joy. I am very, very happy and grateful. I always say, first, I am thankful to God, and second, I am thankful to Germany because Germany could have said, "We don't need people like that."

Responses from female returnees

**Kaan Orhon:** *It is noticeable that many expected to go to prison. What risk could these women pose?*

**Julia Berczyk:** Yes, the biggest concern before returning was that they might lose their children, for example, due to an arrest warrant, but also for other reasons. It was very important to provide clarification in advance because incredible nonsense was being told in ISIS-affiliated channels about what would happen in Germany: that they would never get out of prison, be forced to eat pork, and renounce Islam. The propaganda being spread was really absurd and it was important to counteract this and communicating transparently with the women about what awaits them here in Germany, what is realistic, and what is not. Additionally, preparing for various scenarios, such as where the children would go after the return, was crucial. I must say, we had very good experiences with return coordinators and with youth welfare offices. The better and more long-term the preparation for the return and the care for all contingencies, the better the women felt when they did return.

**Kaan Orhon:** *Despite the women's expectations of arrest warrants and prison sentences, these were not guaranteed outcomes. Therefore, the question now is: How dangerous are these women? Do they pose a threat after their return?*

**Julia Berczyk:** Fundamentally, we always keep an eye on the dangers posed by, but also for the female returnees; this is a highly sensitive area where naivety has no

place. There are also various scientific instruments that help recognize warning signals and pay attention to such indicators and developments. This is an essential part of our work. We see our work as an active contribution to the protection of democracy. In any case, the security authorities are involved, whose primary responsibility is public safety and averting threats.

**Alma Fathi:** So far, there are no known cases of a female returnee being involved in the planning or execution of a terrorist attack after their return. From our counselling experience, we can say that all cases are developing more or less positively, and we do not initially see these women as posing a threat. We see no potential danger in them. Some of these women have also already been recategorized by security authorities, meaning they are no longer classified as threats. Half of the women had to stand trial, allowing us to begin a kind of processing of the offense with them after the verdict. It should be noted that the effectiveness of this investigation depends greatly on the reflection ability of the individual. The severity of the offenses they are accused of varies widely, ranging from membership to slavery. Regardless of the legal prosecution, which fundamentally revolves around whether certain actions can be proven or not, our work also involves fostering honesty, admitting personal guilt, and examining individuals own involvement.

We try to broaden the women's perspective on their own escape and also to discuss possible global consequences with the women, for example: also for Germany, when it comes to the fact that many Syrians have fled, that Yazidi women have been displaced. The jihadist attacks by ISIS in Europe have not been experienced by all the women because they were elsewhere during that time.

This abstract engagement with societal issues is deliberately used by us, as we do not have the right to refuse to testify in ongoing proceedings. Generally, it is also often easier for the women to start with abstract discussions rather than individual ones. But both abstract and individual confrontations are often a significant challenge in our work with these women because they tend to hide behind narratives of justification, such as: I followed my husband, I didn't know much. We also know this from National Socialism, where no one admitted to participating, just as all the men in ISIS were technicians and did not fight. This is something we must accept in our work. When we get to know the women, there are doubts about some of them: Hey, she's smart, she's intelligent, she can speak several languages. Then you start to wonder if these women are really just tag-alongs.

**Julia Berczyk:** Our task is then to go in-depth after the court proceedings. But it might not be the right time for the women themselves. They have been in the camps for a long time, have somehow dealt with their own role in the past, then went to court again, and now someone from the counselling service comes and asks everything again. That can sometimes be simply too much, especially since the women's focus is initially on the here and now and the future: I want to settle back in, I want to return to normality. Some don't want to look back at first. Others deliberately suppress these reflection processes or find it difficult due to other emotional or psychological reasons. Essentially, we must leave it up to the women themselves to decide when they are ready for such confrontation. Deradicalisation doesn't work with a sledgehammer approach or with pressure. We try to catch these windows of opportunity in which the women are ready for such a cognitive confrontation.

Our work also involves conducting so-called biographical test drills or asking unpleasant questions to see when and how someone is ready to be confronted with everything. One client didn't want to deal with it at all; there was no arrest warrant against her, and she wanted to immediately re-enter the workforce and return to normality. She totally overextended herself and then had to take another attempt to process and reflect on everything. The desire to quickly become 'normal' again is very strong.

Not all women go to court, but they are being investigated. It is difficult for us to work through their actions with the affected women during ongoing investigations because we do not have the right to refuse to testify and risk being summoned as witnesses, which is counterproductive to a trusting counselling relationship. Therefore, we cannot discuss certain topics in depth. Additionally, some of the women are still waiting for their husbands, who could be incriminated if they tell their stories.

The wives are not required to testify against their husbands, but now the counsellor also knows about it and can be summoned. As a result, the woman does not feel free to talk about everything with the counsellor. This is an absolute burden.

Our aim is for women to be honest with themselves so that they can look at themselves in the mirror in the long term. We first must work with the truth of the clients, who often feel that the whole truth was not told in court. We cannot judge this; we must work with what the clients tell us. We have experienced that it does

not help the women to keep things hidden, and some things cannot be hidden indefinitely. That's why we want them to be honest.

There are also cases where investigations drag on for years, and suddenly an indictment comes, and they have to answer in court. In the meantime, they already have both feet on the ground, have jobs and their children are very well integrated. And now the past comes back, possibly with media coverage, and the whole house of cards that has been painstakingly built over the last few years suddenly collapses very quickly.

For example, a woman is still waiting for an indictment, not because she concealed anything, but because she simply doesn't believe that she might have been lucky and could get off lightly only maybe with a blue eye. She can't realize this. Others would say: "Come on, be happy." But for her, it is not a source of joy because it also brings many fears that prevent her from leading a normal everyday life. For many years, her family has wanted to go on vacation with her, but she doesn't dare. Now she has a new partner, and they are planning to start a family: Can I do this, or will something come up again? Will my children be taken away if there is a trial? She doesn't feel like she has truly made a fresh start. There are very different challenges, whether before, during, or after the trial, or if there is no trial at all, and we have to adjust our work with the women accordingly.

**Kaan Orhon:** *I would like to return to the topic of the right to refuse to testify. This is the great Damocles' sword hanging over the counselling processes. What can be done with the women if a thorough examination of the offense cannot take place or is not desired by the client for understandable reasons?*

**Julia Berczyk:** It involves psychological and emotional stabilization processes, but also very pragmatic matters that need to be sorted out. The women who do not have an arrest warrant against them need to build a completely new existence with their children. This involves many administrative procedures and registrations, whether with schools, daycare centres, job centres, or finding housing. Another problem is the lack of birth certificates for the children born in Syria under the *caliphate*. How often have we heard from registry offices or health insurance companies: Then you need to inquire in Damascus and obtain the birth certificates. Without these certificates, there may be no eligibility for housing entitlement, no child support advance, no identification documents, or no health insurance. The support that we as a counselling service, as well as the support the women receive from the

return coordinators and local networks is very helpful and noteworthy. These are aids the women did not expect before their return.

## What surprised you the most after your return?

- The friendliness and support of the youth welfare office and many others. I was warmly welcomed by the youth welfare office.
- The understanding of strangers for me as a person and for my past.
- I really didn't do anything wrong; my mistake was simply stepping foot in Syria. That was the biggest mistake of my life. Others committed actions and were punished, but I didn't do anything, so I remained calm, telling myself: "Okay, if there's really justice, nothing will happen." However, given my many terrible experiences and witnessing so much injustice, I thought, "Maybe they will treat me unfairly." I never expected that so quickly I would have my own apartment, be able to send my children to school, and settle here again. It's been less than a year since I was released from detention. Yes, I am surprised that I accomplished this.
- I was positively surprised and received a lot of support from my family, as well as from the German government. I had always heard bad things about the police here, "their dogs, their dirty dogs" and such things. I always say and I know that people may not like. But the police here didn't even treat me disrespectfully.

### Responses from female returnees

**Alma Fathi:** The return of the women was actually very well organized. In some cases, even before their return, we always expected an arrest warrant and therefore held talk with the youth welfare office to see if the children could be placed within the core family e.g. grandparents. Especially in the time after their arrival, when there were many bureaucratic hurdles, such as registry offices, it was very important for us that there was a return coordination in most federal states, which took a lot of organizational work off our hands and helped us significantly in areas where we, as a civil society organization, simply couldn't make any progress because they could speak from institution to institution.

Unfortunately, not all these structures will be preserved, which we very much regret. We still see a need when it comes to the further steps and life paths of the children, and as far as the men concerned support is also repeatedly necessary, including structural support from the state. Therefore, we would like to suggest that these structures be maintained. Perhaps the states can take over the financing.

**Kaan Orhon:** *You have explained how important it is to stabilize the women first. However, these pragmatic aids are often dismissed as a kind of better handholding. We have experienced this perspective ourselves in court cases: You take the women by the hand and help them with their everyday problems, and then everything is fine. But what about the ideological reappraisal, how do you deal with the worldview, how does deradicalisation in thinking take place, so to speak?*

**Alma Fathi:** It always depends on the individual. We have very different types of women in counselling. For those who did not experience the end of the Caliphate because they returned beforehand or were interned in Kurdish camps, the situation is somewhat different. But most of the women witnessed the end of ISIS, experienced war and displacement, wandered from place to place until they reached Baghuz, where the SDF troops defeated ISIS. It is crucial what the women experienced at the end: that ISIS did not care for its supporters and abandoned them, that women and children starved, that nationalities suddenly played a role after all, because in the last days of Baghuz, there were many foreign fighters with women and children, but the local fighters were no longer present. They realized that the ideal did not exist, and that ISIS let its followers starve. I remember a statement from a returnee who told her family: I saw a new video of Baghdadi, he is getting fatter and fatter, eating and eating and we have nothing to eat here, we have to eat grass in Baghuz.

Before their return, we expected the returnees to be more ideologically driven, but that is not the case with the women we counsel. This is probably due to the fact that the women who joined ISIS often had no theoretical religious background knowledge at all. They did not know the theological justifications behind the ideological narratives. They had adopted slogans, enemy images, and certain propagandistic narratives but did not know how these were derived and religiously justified by the jihadist "scholars." Nevertheless, we must of course work with the women on these narratives that fascinated them. It is about finding out why they were fascinated and what fascinated the women about them.

It must also be said that the women have spent the last few years in a totalitarian system, i.e. they have internalized certain ways of behaving and thinking, even if this is no longer expressed in a solid ideology today, but there are certain patterns of thought and action, such as devaluation of the other and valorisation of one's own. For example, one returnee says of a work colleague that "she has achieved



nothing in her life” without – even for a second – thinking about the biographical break in her own life story. Another returnee says: “I’m not interested in politics, my parents saw it that way too and ultimately politics is always bad anyway, I don’t want anything to do with it”. These two examples are not ideologically based thought patterns or actions, but they are certainly problematic attitudes that naturally make the women vulnerable to falling into the next dependent relationship of any kind. However, they are definitely problematic attitudes that naturally make the women susceptible to falling into the next dependency relationship in some form or other.

Our work on this cognitive-ideological level is very closely linked to our work on the emotional-psychosocial level: We assume that personal disposition, i.e., psychological state, and their personal needs play a crucial role in radicalization. And the motives for joining always correlate with the motives for leaving. If someone is looking for the meaning of life, friendship, love, recognition, community, or wants to be part of something big, then this person is more likely to leave again if these needs are not satisfied within the context of the in-group. Or if someone is looking for friendship and realizes there is no one they can trust, or if someone is looking for great love and has an abusive husband who takes other wives and maybe even a Yazidi slave, this person will be disappointed at first. This disappointment leads to the crumbling of ideological convictions, especially when it becomes clear that the propagated ideal does not match reality. Therefore, we work with the women biographically on their entry and exit motives, as these influence each other.

Radical ideology fulfils a concrete function in human life, and we need to find out which needs are specifically satisfied by the ideology. These needs do not disappear with their exit but must be satisfied outside the religious sphere and outside the ideology. Therefore, we work with the women on a variety of life topics such as family, partnership, and gender roles. Other topics include the deconstruction of derogatory mentalities, naive ways of thinking and points of view (e.g. when someone has no media competency and unnecessarily reveals things about themselves online), or attitudes and statements that are distanced from democracy.

We try to promote critical thinking, but that always depends on the other party. We can neither perform magic nor work miracles. We can make offers repeatedly, follow up repeatedly, but we cannot force anyone to confront intensively with their past, even though sometimes we would really like to.

## If you look back on yourself five years ago, what has changed?

- I don't cry every day anymore. I had no hope, none at all. Now I have many dreams, many goals that I didn't have before. It's like a new life. You think about your goals and choose what you can do best to change your life for the better. You do what feels good. You know what was a mistake and what wasn't. After all this experience, you are more mature in your mind and maybe even more self-confident. Luckily, I stayed strong and helped myself, not going crazy.
- A lot. I have a "normal" regulated life in safety! I have many dreams that I didn't have back then.
- My way of thinking about IS and groups in general in all directions.
- I would never travel again. I will also separate from my husband if the opportunity arises because I don't know if I can live with him in the future. I still love him just as much as I did ten years ago, but he is no longer the same. A lot has changed in Syria and he is very violent and aggressive towards me, even in front of my daughter. I would have left back then if I had had the opportunity.

Responses from female returnees

**Kaan Orhon:** *Normality sounds like: We made it, we're back, and we're concentrating on the future. Have the women reached normality?*

**Julia Berczyk:** For the women themselves, everything seems fine at first, but it's not just about them; but also their environment that they are confronted with. And that can look quite different.

## Can you imagine that people in Germany are still afraid of you today?

- Yes, I believe that many people still have a lot of prejudices and don't believe that we have changed.
- Yes, some in my family are still afraid of me. Which I find unfounded, but also understand.
- No. I had this issue with my family too. We wanted to rent an apartment and there was a hint from the landlord that I shouldn't move into this apartment. We were all sad about it, but my sister said, "We have to understand these people too, they have a completely different image of you, so we shouldn't get upset." And so we dealt with it very calmly. And my family has a very good reputation, people have known me here since childhood and know my character. So it was actually not a problem at all.

Responses from female returnees

**Julia Berczyk:** The experiences of the women vary greatly. The size of the community they return to plays a significant role. In small communities, it is harder to remain unnoticed. Even if one returns secretly, they stand out immediately. However, this can also be positive because the people have known them and their families since childhood. They have an image that often contradicts the public image of a terror bride or the monster who comes back. This can help to reduce fears and inhibitions very quickly.

As a counselling service, we were surprised at how well this can work in rural or small communities, and how wonderful and engaged individuals can be, even though these communities are confronted with this issue for the first time and have no prior experience with such cases. There are truly remarkable individuals and local partners who leverage existing local networks, who have short lines of communication and a foundation of trust, who know everyone inside out, and can quickly implement pragmatic solutions for various challenges.

The big city, on the other hand, has the advantage that one can relatively unprejudiced and freely start a new life in anonymity. This can have both advantages and disadvantages. However, what everyone is afraid of, no matter where they return to, is the rejection of themselves by the media coverage and when that happens, it quickly becomes clear that life won't return to normal as fast as they had hoped. This discrepancy between self-perception and external perception heavily burdens the women. No one wants to be perceived as dangerous or for people to be afraid of oneself, and this leads some women to feel pressured: 'Oh God, what can I do here to prove to everyone that I am a good person, that you don't need to be afraid of me, because I am just a normal person like you.'

And this question can partly relate to aspects of faith, especially in a small town: Do I wear a headscarf? What if the outside world equates Muslims with Islamists? Can I still express myself with religious symbols here, or will I scare people by doing so?

**Kaan Orhon:** *Religion hasn't really played a major role so far. The extremist ideology does not necessarily serve a genuinely religious function, but still, because it is perceived from the outside as a religious ideology, it remains a relevant topic. What does this look like in the work with the women? Is religion thematized? What role does Islam generally play in counselling?*

**Alma Fathi:** We do not have a religious approach, meaning religion is neither the initial topic nor the core topic in our counselling, but rather one of many life topics such as love, partnership, and so on. We believe that the radical interpretation of Islam always fulfils a function, and we must approach the needs to find out what lies behind it, and what function religion fulfils in the concrete case.

As mentioned at the beginning, around half of the women come from families without a Muslim background. And the families with a Muslim background are often secular Muslims or so-called cultural Muslims, who fast during Ramadan and celebrate all the festivals but do not live religiously - similar to Christmas Christians who attend church at Christmas but do not practice otherwise. There are also Alevi families. What is crucial are the essential needs that are at the beginning of deradicalisation: A longing for community, recognition, love, etc.

Very few women have solid religious knowledge, which is why religion is not the key to deradicalisation for us. For us, deradicalisation does not mean removing the women from Islam, but out of a violent ideology. Most women, who return, navigate a spiritual, self-created mosaic in which they embrace only certain aspects of the religion. Thus, Islam is one of many life topics we deal with. But, if a woman wishes to have a more in-depth discussion about the topic, then we can do so based on our qualifications.

When it comes to the topic of religion, we are very often confronted by the social environment, and in some cases also by security authorities, with the fact that religiosity is seen as an indicator of further radicalization. We have to deal with this, and the question of practice also plays a role here. I remember a situation with a returnee shortly after her arrival. We were standing in front of her wardrobe, and she said that she only wants to wear dresses and skirts because she feels uncomfortable in pants. That was her feeling at the time and not ideologically based. Two months later, we were standing in front of her wardrobe again, picking out pants and something else she could wear outside.

For us, a deradicalized individual is not the person who abandons the religion completely, but also not the one who becomes a complete expert on Islam. That is not the aim of our work. We do not take this approach because, for some women, we even assume that this could be harmful. Because we mentally bring them back into a sphere that they may have been in before. And we do not want to induce such a cognitive relapse.

## How would you describe your current relationship with Islam?

- I had no idea before I went, to be honest, I just listened to lectures, thought it was okay, and that was it. I still have no idea. You really have to study to have knowledge. I still don't have it. But my faith has become very strong, my trust has become very strong, without having the knowledge to act. I know that I simply don't act according to Islam and also don't really live according to Islam because I don't have the knowledge. But for me, it is like this: I believe in Allah and I have to take care of myself. At the beginning, I didn't know that, I didn't have this relationship with Allah, so this faith that wasn't so strong. That it became so strong, that came later when I experienced and had all these experiences that I had, that's where it comes from.
- Very good, I practice my religion. Without Islam, I would not have survived the war and the time after it.
- It is much more important to me than before. Without it, I would lose myself.
- Back then, I didn't know why and for what I should pray, for what I should fast. I did it simply because I had to. But now I know why I pray. Everything I went through brought me closer to God. My relationship with religion has changed for the better. Islam is not like how IS portrays it, and when someone portrays it like that, Islam is bad. If someone portrays it correctly, Islam is beautiful. Because Islam says that people should not treat each other badly. You should get along well, help each other, and commit as few sins as possible. If I believe in my religion, if I believe in God, if I am more into my religion, that doesn't mean that I am a dangerous person. It may be that the person even becomes a better person if he or she is more into the religion. The people who do bad things or are dangerous, do not understand the religion correctly. To be good, one does not have to be a scholar.

### Responses from female returnees

**Kaan Orhon:** *What about the psychological burden? Are all the women you counsel, or who return traumatized or psychologically burdened in some way?*

**Alma Fathi:** More or less, yes. Some can process or suppress it better than others. We work together with the *NEXUS Counselling Network Union - Psychotherapeutic-Psychiatric Family Support (NEXUS Beratungsnetzwerk Bund - Psychotherapeutisch-Psychiatrische Familienhilfen)* on these issues. NEXUS supports us with consulting, mediation, and therapy, meaning that if we have questions or are unable to assess certain things, we can seek advice from NEXUS or receive support in finding therapy places for our clients. In some cases, NEXUS also takes over the psychotherapeutic work with the respective returnees.

The returnees often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, which is not surprising as they are returning from a war zone. Many of the women left the country at a very young age and often show developmental disorders, as they were unable to develop in line with their age in the *caliphate*. They were isolated, had little access to the outside world, and couldn't develop critical thinking. For some, there are more moral developmental delays. There are also forms of personality disorders, various types of depression, and various other illnesses.

**Kaan Orhon:** *In addition to the various other difficulties someone may have with their biography, there may also be trauma or psychological burdens from past experiences. It is certainly a relatively difficult step to build a desired normal life. What are your concrete practical experiences with reintegration, specifically with the essential aspects of building up an existence, such as housing, work, and the practical needs of everyday life? How well does reintegration work?*

**Julia Berczyk:** Reintegration works quite well. However, there are cases where a returnee must face court years after her return. She has worked successfully in a company for years, was well-liked, and now she must inform her boss. That is not easy. In such situations, the already mentioned networks and we as a counselling service remain important contacts even years after the return. It is easier to be upfront from the beginning; we always tell the women this as it saves them from problems. There are employers who judge based on competence, appearance, and performance, and not on their past, and we have had this experience, too. For others, the fear of a loss of reputation is too great, and they reject the women. We then try to explain to the women that they are not being rejected as a person, but that the employer has problems with their history, with their past, and that they need to learn to separate the two. Sometimes they are not perceived as individuals but as objects with a certain history. It is not easy to deal with this.

Transparency also has its limits. I don't have to tell my landlord that I was with a terrorist organization abroad. The question of who needs to know also arises with children. This starts in kindergarten and school. There are different approaches in the Federal Republic. Some federal states want children to arrive as free from prejudice and stigmatization as possible and see no need to inform the institution. Others, however, say that it makes perfect sense to provide the institution with some security, prepare it for all situations and eventualities, and also to be able to offer the greatest possible support and help to the children and families.

In the meantime, the returnees are asking themselves: When will my child stop being a returnee's child? Does the secondary school need to be informed, even though my child has completed three years of elementary school without any problems? They also ask themselves this question: When will I stop being a returnee? This question does not seem to be resolved within many institutions and authorities yet. Will they be listed in the Annual Reports on the Protection of the

Constitution for the rest of their lives because they can no longer get rid of this status, or can they do something to get rid of this status at some point?

Sometimes, however, this status can also be an advantage when it comes to support systems which are specifically set up for returnees and their children. But here, there is a discrepancy: When am I still considered structurally as a returnee from the perspective of the authorities, and how do I feel about myself? Do I still feel like a returnee at all? And many of the women say: 'No, not anymore'.

### Are you still perceived as a returnee and if so, how does it affect your life and how do you feel about it?

- I don't tell anyone unless I have to tell someone, for example, at school or in kindergarten, and I have received good support there. But at the beginning, it was very difficult for me, I had the feeling it was written on my forehead, and everyone was afraid of me or knew about it. But today, I can deal with it well.
- I don't see myself as a returnee because I didn't go to IS. I went to Syria with my husband, who wanted to work there. I had nothing to do with IS. In prison, it's sometimes an issue because not everyone knows why I am there. Sometimes we even joke about it, for example, when I wash the dishes with another inmate in my housing group and she dries them and then says: I hope you do not think that I am your slave now.
- I can't say that yet. I am still in prison, and here everyone is defined by their crime. I'm afraid of what will happen outside and how it will continue.
- No, not yet. Actually, I don't want to tell it either. I only tell it when I have to because not everyone understands. You immediately make a bad impression, and I don't want to make a bad impression.
- For example, the state school authority decided that my children should go to another school. My mom had to drive my children to school because it was so far away. Then I said, 'Okay, let's change schools' but they said, 'No, that doesn't work'. Unfortunately, you can't choose which school your children go to because not every school would accept your children. But my children integrated well. No one can notice that they are child returnees, nobody would say that. My children don't behave that way either, they have forgotten about that life and have integrated here.

### Responses from female returnees

**Julia Berczyk:** As you can see from the answers, there is still a lot to be done, because not every woman is yet reflective enough to categorize her own role: One had nothing to do with ISIS, but was convicted of crimes against humanity. That doesn't quite fit together.

**Kaan Orhon:** *Our counselling approach was initially very much focused on relatives and has evolved over time so that we are increasingly work directly with the individuals who are radicalizing. This applies above all to returnees. But with the reference to the grandmother who drives the grandchildren to school, I would like to return to our initial counselling approach once more again and ask: What role do the family members play for the returnees and their reintegration?*

**Alma Fathi:** The family can always play both a positive and a negative role. In cases where they were stable family relationships present, the relatives were a strong and important resource during the initial period after the women's arrival. In cases where there was no arrest warrant upon entry, it was a great help for the women to have a place to stay. Because they did not have their own apartment, they had to first submit applications at the job centre, complete paper works, and get health insurance. However, even in the best family situations, this was not a permanent solution, as conflicts would arise at some point. Therefore, as part of the women's process of becoming independent, we aimed to move them into their own apartments.

The families' fears that the return of women could be instrumentalized by certain political movements or cause significant media attention, did not come true. This was very helpful because it was not always possible to accommodate them in the core family. In cases where there were already destructive family relationships before their departure, we had to look for external accommodation options for them. If the family structure was a reason for leaving the country, it could also contribute to an emotional ideological relapse in the event of renewed conflicts.

An example: A returnee who had serious conflicts with her family reacts impulsively with the intention to flee again and says, "If I hadn't come back, if I had stayed there, then I wouldn't have to deal with all this mess." Here we have an emotional ideological relapse, that is not necessarily ideologically per se. There is an idealization of the past; she mentally escapes from the situation and wishes to go back, completely ignoring the bad experiences and negative consequences of leaving, imprisonment, etc. She idealizes the time when she was not physically here and did not have to deal with family problems. This is not an ideologically motivated or underpinned relapse. This relapse occurs purely on an emotional level. This phenomenon is often observed, especially in the initial phase of an exit process. In the field of cults and sects, there is the term "floating" to describe the mental escape to the past and the idealization. The trigger does not necessarily have to be an argument with family; it can also be another personal crisis that causes this recollection and idealization takes place.

Of course, we also have relatives who do not serve as a resource at all because they have such great difficulties with the actions of their family members that they do not want any contact with them.



## Has your relationship with your family of origin changed?

- I have a good relationship with my parents and my brother, but the closeness hasn't changed compared to before I left. I am glad they exist and that I have confidential contact with them. I am also glad they take care of my children. Sometimes I feel that my mother is not entirely honest with me and also hides something from me regarding the children.
- My family has welcomed me warmly and supports me where they can. I have no contact with a part of my family.
- Yes, with my sister very much, she is disappointed and doesn't trust me.
- With my family, I feel they understand me more, that they try to make sure I am not sad and take care of me. They try to understand me, to be there for me, they are all very good to me.

Responses from female returnees

**Kaan Orhon:** *Very few women returned without children. What about the husbands and fathers? What role do the husbands, who were active in ISIS, now play for the women?*

**Julia Berczyk:** They play a role in different ways. If they have died but there is no death certificate, this causes many problems for the children, or if the woman wants to remarry but cannot prove that she is a widow or divorced. Then there are the husbands and fathers who are imprisoned in Kurdish prisons in northeastern Syria, whose wives are eagerly awaiting their return. Other women, however, have completely moved on from their old partners and have entered new partnerships here. One woman who returned with her children had known her partner since childhood. They had been together since their youth but have not seen each other for several years. When he comes back, the question arises as to what state he will be in when he returns and whether a family union is still possible at all. As long as this question remains unresolved, she cannot make a new start. She remains in a state of limbo. As long as the women are in any kind of relationship with their husbands, who are under investigation and mostly classified as threats, they also remain the focus of the security authorities.

The greatest burden of this issue falls on the children. We cooperate with the ProKids project of *the Grenzgänger Bochum* counselling network, which works with these children. The children often hear questions about their fathers, even at

school: Where is your dad? Why doesn't he come to Dad-Child Day at school? It is a difficult story. So, they play a role in different ways, whether they are dead or still alive.

**Kaan Orhon:** *When we talk about absent fathers, it is linked to the question of future problems. With the answers of the female returnees about what they expect for the future and what they are afraid of, we now give the floor to the audience.*

## Where do you see yourself in five years?

- Unfortunately, I can't think that far ahead yet.
- With my children in a stable environment.
- I have always been a housewife and I am a family person. I want to have my family, I want to live normally with my children again.
- I believe that I will be in a very high position, that I will have mastered much more in my life and achieved much more. In a few years, I want to be able to say, "Okay, look where you were and where you are now, how you live now." I want to achieve something in every respect. I really want to be good in every respect. People always say, "be happy with what you have." I don't want the average, I always want the best. I go straight to the top. I actually want to be self-employed and become rich.

Responses from female returnees

## What are you most afraid of?

- That I can no longer be a mother like I used to be.
- Of airplanes and cars rushing towards us, they remind me of the bombs in the war. Of crowds, because there were many bombs on crowds. Of being separated from my children. I have a trauma when there's a bang, on New Year's Eve and much more.
- I am afraid of another war. When people say, "maybe there will be a war in Germany," I panic and say, "no thanks, I don't need that." I hope that all the wars in the world will stop. I hope and wish with all my heart that no one dies, I wish that no one has to suffer, just peace in the whole world so that everyone can live the way they want. Yes, that's what I wish for.

Responses from female returnees

## 4. Questions from the audience

After the panel discussion, the audience took the floor. The moderation was taken over by Axel Schurbohm, and Julia Berczyk, Alma Fathi, and Kaan Orhon sat on the panel alongside also Claudia Dantschke.

**Audience:** *I have a question about the families, namely whether you work with all families or whether some of the families refuse to participate and if they refuse, do you think it makes sense to exert some pressure to bring the families perhaps also come into a counselling context?*

**Julia Berczyk:** Those are absolutely exceptional cases where the family is completely gone, entirely withdrawn. Often, there is still a brother or a distant cousin involved. In most cases, the family plays a role and is also active. In the constellations where they do not want to play a role, there have often been fractures in the past. In order to work through this with family therapy, willingness is required from both sides, and this is often not the case. There is then a very clear cut, where sometimes not even contact information is exchanged, and there is no longer any possibility of being in touch. Fortunately, this is the absolute exception. Most people feel that the family is a great support, even if they become independent and have to find their own path and do not want to return to their parents. Nevertheless, this family support is very helpful, especially in the first weeks and months after their arrival. This also applies to the children, who now have additional caregivers in the form of their grandparents.

Even though family is fundamentally positive, it cannot be forced, especially if there may have been abuse or other incidents in the past. Sometimes, it is better to keep the door closed for a while.

**Claudia Dantschke:** In some cases, the women also find acceptance in their in-laws, the family of their husband, whom they did not know before, but who proves to be very helpful.

**Audience:** *Are there contacts among the returnees, and is this even required of them, or should they rather say no, it's better not, because it entails danger?*

**Claudia Dantschke:** We established a support group for relatives, in which we networked relatives of people who travelled to jihad areas. This strengthened the relatives, and of course we thought we could do the same with the returnees.

However, we quickly learned that this is not appreciated, that security authorities are afraid if the returnees form any kind of relationship with each other. But we also know that some of the children grew up there together like siblings and miss each other, some of them are even related to each other because their mothers are related by marriage, so there are also family ties. But it is very difficult because it is generally not welcomed.

**Julia Berczyk:** I also had a client who was banned from contacting the radical scene as a condition of her probation. However, this woman wanted at least to get in touch with her best friend. This friend is still in a Kurdish camp in Syria, as she could not return to Germany due to her lack of German citizenship. The children of this woman and her friend's children grew up together in this Kurdish camp; they were tent neighbours and spent every day together. I wanted to help this woman, but also wanted to be sure that I could support contact at all. Since I had contact with both women, I initially didn't know if I was even allowed to pass on greetings. I then asked the responsible judge at the Higher Regional Court and received permission for the two women to talk on the phone in my presence. It was a one-off contact, but it did good for both women because they were able to exchange information and encourage each other. It was a completely normal conversation with questions about how the other was doing and how the children were doing. However, judicial permission was required for this.

**Audience:** *How is it decided what legally happens to the returnees, what must the evidence be like, or are there perhaps even cases where a person has received a new identity? And what does the day-to-day counselling look like, are there fixed working hours, or is it a 24/7 job?*

**Claudia Dantschke:** We are not lawyers and are not responsible for providing evidence. We do not provide legal advice either, but we explain the legal situation to the women and what their rights are. In many cases, we have ensured that the women get a good lawyer when they return here, and we have explained to them that they do not have to answer any questions without a lawyer, except those about their identity. When the women were brought back to Germany from the Kurdish camps in Syria by the Federal Government in several groups, BKA officers were also there. We explained to the women that they do not have to say anything that might incriminate themselves and advised them to consider what they wanted to say during the more than twenty-hour return journey. We told them that the

trip would be extremely exhausting and that they would be very tired. In such a situation, one can easily start talking. This led to several women reportedly saying to the BKA on the plane: *Grüner Vogel* told us not to talk to you. Of course, that was not what we meant.

We always advise women to open up and be honest. But, as mentioned, they should not incriminate themselves. That's why we inform the women about the importance of appointing a good lawyer, whether there is an arrest warrant or not. Once the lawyer has access to the case files, it becomes clear what the women are accused of, and then one should respond accordingly, but that is up to the lawyer. Many of the women chatted with their parents, friends, or even with the radical scene here via WhatsApp. Due to house searches in recent years, many of these chats have been secured as evidence and are now on file. The charges are partly based on such chats or on statements from other returnees.

Some of the women were married to men who played key roles in ISIS or killed people on camera in ISIS propaganda videos. There was a lot of media coverage for those men. Some of them are dead, others are still in Syrian-Kurdish custody. However, women have still their husbands' names and now fear being recognized if someone googles those names. While it is easier for the women to drop these names by taking back their maiden names, it becomes more difficult when it comes to the children. In some cases, a death certificate for the father is required, which does not exist and is very difficult to obtain. These are the cases where they attempt to get rid of the ISIS identity through a name change because the husband or father is too well known. No one has yet needed or asked to acquire a completely new identity with us.

**Alma Fathi:** Legal practice and justice are not always congruent. With one or the other women, we thought, she will definitely go to prison, but then, surprisingly, there was no arrest warrant, while with other women, where we were sure that they could go home, arrest warrants were then issued. This often cannot be proven anymore. Therefore, the women often have a problem perceiving their verdict as fair, because they know each other and know what the other did, who was not sentenced. She then says to herself: The other woman was much worse than me, why did she get a suspended sentence and I did not? This of course affects the sense of injustice and destabilizes the trust in the rule of law a bit when one feels that justice is not applied equally, and the penalties imposed are not comparable.

**Julia Berczyk:** Our day-to-day counselling work is very different; there is no set pattern because we travel all over Germany. Sometimes we visit someone at home or meet with their parents. In other instances, we talk to someone who is in prison or accompany a trial that is currently underway. What is always important in these conversations is what is currently concerning the person we are advising and what issues they are currently dealing with. We do not come with a pre-made folder and follow a set program, rather the conversations must be tailored very individually to the needs and requirements. We have goals that we want to achieve together with the person we are advising, or main topics that we consider important, or improvement areas that we still see and need to be worked on. Sometimes it is difficult to have a real conversation because the client, for example, hasn't found anyone to look after their children during that time. Sometimes, you have to fight to find appointments where you can work together alongside the school, a driving lesson, and three children.

**Claudia Dantschke:** We have flexible working hours, that everyone has to manage on their own. Especially during the time when we were in contact with the women still in the Syrian-Kurdish camps, much of the communication happened late in the evening. The women were not officially allowed to have mobile phones, so they hid them during the day. And then in the evenings, in the dark, they started contacting their families or us, offloading some of the psychological burden they were suffering in the camps to us or on their parents. And then, the family would contact us five minutes before they wanted to go to bed, very upset because they had just found out what happened in the camp and were worried about their daughter and grandchildren. We try to be available on weekends only for absolute emergencies. Each of us has to plan our week so that business trip ends on Friday afternoon and the work phone can be turned off. Officially, we work 39 hours per week.

**Audience:** *There is a lot of discussion among the professional community about the extent to which former extremists can be involved in the prevention of extremism and deradicalisation work. This has been practiced for years in right-wing extremism prevention. I am interested in your perspective on whether this could play a role in practice—if not, why not, and if so, under what conditions?*

**Alma Fathi:** That would be very good if someone could do that. I come from counselling in the field of sects and cults and have experience with people who have left. It has a completely different impact when someone sits in front of the people and

says, "I experienced this," compared to when I sit there and say, "My former client experienced this." It's much more authentic, and the discussions can be conducted completely differently, also through a peer-to-peer approach. This is something we would like to expand our approach to. We also have one or another returnee who would be willing to participate. I once asked one if she could imagine doing this. She said, "Give me 5 minutes with a girl who wants to leave, give me 5 minutes with her!" I believe we should be braver and try it out. From the point of view of the security authorities, it is understandably not always the best thing to bring someone who might still be in the radicalization phase together with someone who has perhaps already left. From our point of view, however, it would be a helpful approach.

**Julia Berczyk:** I am convinced that some of our clients would be very well suited and would leave a lasting impression if they were to discuss and reflect with people. Dropout reports from former extremists in films, television, or books already have a significant impact, but it would be even more effective when drop-outs say something. Nevertheless, the societal resonance is different than when a right-wing extremist appears at a school or in public. Former ISIS members are perceived very differently than former right-wing extremists. In right-wing extremism, there is already a discussion about how long dropouts can be included in prevention work. One has to pay attention, not to reduce the whole existence to the identity of a former extremist. Because then this person will never be able to get rid of the status of a former extremist for themselves and start to define or profile oneself through it, both professionally and financially. I am convinced that you have to be courageous, especially with individual projects, and make an effort to share their voice, perhaps anonymously. You must not create financial dependencies and must always be aware that reactions need to be addressed. For this, professional support is necessary.

**Claudia Dantschke:** The returnees we work with are most suitable for anonymous, closed, individual collaboration. They are not suitable for public appearances or anonymized for television documentaries because they are afraid of stigmatization. When it comes to counter-narratives, they are of course very well-suited with their stories.

**Audience:** *Are there contacts with women who are still in Syria, i.e. contact requests from returnees? Is returning still a topic at all?*

**Claudia Dantschke:** We are still in contact with women in the Kurdish camps in Syria, and there are some who have reoriented themselves and would like to come back. They hope that there will be another repatriation operation. There are also women who do not want to return yet but with whom we still maintain contact. Or women who are in north-western Syria because they fled from the Kurdish camps a long time ago. In these cases, we maintain contact through relatives. Others have been living in Turkey for a while and have now decided to return to Germany. They have to manage this on their own. But we can prepare for it together with them and the relevant authorities.

**Audience:** *Has anything changed in the counselling after October 7 {Hamas attack on Israel}? Where there any expectations from institutions or families about how the returnees view these events?*

**Claudia Dantschke:** For us, as a counselling service, we have had a few cases where radicalization or an intensification of radicalization has occurred, but that was not an issue with the returnees.

**Julia Berczyk:** I had to bring this up recently because the extended family has empathy for the people in Gaza and wants to help in somehow, but they do not have the financial possibilities. Now, it is being said throughout the entire family: "Now we are boycotting everything that belongs to Jewish-owned companies or involves Jewish products." We entered a conversation and differentiated between rejecting the political actions of a government and denigrating an entire religious community, emphasizing the need to be careful, especially with such a background, not to fall back into the same patterns of denigration as have been done once before. But this is rather the exception. I also believe that the prevention projects are now affected in terms of the number of cases. We might deal with it later, because it is possible that the wave will eventually reach us.

**Audience:** *How are the female returnees from ISIS perceived? Are they potential targets of attacks by ISIS, or is that not the case at all?*

**Claudia Dantschke:** No, the women who have been brought back are not discussed, neither positively nor negatively. There are 'sisterhood' networks here that adhere to the ideology, collect money, and try to ransom the women and possibly the men from Syria. But the returnees are largely ignored in the propaganda.



**Kaan Orhon:** There are prisoner support networks. These are ISIS supporters who organize letters to be written to prisons, arrange for lawyers, provide financial support, or collect money to ransom women or men from Kurdish custody. They actively approach returnees to prevent them from leaving the scene or ideology or to bring them back if they have already distanced themselves. We try to intercept this when we become aware of it.

**Audience:** *I am convinced that it is in Germany's interest to eventually allow all citizens, including the men, to return sooner or later. This goal must be politically advocated. How do you see this? The case of Shamima Begum concerns me greatly, especially after the recent ruling that declared her statelessness lawful following the withdrawal of her British citizenship. What is your opinion on this, given your experience working with returnees? I am interested because I am horrified from a rule of law perspective.*

**Claudia Dantschke:** In a democracy and a state governed by the rule of law, it is unacceptable not to bring back these people who are German citizens. We lose credibility if we promote the rule of law but fail in this matter.

**Kaan Orhon:** It is also ideologically an absolute disaster. We were in contact with the women, and they had contact with their families. As a result, some of them have been influenced by factors that changed their thinking regarding a return. Such discourses do not pass them by just because they are in the camps. It doesn't mean they do not notice it.

It is the reproduction of patterns that we have in society or that already existed at the time of departure. The message is clear: You can't be a true European if you are an immigrant, or if you are Muslim. A white English woman without an immigrant background, no matter what she did with ISIS, how ideologized or radicalized she is, is simply not an option. It is not about the person or what she did with ISIS. It is about her immigration background. That is what this verdict says. And with that, this narrative has been adopted hundred percent. I don't want to go so far as to say that this promotes the next generation of radicalization, but it is not entirely unthinkable. For our approach to work, this is catastrophic.

**Alma Fathi:** These people did not radicalize abroad, but here. We have to admit that our societies have failed to prevent these young people from taking this step and catching them. We must take responsibility for this and cannot leave it to the Kurds, hoping they will return better than they left.

**Julia Berczyk:** From a security policy perspective, the question arises whether it makes sense not to repatriate our own citizens. How stable is the situation on the ground? What will happen when the U.S. eventually withdraws? A regulated, structured repatriation offers more long-term security than a state of limbo that could escalate at any time.



