The Fascination of the ‘Islamic State’:
Perceived Injustice and Crises of Identity – Why German Citizens join the Extremist Organization

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A minor dissertation submitted in *partial fulfillment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Social Science

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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ABSTRACT


Throughout the Syrian conflict, a new extremist organization became increasingly visible to the public due its use of extreme violence and continuous threats to the entire world living outside of it. The self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) attracted the highest number of foreign fighters in the history of Islamic social movements, and continues to recruit from foreign countries. While the majority of the foreign fighters come from neighbouring countries to the conflict region in Syria and Iraq, it is estimated that around one quarter of the recruits stems from Western countries. Although ISIS managed to attract both men and women to voluntarily join their extremist organization, the vast majority of foreign fighters are men.

Due to the recent occurrence of this phenomenon, the motivations of foreign fighters to join ISIS remain greatly under-researched. Taking various attacks and threats towards Western countries into consideration, it might appear paradox that people leave their home countries to fight for ISIS abroad. However, the number of people leaving for this purpose has summed up to around 800 in Germany in 2016. Therefore, this thesis analyses the motifs and causes of German men to travel to the conflict region to become a member of the extremist network. Contrary to the widely-spread assumption that socio-economic circumstances lead young men into violent extremism, this thesis studies their paths to radicalization from a socio-psychological perspective.

Keywords: Violent Extremism, Foreign Fighters, Islamism, ISIS
List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

AQI – al-Qaeda in Iraq

BKA – Bundeskriminalamt Deutschland (German Federal Criminal Office)

ISI – Islamic State in Iraq

ISIL – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levante

ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham

RAF – Red Army Faction
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4.1 Literature Review
Special attention from the international community has been given to the extremist organization Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) since the violent capture of two Iraqi cities, Fallujah and Mosul, and several terror attacks around the world (Cockburn, 2016). With the help of violent glorifying videos and social media channels the group spreads its radical ideology as well as its self-image on an international level. Although or perhaps even because the practice of ISIS has been recognized as extremely violent, around 20,000 foreign fighters have already travelled to Syria and Iraq (Barrett et al., 2015, Neumann, 2015). The fact that humans set out to war zones in foreign countries in order to risk their own lives and those of others, cannot be considered a phenomenon of modern times but an event that has happened many times in history. In the 20th century, in between 35,000 and 50,000 foreigners fought in the Spanish Civil War (Said, 2014). A few decades later many young Muslims joined the Afghan resistance during the Soviet War (De Roy van Zuijwijn and Bakker, 2014). However, the number of foreign fighters who joined the self-proclaimed Islamic State is surprisingly high, in fact, it is the highest number of foreign fighters within a war zone at the moment and remains the highest foreign fighter mobilization of Islamist foreign fighters in history (Said, 2015). This is problematic, because few ISIS-fighters originate from Syria or Iraq, the countries in which ISIS is conducting its war efforts. The majority come from neighbouring regions such as Saudi-Arabia, Yemen, Jordan or from the Maghreb countries (Barrett et al., 2015). Around one quarter of the foreign fighters is recruited from Western countries such as France, Germany, Belgium and the United Kingdom. The great majority of these countries are first world democracies, where there is no conflict and has not been for many decades. Thus, the question these democratic European governments currently face is why their citizens decide to leave their home countries or countries of residence to fight for an extremist non-state actor in a war zone abroad.

Western countries such as the United States as well as European countries are a declared enemy and target of ISIS. This has been tragically demonstrated in various lethal attacks, the latest in Berlin, Germany in 2016 (Eddy and Smale, 2016). While it seems enormously striking that people who previously belonged to the target group of an extremist group travel far-distances to support their extreme violence, around 800 persons left Germany in the past years to join ISIS (Heil et al., 2016). Even if approximately 260 have returned, the
number of attempted departures lies higher, according to the German Office for Protection of the Constitution (ibid.). This makes Germany one of the largest European exporters of foreign fighters, beside Belgium and the United Kingdom (Barrett et. al., 2015). The problems that arise for intelligence and security authorities are: 1) that there is no clear profile for a potential foreign fighter; 2) that it remains difficult to distinguish individuals with the actual intension to fight from people who travel to Syria for humanitarian reasons; and 3) that they might return and perpetrate terrorist acts. As the German Minister of the Interior has remarked, the problem does not end with the departure of the foreign fighters but is simply transported to another country for the moment (Vornbäumen and König, 2014). Thus, these individuals use violence and violate human rights abroad and bear the risk of bringing back violence to Europe at the same time.

Although the number of women who join the Islamic State in Iraq or Syria is increasing, the predominant majority of foreign fighters are men and therefore they represent the greatest threat to global security in this regard. This is why the focus of this dissertation lies solely on the motivations of men joining ISIS.

Since the publicly available research of this recent phenomenon is very limited at the current stage, this research appears to be a necessary step towards the understanding, prevention and counter-fight of ISIS’s recruitment. With regard to on-going Syrian conflict, it does not seem likely for the extremist group to disappear in the near future. Thus, it appears to be necessary to find a better understanding of the motivations and risk factors for young men to decide to join this extremist organization. This is why this work analyses sources with regard to the Staircase Model to Terrorism by Moghaddam, which provides insight into the socio-psychological process of potential terrorists.

1.2 Purpose of Study

The aim of this dissertation is to identify the motivating forces and risk factors of individuals that have joined a violent extremist organization in a foreign country, and to analyse whether there are any commonalities in this regard. As ISIS is regarded as a key threat to international peace and security, and is considered to currently have amongst the highest number of foreign fighters within its ranks, ISIS will be the main focus of this dissertation.
Concerning the motivating forces of the individuals, the dissertation will examine the reasons and motivations, such as turning points or personal crises, during the process that led them to the conscious decision to inflict violence and murder people abroad. Thus, the central research question of this dissertation will be: Why do some young German men decide to travel to Syria or Iraq to fight for ISIS? Subsequently, the following sub-questions need to be answered in the process of this research: Are there common risk factors that make individuals more vulnerable to traveling abroad to participate in violent extremism, and what is the role of religious motivations in this regard? Furthermore, can personal failures or a crisis of identity contribute to such violent extremism?

1.3 Research Method

This dissertation conducts a qualitative analysis, which collects data from previously recorded, publicly available sources. Various types of sources are used for this work since data on foreign fighters of ISIS is extremely limited. In total, 17 sources are analysed and assessed. All of the sources are secondary sources, which were developed by journalists or researchers. Consequently, the author of this dissertation did not have an influence on the nature of the questions or the narrative of the sources. The sources are predominantly documentaries, interviews and online newspaper articles that were mainly released in German. Furthermore, books on the pathways of foreign fighters and returnees serve as key sources of information for this work.

In general, the providers of the sources are reputable German newspaper agencies such as ZEIT, Die Welt, and Rheinische Post. While the first two are national newspapers, the latter one is only distributed in North Rhine-Westphalia. Besides, German political magazines such as Der Spiegel and FOCUS also provide interviews with and articles on German foreign fighters. Both are considered serious and reliable political magazines; however, Der Spiegel is rather left-wing orientated while FOCUS covers the more right-wing perspective. Apart from the newspaper agencies, several documentaries and reports on the radicalization process and former life of German foreign fighters have been broadcasted by German national television, such as ZDF and Das Erste (ARD).
Further sources are three academic books that have been published in Germany about several individual pathways of German foreign fighters. The authors of these books are Jürgen Todenhöfer, Benham T. Said and Lamya Kaddor. However, the three authors report from a different angle and use various methods of data collection. Whereas Todenhöfer, a former deputy and journalist, conducted interviews with a German foreign fighter in Syria, he also researched on the man’s previous environment and his radicalization process. Kaddor, the teacher of five young men who left Germany for ISIS, gives insight into her perspective on the slow but gradual radicalization of her former pupils. Lastly, Said’s research focused primarily on the tactics and structure of ISIS, and began his research on German fighters from this perspective.

All of the sources provide information which is gathered from the previous environment of the foreign fighters such as their parents, former friends and teachers. The interviews provide further information that is given by returnees and German men who still fight for ISIS. In order to gain a structured overview of the various sources and the foreign fighters they provide information on, Table 1 (see below) gives a detailed list of all of the sources analysed in the analytical section. This information reveals personal knowledge on their motivations and the in-group structure of ISIS on the one hand, but must be considered carefully on the other hand since statements of returnees could be used as evidence for the respective court cases. Besides, the sources need to be considered in view of their audience. The majority of the sources targets a wider audience, such as readers of their newspapers or books. Thus, the language used in the majority of the sources can partially be described as emotional and biased. Furthermore, a judgemental undertone becomes visible in many of the sources since they do not regard the problem from an academic angle.

Because it remains unclear for how long the phenomenon of German foreign fighters endures, the analytical part of this dissertation only makes use of sources that were published in between 2013 and 2017. The timeframe is also set in between these specific years since the media coverage of Germans who joined ISIS began in 2013, one year after the first men went to Syria, and 2017, in which the most current reports were released.

Regarding the theoretical framework, this dissertation aims to explain commonalities of German foreign fighters with Moghaddam’s Staircase Model to Terrorism. This model examines the motivations of foreign fighters from a socio-psychological perspective with the
help of different stages on which the individuals who later decide to join an extremist or terrorist network move upwards (Moghaddam, 2005). Moreover, it considers the motivating forces for individuals to be dependent on a process that sometimes shifts or hardens the reasons due to an increasing in-group versus out-group thinking (ibid.). The theoretical framework will be explained in Chapter Five of this work in greater detail before it is applied to the analytical section thereafter.
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1.4 Limitations

As explained above, this work aims at exploring the reasons and motivations of young German men to join the extremist group ISIS. Therefore, other nation’s foreign fighters and their motivations as well as their individual pathways are excluded from this work. Although this dissertation includes all relevant publicly available interviews with German ISIS-fighters, it only considers data that was published in between 2013 and 2017. A timeframe for the respective collection of data was set because it remains unpredictable for how long the phenomenon of German foreign fighters will play a significant role and whether the numbers of them are likely to decline or increase. Furthermore, the findings of this dissertation seek to extend the existing literature on foreign fighters, which is primarily focused on other matters in this context. Due to a limitation of words, this dissertation can only inspect the motivations of men, while the reasons for women to join ISIS remain unexplored in this work. Exempted therefrom are further persons who planned or exercised a suicide attack within Germany, and thus, did not join ISIS on-site in Syria or Iraq.

1.5 Definitions

In the following section relevant terms and concepts for the understanding of this dissertation will be defined and explained since they are often used interchangeably in the media and even by scholars, which can lead to a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the topic as a whole.

Beginning with the most relevant concept to this work, the term *extremism* needs to be explained. In general, extremism stands for any type of radical ideology opposing a set of values of a particular society (Schmid, 2013). With regard to liberal democracies, Neumann (2010) notes that it ‘could be applied to any ideology that advocates racial or religious supremacy and/or opposes the core principles of democracy and universal human rights’. However, the sheer hold of radical and opposing beliefs itself cannot be considered a criminal act, only if this hold shifts towards violent extremism. While the academia often ignores the
difference between violent and non-violent extremism, a distinction appears to be essential for this context. Since this work intents to understand the motivations of German men who joined the extremist group ISIS, a further distinction of violent extremism is given subsequently. Violent extremism describes the willingness of a person to intentionally use violence in order to enforce their set of values and (political) beliefs. It further comprises the justification of violence and the demand of sacrifices for the particular ingroup (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008).

A special form of extremism is Islamism or Islamic extremism, which stands for the adaption of extremist beliefs that request radical Islamic principles to guide every aspect of public as well as political life. Moreover, it rejects the separation of religion and the state and key dimensions of modern democratic culture (Benard and Rabasa, 2015). In some cases, it represents the conviction that sharia, Islamic law, has to be implemented as the overall state form. It is important to note that Islamism is not to be confused with Islam.

This dissertation uses the term ‘extremist organization’, which has defined itself as the Islamic State as a case study for why individuals decide to fight for an extremist group in a foreign country. The organization is also commonly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levante (ISIL) or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, which is abbreviated with ISIS and which will be referred to throughout this work. Although many governments have classified this organization as a terrorist network, this dissertation will rather refer to it as an extremist group due to its form of operating and structure (Cronin, 2015). Many extremist organizations have made and still make use of instruments of terrorism because they yield a desired response through international attacks or kidnappings (Kydd and Walter, 2012) – just like the extremist group ISIS. However, the focus of this work is not on the concept of terrorism since it only analyses the motivations of young men who actively went to ISIS-occupied territory abroad and take over various functions.

The term ‘radicalization’ is used in this dissertation several times. Although there is no scholarly consensus on the definition of the term, this work will refer to the definition of the United Kingdom’s Home Office. According to its counterterrorism strategy of 2011, radicalization is defined as ‘The process by which people come to support and in some cases participate in terrorism’ (U.K.’s Home Office : 36). Subsequently, this work refers to
radicalized persons as individuals who drive towards the active membership in a terrorist or violent extremist group.

In addition, the term *Jihad* derives from the Quran and means struggle or striving. Originally it is interpreted in a spiritual, religious or personal way and encourages Muslims to overcome inner conflicts or to make a positive effort to their surrounding grounded on their belief. Although this term was already abused for the military fight of the Taliban during the Soviet War, it was increasingly used by terrorist or extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS after 9/11 to promote the allegedly religious duty for war against non-Muslims. However, the Arabic terminology for war is ‘harb’ or ‘muqdassa’ (The Islamic Supreme Council of America).

Another definition that needs to be given is the one of a so-called *caliphate*, which roots in the centuries following the death of the Muslim prophet Muhammed and stands for a political-religious state. This state seeks to comprise the Muslim community as whole and determines the *caliph*, who originally had to be a relative of the prophet, as the ultimate ruler (Chandler, 2014). During its first centuries, this empire conquered parts of Southwest Asia, North Africa and Spain but was later defeated by the Mongols in 1258. In the subsequent centuries, the caliphate only gained relatively small importance before the decline of the Ottoman empire. Until the 20th century, the term has rather been used in a symbolic instead of a practical manner. The expression caliphate only became relevant through the extremist group ISIS in respect of its occupied territory in eastern Syria and western Iraq. The organization claims to have founded the last caliphate of the Muslim world under the leadership of the self-declared caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, although this claim is widely rejected by the Muslim community. This dissertation refers to the new interpretation and use of the word caliphate in respect of the fundamental ideology of ISIS (Warrick, 2016).

While the term *foreign fighter* is nowadays often used by the media solely in reference to persons who left their country of origin or residence voluntarily to join Islamist extremist groups, it originates in the mass mobilization of young men who joined the Crusades and was later used for foreigners who fought within the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s (Said, 2015). However, in the course of the 20th century, it increasingly developed to a keyword for transnational Islamist militancy, which was due to the Afghan resistance in the 1980s and a
post-2003 Iraqi movement (Hegghammer, 2010). In this context, foreign fighter will refer to men who left Germany to join ISIS in Syria or Iraq.
2 CHAPTER TWO

2.1 The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

Since the Islamic State serves as case study for this thesis, it needs to be shortly introduced for the overall understanding of this work. Even if the focus of this dissertation does not lie on the extremist organization itself but rather on the persons who joined it, it is still necessary to comprehend the modus operandi as well as the ideology and recruitment strategy of this group in this context.

2.2 The Rise and Structure

Although there has been the general perception within the international community that ISIS has arisen quickly and out of nowhere, the roots for the extremist organization had been laid long before it appeared forcefully to the public in 2014 (Warrick, 2016). Founded by Abu al-Zarqawi in the late 1990s, it became increasingly important within radical Islamist circles. The founder was a Jordanian foreign fighter in the Afghan civil war, who met Abu Muhammed al-Maqdisi, one of the most influential Islamist preachers, in Afghan training camps. Even if al-Maqdisi was never known to be a fighter himself, he strongly influenced the minds of young men in the training camps and bound to al-Zarqawi (ibid.). After their return to Jordan, the two were imprisoned for terrorism in al-Jafr, a prison which was internationally known as one of the world’s most isolated and brutal prisons. Under the supervision of the literate al-Maqdisi, al-Zarqawi became the leader of around 50 Islamist inmates, who adored him for his impulsive violence and his extremist worldview which did not allow for any space of flexible interpretation (Cockburn, 2015).

After his release, al-Zarqawi opened a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan, which operated under the name al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) from 2004 onwards (Lister, 2014). The connection to the internationally feared terrorist organization that became tragically famous after 9/11, gave numerous recruits and a stable funding to the recently established organization. In return, it provided the much-needed presence for bin Laden’s terror organization in Iraq. In 2006 however, al-Zarqawi was killed by a joint US-Jordanian airstrike and his organization was renamed the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), but remained an al-Qaeda affiliate (Warrick, 2016).
When Abu Bakr al Baghdadi became the leader in 2010, he restructured the organization and saw an opportunity in the event of the rising Arab Spring and the soon-to-begin civil war in Syria. Al-Baghdadi decided to expand the organization’s operations to Syria and eventually founded the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2013 (Lister, 2014). Beginning with the capture of two strategically important Iraqi cities, Fallujah and Mosul, ISIS announced the establishment of the last Caliphate one year later. Almost simultaneously, al-Qaeda distanced itself from ISIS due to an ideological dispute (Watts, 2015). Al-Qaeda has often criticized Shiite Muslims, whereas ISIS’ hatred was directed toward them, al-Qaeda’s ultimate goal was to destabilize the Western world. However, the differences are even more severe than what meets the eye.

Concerning the structure, it must be noted that ISIS differs greatly from previous extremist organizations since it has established a radical pseudo-state and uses terror instruments only occasionally for its purposes (Cronin, 2015). This radical and self-proclaimed state entails many crucial governing elements that allowed it to grow fast and consolidate in the conflict region. Although al-Baghdadi is considered the sovereign political and religious leader of ISIS, he established a governmental system with various councils that are appointed by him and cover all intelligence, religious, military and financial matters (Lister, 2014). One of al-Baghdadi’s deputies, Abu Muslim al Turkemani manages the administration of ISIS occupied territory in Iraq (Warrick, 2016). The governing part of ISIS monitors the actions of all citizens and recruits. Besides, recently stolen documents from the extremist organization revealed that information about their recruits was recorded in detail (Reuter, 2015). Furthermore, the organization benefited from an Iraqi military falling apart and resulting unemployed but well-trained military staff. Apart from this, ISIS relies on a highly bureaucratic structure. With the establishment of courts, schools and local governments, the overall monitoring of citizens within ISIS occupied territory was extremely facilitated. In this way, the prohibition of arts, music and a moderate interpretation of Islam could be ensured in almost all parts of life. The propaganda machinery of ISIS also includes the release of a magazine, which was originally named ‘Dabiq,’ now changed to ‘Rumiyah’ (Arabic for Rome). This magazine reports on previously operated terror attacks, justifies violence towards adherents of other religions, and explains to its followers how to launch a terror attack (Harris, 2014).

In the course of the Syrian conflict, it has gradually secured a safe funding system.
One of the major sources of income remains the revenue from oil sales. In total, the extremist organization occupies territory on which up to 60,000 barrels are produced every day. Moreover, it collects taxes from religious minorities within ISIS territory, which serves as protection money. In addition, ISIS utilizes the usual income sources of extremist or terrorist organizations, such as kidnapping ransoms, smuggling and looting (Diekmann, 2015).

2.3 Ideology and Goals

Although ISIS appeared to be just another Sunni extremist group in the world order, it soon turned out to be even more extreme in its interpretation of Islam and the use of violence. Predecessors like al-Qaeda sought to weaken secular powers around the world and demonstrated its willingness through spectacular and well planned terror attacks. On the contrary, ISIS seeks to attack everyone living outside the organization (Cronin, 2015). The main focus lies on Shiite Muslims; however, the organization is responsible for the death of thousands of Yazidi, Christians and atheists as well. The organization follows the Wahhabi doctrine of Sunni Islam and considers people outside the group as *kafirs*, unbelievers, that have to be executed. While ISIS became famous through videos of violence against non-members, it also uses violence against former members who are suspected to be spies or deserters. Once joined, recruits will never again be granted the chance to leave the organization (Todenhöfer, 2017). According to ISIS, everyone who prefers to live outside this organization, regardless whether they are Muslim or not, has to be considered an enemy.

The long-term goal of the organization is the establishment of a pure Sunni Islamist state, which rules over all of the world’s Muslims and captures more and more territory over time (Warrick, 2016). While the capture of parts of Iraq up to the Mediterranean was the original goal, ISIS declared world domination as its new ultimate goal. In the last years, ISIS has successfully expanded its power and territory with followers in Libya, Yemen and Afghanistan and a new affiliate, Boko Haram (ibid.). Nonetheless, ISIS does not only aim at destroying borders that were set by Westerners centuries ago, it is also accused of the devastation of the world’s cultural heritage. The only law that ISIS allows is a deeply radical interpretation of the Sharia. This form of Sharia clearly sets out which penalty applies to which offence and everyone in the inner circle is entitled to carry out the punishment.
According to their interpretation, women are subordinated to men, therefore they do not have any rights within society and have to obey their husbands. Besides, as a symbol of alleged piety, all women have to wear a burqa and are to be chastised if any part of their skin can be seen. In contrast, men are allowed to have several wives and only have to obey to men standing above them in the ISIS hierarchy (Mekhennet et al., 2015).

2.4 The Recruitment

The phenomenon of foreign fighters became an increasing problem to different countries in the last five years, with at least one of the citizens or residents from approximately 86 different countries leaving for an extremist group abroad. According to various sources, the numbers of foreign fighters of ISIS is estimated to be around 20,000 (Barrett et al., 2015). However, it must be noted that the actual number is likely to be even higher since the parents of the foreign fighters sometimes try to protect their sons from criminal prosecution.

The recruitment strategies of ISIS differ greatly from other extremist groups. Previous Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda do not appear as attractive to young men as ISIS does (Cronin, 2015). This is due to various factors. ISIS uses social media channels that reach people worldwide and are easily accessible from almost all places. Moreover, the use of social media and the internet helps spreading videos in which the proclaimed caliphate is represented as an adventurous place, where ISIS-members live together but also respect each other. The image of a strong comradeship is created and a strong emphasis is further put on cohesion. Although the internet is used as a tool to attract new members, the majority of new foreign fighters connects with ISIS through a familiar person. Oftentimes, young men in their 20s travel together with a friend or even sibling to Syria. However, unlike al-Qaeda, ISIS does not require a special religious education and accepts followers who recently converted to Islam, only for the purpose of joining ISIS. Documents that were leaked in 2015, reveal that only five per cent of ISIS-recruits has a profound religious knowledge, whereas the vast majority, 70 per cent only had basic knowledge about the sharia law (Batrawy et al., 2016). The remaining 24 per cent were considered by ISIS as having average knowledge on Islam. In order to categorize their recruits, ISIS uses very simple methods. In questionnaires, new recruits are asked about their knowledge of Islam and can choose between three levels (ibid.). Many of those who travel from Europe to Syria were found to have ‘Islam for Dummies’ in
their bags (Rosenbaum, 2016). In 2015, when the recruitment numbers temporarily decreased, ISIS adjusted its tactics to the recruitment of homeless, mentally disabled persons, children in care or unaccompanied minors (Hackensberger, 2015).

Once part of the extremist group, ISIS separates the young men into various units, just like the army trains different units in different ways. Men who are willing to become suicide bombers are separated from those who wish to become fighters or members of the secret police. Nevertheless, the confiscation of mobile phones or personal belongings is essential for all of the new recruits as well as a subsequent religious instruction. The religious teaching suggests to consider all non-members of ISIS and non-Sunni Muslims as enemies. Beside the religious instruction, new recruits receive several weeks of military training. This training is supposed to prepare ISIS-fighters for frontline military operations and therefore includes the training with assault rifles and grenades. However, new recruits usually complete guard duty for numerous weeks before they are involved in frontline military operations (Lister, 2014).

Further, propaganda videos that support the conspiracy theories of the extremist group are shown, so that any doubts are eliminated and the desired image is promoted among the fighters. On top of this, ISIS formed an internal group of spies, which resembles the structure and organization of the German ‘Stasi’. Spies that are trained by ISIS usually monitor other ISIS-members or are sent to outside organisations to gather information that could be useful for the destruction of foreign territory (Reuter, 2015). In case one of the foreign fighters wishes to travel to another zone on ISIS occupied territory, they need to receive a letter of permission from the higher tiers of the group. The same applies to requests on visits to the home countries of the foreign fighters (Todenhöfer, 2017).

Apart from this, potential recruits are often attracted with a more flexible lifestyle than al-Qaeda followers. Although the organization stresses its piety, members are given expensive cars as well as heavy arms and get to marry several women (Cronin, 2015). However, ISIS members have to adhere to sharia law, which means they are not allowed to drink alcohol or use drugs. If they insist on their previous lifestyle, the extremist organization either punishes them or sends them home (Gillman and Boyle, 2014). For foreign fighters coming from Muslim countries, the comparatively high income seems to be another factor of attraction. Taking the far-distance for Europeans into consideration, it remains surprising that such a high number of people travel to a war zone in Syria. However, there are direct flights to Turkey and a complex network of people who help foreign fighters on their routes, and the costs of travelling to Syria are relatively low (Benard and Rabasa, 2015).
The main countries that ISIS recruits from are Tunisia, Saudi Arabia and Russia (Barrett et.al., 2015). However, Western European countries are also on the rise as home countries of potential foreign fighters. Among these, four countries have proved to be the greatest suppliers of foreign fighters. While France with approximately 1,800 individuals supplies the highest number of European foreign fighters, the United Kingdom and Germany indicate similar numbers with in between 700 and 800 individuals that left their countries (ibid.). Belgium, which around 500 people left for joining ISIS, contributes the largest number of foreign fighters in proportion to its population in Western Europe. In total, more than half of the foreign fighters originating from Western Europe come from the listed countries.
3  

3.1 Germany

Because this dissertation examines the motivations of only German foreign fighters, the following section will briefly describe important societal circumstances of the country and the facts that were published about people who left the country towards Syria or Iraq in between 2013 and 2017. Lastly, this section gives a broad overview of the Salafi movement in Germany, which was in many cases a connection point on the individuals’ paths to ISIS.

3.2 German Society

The federal republic of Germany represents a democratic state, which comprises 16 sovereign federal states. The majority of the population, around 60 per cent adheres to Christianity, followed by approximately 5 per cent who adhere to Islam and 1 per cent that adheres to other religions such as Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism (bpb, 2012). In economic terms, it can be hold that Germany is a comparatively strong economy with a GDP of € 3.13 billion (Statista, 2016). In a cultural dimension, Germany was however analysed to be a Masculine society that orientates itself on status and work performance (Hofstede, 2016). As Hofstede describes, Germans rather ‘live in order to work’ and consider status symbols extremely important. Besides, German society was evaluated to be rather uncertainty avoidant (with a score of 65 per cent). This means that Germans tend to feel threatened by unknown situations in the future. Therefore, they largely depend on and trust in a system of various institutions that were established in order to minimize uncertainty (ibid.).

In a geographical and historic context, the country was separated into two states after World War II, and was unified again after 40 years in 1990. While the Western part could function as an independent state after 1949, the Eastern part cooperated with the former Soviet Union. Great parts of the population in East Germany suffered from a status monitoring, oppression of the freedom of press as well as the freedom of speech and movement (Major, 2010). On the other hand, the population in West Germany experienced phases of a police state and homegrown terrorism (RAF), which spilled over to the Eastern part (Aust, 2008). The unequal development led to a deep split within German society that needed to be addressed politically as well as economically for a long period (Major, 2010). Due to international support, the war-torn country was stabilized again and became one of the
founding countries of the European Community. Within this union, the country managed to become one of largest economies and an important advocate of human rights and the freedom of speech, movement and the press – particularly with regard to its historical circumstances (European Union, 2016). However, during this process, the German society faced another challenge, namely the integration of mostly Turkish, Italian and Polish guest-workers in the 1960s and 1970s (Prevezanos, 2011).

Regarding the conflict with transnational Islamist militancy, it must be noted that Germany did not experience Islamist-motivated attacks on its own territory up until December 2016. On 19 December 2016, a young Tunisian murdered a truck driver in order to speed into a Christmas Market in Berlin. In total, 12 people were killed in the Berlin attack and approximately 50 were injured (Huggler et.al., 2016). Although ISIS threatened to attack the country in several videos, many were prevented due to police observation of various networks and individuals (Foster, 2016). However, the number of persons who leave the country to join the extremist group ISIS abroad is significantly high in the European and Western context, and therefore represents an increasing threat to the Syrian conflict but also to the German and European safety.

3.3 The German Foreign Fighter

As mentioned before, information about people who travelled to Syria or Iraq is very limited and oftentimes not shared with the public. Besides, there is no definite profile of a typical foreign fighter. However, there are some obvious commonalities that people share who leave Germany. The German intelligence observed around 400 people who left the country until 2014 (BKA et.al., 2014). Two years later, this number was revised upwards by the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) to approximately 800 (Heil et.al., 2016). The vast majority are young men, most of them were in between 22 and 25 years old at their departure and hold the German citizenship (BKA et.al., 2014). It is estimated that around 130 German foreign fighters died in Syria or Iraq, while around one third has returned to Germany by now. Due to the country’s geographical situation, most of the Germans who left, did not have any personal connection or ties to the Syrian conflict before. Nevertheless, they usually got in contact with ISIS middlemen over friends or relatives who reinforced their grievance about the conflict
3.4 The Salafi Movement in Germany

A high percentage of people who left Germany have been in contact with the Salafi movement before their departure (BKA et.al., 2014). The Salafi movement became increasingly famous through its so-called ‘Lies!’-initiative. Members of various Salafi groups distributed the Quran for free on German streets and tried to convince passengers to convert to Islam publicly (Kaufmann, 2016). While many persons and groups of this movement were under observation of the German intelligence for many years, the most prominent group ‘Die wahre Religion’ (The True Religion) as well as their initiative were banned in 2016 (Hackwill, 2016). Prior to this, members of this group elicited outrage within the German population by walking around as a self-appointed ‘Sharia-Police’ in Wuppertal, and demanding other men to stop drinking alcohol or gambling (Unknown, 2016). In general, preachers of this group have repeatedly called on their members not to follow the democratic state since it conflicts with the teachings of Islam. Other members interpreted this as an invitation to the use of violence against the German state in the past, when they attacked German police men with knives at demonstrations. Moreover, the founder, Ibrahim Abou Nagie, was accused of funding plane tickets to Syria for German foreign fighters. Currently, there are around 9,700 members of Salafi groups in Germany (Unknown, 2017).
4 CHAPTER FOUR

4.1 Literature Review

The question why people decide to join extremist or terrorist networks remains greatly under-researched. Existing literature focuses strongly on the organization and funding of extremist networks or the support from international state actors. As outlined by Sageman (2014), there is a lack of both quantitative as well as qualitative research in this field. In general, the prevailing literature comprises rather conceptual than empirical knowledge. The difficulty lies clearly in the accessibility of empirical data, since it is precarious to gather reliable information from individuals who are situated in a war zone or returned and now fear the criminal prosecution of their home countries. Although Schmid (2014) notes the improvement in this field over the last decade, Sageman (2014) recommends an increased share of information and data between the academia and intelligence communities to eventually bridge this gap.

In the last forty years of research, the notion that only mentally ill persons are prone to violent extremism has been disproven (Borum, 2010). However, there is still not a clear profile of the characteristics or motivations that drive people into extremism. While it was previously assumed that a lack of education is to blame for the new formation of foreign fighters, a 2008 Gallup Poll indicated that politically radicalized people have often received secondary or higher education (Gallup, 2008). Nevertheless, this poll only comprised the stance of people who live in predominantly Muslim countries. A recent study that focused on Western foreign fighters have indicated that education – or respectively the lack of it – does not play a crucial role in this process (Basra et al., 2016). Nevertheless, there seems to be a relation between the degree of education and the level of income. A significant number of foreign fighters seems to have higher education but a low paid job and thus, dissatisfaction took over. However, it is important to note that those who join extremist organizations usually do not hold deeply ideological views but rather adapt them on their paths to extremism. In contrast, people who actually hold radical views rarely engage in terrorist or extremist activities. As noted by Borum (2010), different pathways lead to the engagement in violent extremism and therefore, it must be considered that the actual engagement is never a product of a single decision.

McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) conceptualize a pyramid of political radicalization with 12 different mechanisms that characterize the shift in the set of beliefs, feelings and
behaviours of people. According to this concept, radicalization most often occurs in the process of group identification and subsequently, a perceived threat to the respective group. However, they also identify a process of individual radicalization, which is driven by personal victimization or political grievances. This path differs from group or mass radicalization in the way that recruits need a personal connection to a particular terrorist or extremist group and radicalize themselves slowly and gradually. In order to transform personal grievance into a group sacrifice, it must relate to group grievance to a certain extent. Besides, an individual has to undergo various smaller tests, such as non-violent activities, before the group will trust him or her with more meaningful tasks. While the power of love is also considered a strong factor for joining an extremist group, it is on the other hand an important factor of reliability from the perspective of the group. Because individuals feel responsible and devoted to people in their surroundings, e.g. lovers, friends or family members, terrorists count on the strength of this bond for their recruitment. This devotion cannot only appeal recruits but also deepen their sense for common goals and thus, increase the group cohesion. Neumann agrees with this notion and stresses the role of friends within the process of radicalization and the final decision of foreign fighters to leave their home countries (Basra et.al., 2016).

Further, McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) explain an increased group’s association with the factor of like-mindedness, which encourages individuals in the course of group dynamics to develop even more extreme standpoints. Moreover, group radicalization can go along with differentiation from people outside the group or even competition among other groups with a similar goal or ideology. The imagination of an outgroup threat ‘leads reliably to increased group cohesion, increased respect for ingroup deviates and idealization of ingroup norms’ (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008, p. 426). Crucial to all group members is the internalization of common standards of value, which includes moral standards that are agreed upon within the group. Mass mobilization often replaces group cohesion with wider forms of ingroup identification, such as patriotism or nationalism but the common factor remains an (imagined) outgroup threat. Apart from this, hate that is projected on the enemy plays a significant role in mass mobilization and leads followers to dehumanize the other side.

Apart from this, Hegghammer (2010) explains the emergence of foreign fighters in Islamist movements with the formation of a Hijaz pan-Islamist identity. He links the willingness of young Muslims to join an extremist or terrorist organization to the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Syria and Iraq in the 1960s, which increased the immigration of Islamists from various Muslim countries to Saudi Arabia. The simultaneous
promotion of elitist Saudis led to a competition among Muslim transnational activists, which was further supported by a flourishing international trade and the importance of Mecca. A useful and necessary aspect of his work is the observation that transnational militancy seems to be ideology driven, yet, Hegghammer compares this ideology or pan-Islamism to forms of nationalism rather than valid religious features. This type of ideology rather comprises simplified answers to complex questions and ignores the context that is essential for a theological discussion. Apart from this, a general differentiation between terrorists and foreign fighters is crucial to his work and contributes greatly to the overall debate. However, Hegghammer solely includes Muslims who live outside a conflict zone, adopt the pan-Islamist ideology and therefore develop a feeling of solidarity among other Muslims who are located in war zones. This is due to the period of time in which he conducted his research, namely the time before ISIS arose and the international focus was still on terror networks like al-Qaeda. Furthermore, his advice is to worry less about ultra-conservative Salafist ideology and develop a sceptical stance against anti-Western propaganda instead. While this argument might be true for al-Qaeda recruits, it is now commonly known that a majority of ISIS-recruits had contact to Salafi groups before they went abroad. Besides, ultra conservative Salafist ideology does not necessarily exclude extreme anti-Western propaganda and therefore it should rather be advised to work preventively against both factors.

Benard and Rabasa (2015) argue that the extent of integration of European Muslims plays a role in the process of radicalization of foreign fighters, however it remains unclear whether this role is crucial to understand their motivations. Since there are very few European individuals who claim to have felt alienated from the European society, it can be assumed that the role of integration is relevant to few individuals but not to the majority of foreign fighters from Europe. Nevertheless, many European Muslims ‘are neither well integrated nor radicalized’ (Benard and Rabasa, 2015, p.4) but often feel caught between two cultures, which can in individual cases create a vacuum that facilitates the believe in the simplified Salafi extremist ideology.

Another report was released by the director of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), Peter Neumann, in 2016. Although the hypothesis that extremist and terror organizations recruit from prisons is not new, Neumann brings in a different but promising viewpoint. According to Basra et al. (2016), the shift in the nature of terrorist networks has also changed the nature of recruitment and therefore the type of people who are attracted to the recently established group ISIS. Unlike political extremist
groups in the West such as the IRA or the Basque Homeland and Liberty (ETA), extremist
groups like ISIS are said to prefer to recruit former prisoners who can be murderers, rapists or
thieves and do not necessarily advocate their political ideology in the first place. The study’s
results indicate that more than half of the analysed European foreign fighters have a criminal
history, however the range varies from petty crime to violent acts. In addition, Basra et al.
(2016) suggest that jihadist extremist groups specifically encourage their followers to steal
from ‘kafirs’, or what they consider unbelievers, and thus, even promote a positive ideology
behind criminality. This ideology legitimizes crimes with the alleged duty of the jihad.
Nevertheless, the study does not provide insight into psychological factors of European
foreign fighters and only assumes that a familiarity with criminal action lowers the
psychological threshold of committing extremist or terrorist violence.

Concerning the research of Western governments, the most prominent model that has
been established for the analysis of people who radicalize in Western countries is the one of
the Danish intelligence service (PET). The phase model divides the radicalization process into
four stages through which a person that radicalizes goes. It further considers the radicalization
process a top-down procedure. The PET’s phase model considers an external person as crucial
in the understanding of the cause of radicalization. It suggests that the respective individuals
are already open to radical ideas, however, only adapt these when they get in contact with an
influencing person (Veldhuis and Staun, 2009). This leads the individuals to change their
behaviour towards their environment and consequently, to narrow their social life to the point
where the contact to the former environment, in some cases, even to close family members, is
entirely blocked. Lastly, this model identifies a moral hardening of the violent radicals, which
is characterized by the watching of violent videos of extremists that allegedly reinforce the
worldview of the radical person (ibid.). The model contributes to the analysis of radicalization
processes themselves since it indicates behaviour patterns that are relevant for de-
radicalization programs. However, it does not differentiate between the reasons for
individuals to become radical in the first place, which can lead to broad and generalized
profiles of respective radicals. An important feature of the Danish intelligence service seems
to be the cooperation with local practitioners and experts on this field. The model underlies
future changes and remains open to testing its validity (Hemmingsen, 2015). Although the
model is still widely used by Western countries in order to develop counter or preventive
measures, its ignorance of the motivations of Westerners to join extremist networks results in
a clear lack in the development of sustainable preventive policies. Nonetheless, the behaviour
patterns of people who become gradually radical are a helpful and necessary factor in the analysis of radicalization.

In summary, it must be noted that the lack of empirical data and insufficient exchange of data between the academia and governments has inevitably led to unsatisfactory models and studies that tackle this phenomenon rather from a socio-economic perspective. Besides, a look on the criminal pasts of some foreign fighters helps to understand the vulnerability and hopelessness of them, however, it rather explains how young men got in contact with influential persons of terrorist networks but fails to explain why. In order to find effective countermeasures, their motivations should be studied from a socio-psychological angle instead of from an economic or only event-oriented perspective.

4.2 Hypothesis

As examined above, most of the existing research focuses on the socio-economic situation of people who are vulnerable to violent extremism. However, this work assumes that the socio-psychological side will provide more insight into the motivating forces of men to join an extremist organization.

Although the cultural and social environment can influence the socio-psychological situation of individuals, it is not expected to reveal the motivation of foreign fighters. Since the underlying cases of German foreign fighters also include young men without a migration background, it is rather estimated that a migration background is not the decisive aspect for German men to join ISIS. In some cases, however, it could foster the feeling of alienation within a society and therefore also increase the motivation in the first place.

Due to Germany’s economic position, it is assumed in this dissertation that economic deprivation does not play the same significant role for German men to join ISIS as it does in countries which are comparatively weaker in economic terms and provide a bigger income gap. In the respective countries, young men sometimes consider extremist organizations as an alternative economic perspective. Nevertheless, in exceptional cases, the personal economic situation of potential German foreign fighters might lead to a further deprivation of the overall situation.

Instead of assuming that a criminal past is a condition for many men to become
foreign fighters, this work considers criminality rather as an event that expressed the already existent discontent and forlornness within the life of a later-to-be foreign fighter. Although it might be relevant that radical milieus recruit from prisons and therefore facilitate a radicalization process, it is obvious that not all prisoners join an extremist network thereafter. Thus, the vulnerability to join a radical milieu must have been present in the individual cases before the period of imprisonment.

Because the economic backgrounds as well as the levels of education vary in the cases of German foreign fighters, this work assumes that the socio-psychological situation of the individuals is more likely to put them at risk of radicalization, which in turn will lead to them joining a violent extremist organisation. This could comprise personal grievance, personal failures, or even social exclusion in their private surrounding. Moreover, a crisis of identity and the resulting feeling of forlornness could be more important for an individual to turn away from their former environment. Apart from this, this dissertation believes that radicalization towards violent extremism must be considered as an entire process, in which the motivating forces of young men are constantly reinforced on their paths to ISIS. The given attention by the respective radical milieu and a growing feeling of belonging are assumed to foster the association with an extremist network. Further is the group identity believed to provide the basis for a radical development and for the decision to go abroad in order to fight for an extremist network. Consequently, the hypotheses of this work are the following: The stronger personal failures and injustice are perceived by German men, the more likely do they become vulnerable to radicalization. Furthermore, the more these individuals are driven into a radical milieu, the more likely do risk factors and new motivating forces lead them into violent extremism.
CHAPTER FIVE

5.1 Theoretical Framework

In the following section, the previously described secondary sources will be analysed with the help of a theoretical framework. It must be noted that the relevant sources for this section are focused on the radicalization processes of individual German foreign fighters and their motivating forces to join ISIS. All of the underlying sources in the analytical part include information on the personality, behaviour patterns and reasons of young German men to fight for the extremist group. This information is usually provided by interviews with family members or former friends of the foreign fighters. In some cases, the sources include interviews with German foreign fighters themselves (compare Table 1). The sources are analysed in consideration of a socio-psychological model, which seeks to give a better understanding of the motivations and radicalization paths.

The theoretical framework for this work is mainly built on the Staircase Model to Terrorism, which was developed by Fathali M. Moghaddam in 2005. The model is widely used in order to explain the development of terrorist behaviour from a psychological view. The circumstances as well as the psychological perception of individuals are taken into consideration, which is why the model appears to be useful for this dissertation. Besides, it describes the development and adoption of behaviour patterns throughout the radicalization process. This aspect helps to understand the risk factors that drive individuals into terrorism or violent extremism. Although the characteristics that are attributed to every stage could have been supported by empirical evidence, the linear stepwise approach was not evident in every case of last-stage terrorists (Lygre et.al., 2011). Therefore, it is suggested to consider risk factors as well as mechanisms from other theories and models (ibid.).

In total, Moghaddam describes six potential stages, on which people stand and from which they can climb up if they are vulnerable to extremist ideologies and violent behaviour. The professor of psychology at Georgetown University assumes that all individuals that are driven into a terrorist or extremist network, begin their paths at the ground floor, on which they feel disadvantaged or develop a great discontent regarding their life. Although the number of stages does not matter, it depends on the options that are presented to the respective person on each stage, whether individuals climb further up or remain on the same floor. Moghaddam refers to these options as doors, which can appear to be open and thus, become an exit to the potential terrorist, or closed and lead to further frustration. He links the
number of available options to the likeliness of shifting towards violence. According to the Staircase Model, the fewer choices seem to be or are available to persons moving on the staircase, the more likely do individuals climb up.

A crucial factor for this model is the perception of the respective individuals who move towards extremism. Perceived injustice, discrimination or feelings of disappointment can lead to the perception of exclusion or disadvantage. If a person does not see or find alternatives, it is more likely for this person to isolate from the previous environment in which this perception occurred. Each of the stairs within the model expresses a particular psychological perception of the outside world as well as a particular pattern of behaviour. As the person moves on to a higher stair, the thinking and behaviour adjusts to a more radical and narrowed perspective. The highest and last stair marks the end-phase of a radicalized person, which by then, is already an active member of a terrorist or extremist organization and is willing to take away the lives of others and even willing to sacrifice their own.

Moggahadam describes radicalization as a six-stage model, in which persons gradually shift towards violent extremism or terrorism. The first commonality of vulnerable people is considered the ground floor, the stage where discontent over their lives comes into being. Whether the socio-economic perspectives of the individual are comparatively bad in reality or only perceived as bad, they create a feeling of injustice. Moggahadam refers to the latter situation as perceived deprivation, which plays a role for many people in various countries but only drives a certain number of individuals into the decision to become more radical.

On the second floor, the potential foreign fighters displace their aggression. This procedure has been observed in special regards to out-groups that come from the West. Direct or indirect support of suppressive or authoritarian organizations or regimes is an expression for the intended displacement of aggression. This phase is characterized by a readiness to take action against perceived enemies. When individuals decide to leave this floor, they search for opportunities to displace their aggression, preferably groups that actively target a perceived enemy.

Based on the initial situation, a person in the Moggahadam’s Staircase Model can then decide to step upwards and actively look for (non-violent) options of improvement. This is considered the first floor, on which individuals can perceive their opportunities – or respectively the lack of these – as doors that are either closed or opened. These doors indicate whether a solution to their situation or feeling of injustice is available or not. In case the options appear to be very limited or non-existent, the respective person is more likely to look
into more radical ideas.

The next stage represents a shift in the level of aggression, which evolves from the examined but dissatisfying options. Typically, respective individuals then develop an imagination of an out-group that is to blame for their discontent and experienced or perceived injustice. In the third stage of the Staircase Model, people already became part of an imagined in-group. Members of a respective in-group usually reinforce the radicalization process reciprocally and share the same level of aggression towards the imagined out-group. According to Moggahadam (2005), this is the stage in which people adapt extremist morality and consider their enemy, i.e. governments, as ‘morally disengaged’ (p.5).

In the fourth stage, the radicalized person has entered the extremist or terrorist network and there is very rare, if any, opportunity for it to leave again. Although the first given attention to new recruits can strengthen their group identity, they soon realize the narrowing of their options, especially the limitation to their option to exit the network alive. They now find themselves trapped in in-group obedience and conformity.

In the final stage, their ‘us’ versus ‘them’ perspective has led to a profound justification of violence against out-group members. Since civilians do not actively fight against governments, they are considered out-group members as well and can thus be targeted (Moghaddam, 2005).
Graphic 1

Staircase to Terrorism

Fifth Floor
Development of Inhibitory Mechanisms

Fourth Floor
Solidification of Categorical Thinking

Third Floor
Moral Engagement

Second Floor
Displacement of Aggression

First Floor
Perceived Options to Fight Unfair Treatment

Ground Floor
Perceived or Experienced Injustice

Based on Moghaddam, 2005
5.2 Analysis

5.2.1 Ground Floor

The Ground Floor comprises a large amount of people in various societies. The feeling of disappointment and injustice is not only applicable to young German men. However, the decision to move on from the common ground strongly depends on the psychological perception of the actual situation. An individual does not necessarily have to experience injustice, discrimination or disadvantage in society. What appears to be more important in this regard is the perception of injustice – towards oneself or the surroundings (Moghaddam, 2005).

With regard to the radicalization of German ISIS-fighters, this pre-phase can be referred to as the stage in which they develop frustration and discontent over a long period, beginning in their childhood and adolescence. This is expressed in a stage in their lives when they found themselves to be lost and disoriented. Their social surroundings stress that they have been eager for knowledge and looking for a deeper sense in most of the cases (Todenhöfer, 2017). During this phase, which usually lasted for several years and which can be regarded as the starting point of their radicalization process, they concentrated themselves on topics with a complex meaning, such as the existence, death and the nature of injustice and justice. Although many of them have posed complex questions since their childhood or adolescence, they could not find satisfying answers for injustice or failure (Simon, 2015). Just as identified by Moghaddam, many of them have not necessarily experienced injustice themselves but experienced injustice towards others as unjust behaviour towards them. Regardless of their family structures, the majority of the German foreign fighters had a strong position within social constructions outside of their families, i.e. in sports clubs, bands, the army or simply in their group of friends. Some of them were even competitive sportsmen or the leader of their sports clubs and enjoyed a high popularity among their peers (Todenhöfer, 2017). Their families or friends describe their personalities often as extremely social and caring for others. In this context, however, many have experienced injustice or noticed injustice towards their surroundings. This injustice often began at a personal or social stage and was transferred to complex topics in the media, such as war or conflicts in foreign countries, the exploitation of poor countries and the suffering of humans. To many of the foreign fighters this was a turning point in their decision process, since they could not find an explanation for injustice and started questioning the world’s morality.
Apart from the search for meaning in life, the later-to-be foreign fighters often experienced a long phase of inner strife. Whether it has been the long search for employment, the disappointment over a failed relationship, or the grievance about the loss of the father, there has always been a crisis of identity in all of the underlying cases. In most of the cases, various events have come together and made the situation appear to be even worse in the perspective of the foreign fighters. Consequently, they have faced a lack of prospects and were not able to find a way out of this situation on their own.

Within this context, the role of the father is the most prominent factor throughout the radicalization process. The reasons why the role of the father became significant vary from situations in which the fathers lived separated or divorced from the young men’s mothers, had been deported to their home countries or have even passed away at an early stage. It can be hold that in the majority of the profiles, the later-to-be foreign fighters suffered many years from the bad relationship to their fathers. As described by a mother of a German foreign fighter, her son stayed in contact with his father for many years but was always left alone on the inside and was desperately looking for a guiding role model. Years later, his dream to become a professional sportsman turned to ruin due to a sports accident and his self-employment had failed (Todenhöfer, 2017). On top of this, the last thing he could hold onto at this point, his relationship, broke up as well. Although the level of education does not appear to be a triggering cause for the decision to join ISIS, the young men have often experienced several failures on their educational pathways. Whether they received higher education or not, performed well or not, they often experienced a chain of failures and disappointments. Another example for a long way of inner strife is Denis Cuspert, a former German-Ghanaian rapper whose father got deported to Ghana when he was a child (Said, 2015). He later explained how much he was searching for an idol and an identity throughout his childhood and adolescence. According to an interview he gave in 2011, Cuspert always hoped that his parents would tell him how to behave and how to express his thoughts. In spite of every effort, he could not find something he could relate to or identify with until he found American rap music, which expressed the same anger he felt for many years. While eventually finding an identity, he confused his idols’ glorification of violence and their representation of masculinity with a positive role model. Because he did not want to give up his recently found idols, he adapted their behaviour which included criminality and the use of drugs. When he was involved in a car accident in 2008, he lost parts of his memory, which marked the end of his career as a musician (Said, 2015). The desire for a role model has in most of the cases led
to an inner strife that was manifested throughout several years and combined with many
disappointments in other parts of their lives. This made many of the foreign fighters feel
isolated, even if they were highly socialized in their environment. Although the cases of
foreign fighters who had a stable family background are rare, they still exist. Two of the
German foreign fighters that are analysed in this dissertation had not lost any parent and
enjoyed a good relationship to their parents and siblings. However, two examples, Samuel and
Erhan A. both state that they could not identify with their parents’ way of living, so that they
started looking for an identity in Islam. Both of their families, the one Christian and the other
one Muslim, did not practice their religion in a fundamental or radical way and came from
middle-class backgrounds. Nevertheless, the two young men struggled to find their role
within society. Samuel did his A-levels but could not find anything he wished to do later on
(Jüttner, 2015). His parents would now describe the phase in which he decided to join ISIS as
a transition phase in which Samuel did not know who he was and in which he could not find
any orientation. According to Samuel, he could not identify with a superficial lifestyle of
German society and his family (ibid.). Erhan A. graduated, studied and found a well-paid job.
However, he could never relate to his studies or profession, so he invested time in studying
Islam and found the Salafi doctrine, which gave him a ready-made identity (Unknown, 2014).
The feeling of having no identity and living without prospects, led many of the foreign
fighters to develop a solidarity with Muslims around the world. As Kaddor (2015) notes, this
does not mean that German foreign fighters became more religious on the inside or gained
knowledge about Islam. Instead, they adapted an identity that was easily presented to them
and which they were striving for for many years. Due to a strong in-group identity and
outgroup exclusion of ISIS, this identity helped them to eventually differentiate themselves
from others.

A third factor that triggered a crisis of identity for some of the foreign fighters was an inner
strife about their cultural identity. Although some of the ones who felt alienated from society
at some point did not have a migration background, they could not identify with German
society. As explained by Triandis and Gelfand (2012), cultural identity and a self-identity are
usually interconnected, while a certain set of values and behaviour of each culture serve as an
overall guidance to individuals. Yet, it remains subject to each society and culture, who is
considered part of the in-group and why. In some cultures, categorizations such as a shared
place of birth or the same race are considered indicators for the same cultural identity. In other
cultures, persons with a similar mind-set are regarded peers (ibid.). Since a cultural identity partially shapes the self-perception and self-conceptualization, the perception of feeling excluded from the attached culture can result in a feeling of frustration and alienation.

Other German foreign fighters, however, lived peacefully and well-integrated in German society with a migration background before their radicalization. Usually, they had Muslim parents, coming from various Islamic countries, who practiced their religion in a moderate way (Santina, 2014, Daelhaes et al., 2014). However, some of them experienced discrimination towards themselves or people in their surroundings and thus, alienated themselves from German society. Simultaneously, they were looking for an identity in Salafi mosques or associations, since they considered their parents’ identity as not definite enough. Their parents and former mosques could not comprehend this turning to radical Islam and in some cases distanced themselves from the foreign fighters, so that the feeling of exclusion was even increased (ibid.). A special case for this strife for identity is Harry S. who was born in Ghana and lived most of his life in Germany, where he could not identify with his surrounding in a small town with many socio-economic problems and few prospects. His mother tried to educate him in a Catholic way by sending him to a private Catholic school but Harry struggled between a religious ideology and his friends who were often involved in petty crime (Jüttner, 2016). When his mother decided to move to England, he again had to search for a new identity within his adolescence and felt caught between his three cultural identities. The decision of moving to another country reinforced his feelings of isolation and alienation. As he would later describe, the Muslim friends he made at an English college were the first thing he could identify with in his life, which is why he converted to Islam. However, he returned to Germany in the hope that he had finally overcome his identity crisis and could live in his old environment. Nevertheless, this hope was destroyed when he got involved in a robbery for his old friends. In jail, he met radical Salafists who familiarized him with the strict interpretation of Islam. Since Harry felt disappointment by his German environment and had always identified with Islam, he wanted to give something in return and sought to help the Muslim community by allegedly defending them in the jihad of ISIS (Woldin, 2016).

This turning point marks the end of the ground floor and explains why these German men decided to take further action. Due to the dissatisfying answers, they still felt the feeling of injustice and did not want to continue their previous lives.
5.2.2 First Floor

In order to take the actual decision to climb up to the first floor of the Staircase Model, individuals have to perceive available options for an improvement of their personal situation as either limited or completely non-existent. Therefore, they attempt to go a different path than mainstream society and explore alternative, radical options that appear to help them out of their current dilemma (Moghaddam, 2005).

Against the prejudice that foreign fighters are less educated or literate, it can be held that many of the men analysed in this work have various educational backgrounds. However, taking a closer look at their lives before the departure to Syria or Iraq, it must be noted that the majority of the analysed persons did not have a significantly important job or task. Oftentimes, they were either in a low-paid job position or unemployed; some were in a phase of transition between their school education and their future lives (Simon, 2015). In a country with a strong emphasis on work ethics and achieving status symbols, failure or perceived failure is however not widely accepted. Since a great part of German society orientates on a good work performance (Hofstede, 2016), a low-paid job is not considered comprehensible.

What seems to connect the German men further is the period of forlornness and the subsequent willingness to find a deeper sense in life. Considering the extreme violence and arbitrariness of ISIS, it might seem paradox that they often state they eventually found a deeper sense and morality in this radical doctrine. However, they also add they could not cope with the world’s injustice that they have experienced themselves or in their inner circle, and which they linked to injustice within the world as a whole. Because they could not find a reasonable explanation and thus, no sense in human life, they considered their lives as an empty shell, which would not bring any significant change to the world and does not differ from anyone else’s life. To many of the analysed German foreign fighters, the doors seemed closed and the opportunities available to them did not seem satisfactory at all. Although this stage rather appears to have been a transitional phase, it is nevertheless unavoidable for a further shift towards violent extremism. According to Atran (2015), ISIS often recruits people who find themselves in a transitional phase and suffer from few opportunities and a lack of hope but also a missing identity. A vast majority of the German foreign fighters first got in contact with a radical milieu through a new friend they met. In other cases, the encounter with a charismatic person from a radical group dragged them closer into the radical milieu. However, what becomes obvious, is that in nearly all of the profiles the contact to a Salafi
group had been present.

Compared to the other options that were available to the German foreign fighters at this time, the inner circle of the respective Salafi group offered the most attractive opportunity. While the other options, such as other religious doctrines and political ideologies could not appeal to the German men, the radical Salafi doctrine convinced them with very clear and definite answers to complex questions. In the case of the young men who left Lohberg and were later referred to as the ‘Lohberger Brigade’, one of their former teachers underlines that there has not been any difference between young men with or without a migration background; the only thing she could identify as a similarity in their life was the fascination for Salafi preachers who gave them clear answers to their complex questions (Kaddor, 2015). In the belief to finally have found the truth and a sense in life, they decided they could only bring change if they join this radical network, which claims an all-encompassing validity for itself. While their opportunities in Germany did not have a chance of improvement in their own view, the German men could easily relate to the imagination that their lives would gain meaning and importance in the alleged jihad in Syria.

5.2.3 Second Floor

On the second floor, later-to-be terrorists actively search for a group that represents their feeling of frustration and perception of injustice in the world. Through the group, they hope, they can displace their aggression – towards out-group members (Moghaddam, 2005). Regarding the young German men who felt disappointed and decided to find a radical solution to their current situation, it must be noted that in almost all of the cases the Salafi milieu seemed to be the only reasonable match. According to many former friends and family members, the German foreign fighters usually got in contact with the Salafi group in Germany after their conversion to Islam. Since the radical milieu benefits from its followers, it rewards the new members with a lot attention. This in turn, seems to have driven many of the underlying cases into the belief that they had found a new family or social surrounding that fully supports them and understands their grievance. However, only few of the German foreign fighters understand in hindsight that they happened to confuse their own feelings of injustice and disappointment with the abstract perception of injustice from the radical milieu (Von der Heide and Baars, 2015). In the end, it only appeared to be relevant that a group of people allegedly shared the same grievance. Furthermore, a shared feeling of aggression
seemed to match the anger of many young Germans who at that time, only considered a radical pathway as an available option.

Although this stage indicates a rather slow process in many cases, it nevertheless is highly important for the entire radicalization process, since almost all of the German foreign fighters first became members of the Salafi scene. Thus, this seemingly transition stage can also be considered the most important stage in the process because it opened the young men’s mind to a strong displacement of aggression – towards everyone living outside of the radical scene.

5.2.4 Third Floor

On the third floor of the Staircase Model, individuals develop a strong identification with an imagined in-group (Moghaddam, 2005). This identification is supported by self-fulfilling beliefs that lower the stance of out-group members. Although the initial frustration originated from personal grievance, it is now transferred to grievance of the in-group. As a result, individuals are more willing to perpetrate and justify violence at this stage because they adopted the perception of the extremist group that out-group members are to blame for in-group grievance (ibid.).

A similarity that connects the German foreign fighters in this stage is political grievance. Their discontent over the foreign policy of Germany regarding the Syrian conflict fortified their feeling of injustice in their private lives. The very personal problems of individuals seemed to match the broader and universal accusations of ISIS, which means that the perception of abstract problems became increasingly concrete when they joined the in-group. While their grievance over the humanitarian situation within this conflict was first caused by pictures and videos from the media, it was later often reinforced by their friends and eventually manifested by the radical milieu that they joined. Especially conspiracy theories that reflected simplified versions of global conflicts, reiterated this notion on top of it. The consequence that many of the foreign fighters drew from this worldview was that they have to bring jihad back to Europe. To them, it had become a clear ‘us’ versus ‘them’ perspective, in which their newly found identity had to be defended in a much broader context. While the radical milieu, which in the case of German foreign fighters has often been the Salafi scene, is considered ‘us’, the imagined opposite, Western society, stands for ‘them’. A special set of values and features are attributed to both of the groups. On the one hand, the
in-group (‘us’), is usually regarded as the morally superior and righteous group which may justify violence on the grounds of an allegedly religious determination. In the view of its followers, ISIS challenges the suppressers of the Muslim population, namely the Western world. Consequently, the image that is created and promoted from the ‘enemy’ is one of an immoral oppressor. From this perspective, everyone who does not see this perceived injustice, is living a convenient life on the costs of the world’s Muslim population and has to regarded as an enemy. Furthermore, discrimination plays a significant role within this context. Whereas some of the foreign fighters experienced discrimination after their conversion to Islam, others felt discriminated or disadvantaged from teachers or work colleagues and blamed their migration background for this (Kaddor, 2015). Oftentimes, a generalized perception of discrimination against Muslims grew out of this and led to an overall feeling of anger against the German government, German police or other state representatives. However, even Germans who do not have a migration background now speak of ‘our’ countries, to which the West had brought war and disaster (Todenhöfer, 2017). They would not differentiate between Western countries but adopt the idea of radical Salafists friends that Western countries intend to oppress Muslims around the world. Germany’s political stance in this matter was considered ignorant and manipulative since it could neither prevent nor stop the Syrian war (Simon, 2015, Santina, 2014). Besides, they consider Western governments as ignorant institutions with double standards. According to the German foreign fighters, there was no more morality in Germany. Many of them could not explain state’s failure in terms of enforced prostitution, failed criminal prosecution or parallel economies (Todenhöfer, 2017). Apart from this, the young men often blamed consumerism and capitalism in Western countries, including Germany, for the world’s suffering and injustice. In regards to the idea of morality that attracted many German foreign fighters, it is important to note that ISIS offers very simplified answers and ideologues views to complex questions. These simplified answers, the decision what is wrong and what is right, what has to be considered a sin and how to punish it, appeared to be a relief to many German foreign fighters who sought for a clear structure in life. Some argue that it felt ‘right’ to have a say over what is right and wrong and to be able to justify its own actions with a higher, more important cause (Von der Heide and Baars, 2015).

Apart from this, the structures and rules of ISIS’s radical interpretation of Islam provides a clear indication of how to live – in every detail. Besides, the declared goal of ISIS is to fight all enemies of their group, which in the eyes of some German foreign fighters also
comprises the ones who were unjust to them or their surroundings. Consequently, many of the German foreign fighters created the imagination of fulfilling a role of significance. In general, the radicalized men are or were convinced that they had finally found their place and carried out tasks of relevance. Some argue that they are ‘the man of Jihad’, even if they do not belong to the higher tier within the ISIS hierarchy (Santina, 2014). Nonetheless, they believed that their active participation would eventually make a difference and bring the desired breakthrough in their imagined global Islamic movement. Realizing this potential of new role and identity, this can be considered the turning point for many German men to decide to become a foreign fighter for ISIS.

During this phase, the surroundings of the later-to-be foreign fighters noticed a drastic change in the men’s behaviour. Those who have been Muslim throughout their lives, began to force their mothers to wear a headscarf, so that they could belong to the imagined in-group as well. Others also requested their fathers to adapt a stricter and narrowed religious behaviour and ideology. If the parents however rejected to change their lifestyle, the foreign fighters usually cut off their ties to their families or continued living in their houses but ignored them entirely. Besides, the young men also corrected their former imams since they would not teach the real ideology of Islam, namely the radical Salafi doctrine. When their mosques asked them to reject their newly adapted worldview, the men rather decided to turn away from their moderate mosques (Fromm and Strompen, 2016). In order to fortify the in-group commitment, they would only go to Salafi mosques and change their outward appearance to the images of the Salafi doctrine. Those who have been Christians before their radicalization, asked their families to adapt the Salafi doctrine, too. In the case of one German foreign fighter without a migration background, the father reported that his son asked him to avoid grace and to lick off his plate after every meal, as required by the Salafi doctrine (Simon, 2015). In this stage, many also turned away from their old friends because they considered them as members of the out-group, too. This behaviour is often noticed in the in-group formation of cults, too. As outlined by Furnham (2014), the in-group pressures members to cut off the ties to the former environment in order to create an increasing dependence on the group itself. Furthermore, this breakaway avoids any interference that questions the in-group morality and actions (ibid.).
Once radicalized persons join the extremist or terrorist organization, their motivating forces to be part of the in-group seem to shift. In many cases, the personal grievance and imagined collective grievance is now replaced by an increasing in-group pressure that forces the respective person to obey to the rules of the group (Moghaddam, 2005). This experience was also shared by some of the German foreign fighters who managed to escape from ISIS. Contrary to the imagined place that ISIS suggested, the young men often discovered a different reality and were disappointed by the circumstances in which they found themselves. Whereas they first understood the confiscation of their mobile phones and private belongings as an act of group commitment, they soon recognized these measures as a means of oppression (Von der Heide and Baars, 2015). Instead of a peaceful life among other in-group members, thus ISIS-fighters, they would experience further suppression, sometimes even traumatic events. The widespread image of extreme violence and torture from ISIS was not only directed towards the group’s enemies, it was in some cases also applied to fellow fighters or Sunni civilians. ISIS has established special prisons for spies and deserters, in which the suspects are tortured or executed. In order to demonstrate power and trigger obedience from their followers, ISIS built these prisons in proximity to the fighters’ accommodations, so that they could hear the inmates’ cries. This created a constant feeling of fear, even if the German foreign fighters did not consider themselves as spies to the ISIS in-group (Simon, 2015). However, it almost prevented all of the returnees from escaping. This pattern is also found in the in-group manifestation of cults. Although it is called a break-in strategy, it describes the same forced obedience of group members with the help of rules and the creation of fear (Furnham, 2014). Besides, the in-group members are often confronted with arbitrary and pointless tasks, which solely serve as means to force the individuals to group conformity (ibid.). As suggested by Moghaddam, some of the German foreign fighters found themselves in a dilemma at this stage. They were trapped between the ever-increasing fear of disobedience and the fear of criminal prosecution in Germany. Their actions or statements could have led to mistrust and subsequently to torture or execution, if they were not extremely cautious towards ISIS-members. However, they were also aware of the fact that they faced criminal prosecution if they managed to escape alive.

Nevertheless, there is also a small group of the analysed German foreign fighters who decided to remain part of the extremist group and to climb up to a higher tier within. These
men are convinced that ISIS’s ideology is the one they want to die for. These individuals could be considered as deeply involved and engaged in the in-group ideology, since they decided to climb up to the last stage of Moghaddam’s Staircase Model.

5.2.6 Fifth Floor

Those, who climbed up to the fifth stage, have usually fully adopted the worldview of the respective terrorist or extremist organization. The separation of people into ‘us’ versus ‘them’ groups led them to an inflexible thinking in black-and-white terms (Moghaddam, 2005). According to Turner et.al. (1992), a differentiation between in- and out-group members evolves with a shift in self-perception. Group members often shift from a personal to a social identity, and tend to not differentiate between their own goals and those of the group anymore. Once individuals adopted this thinking, they consider themselves and other in-group members as interchangeable representatives. This behaviour marks the process in which individuals displace their individual identity by a shared social identity. Consequently, their individual self-perception becomes depersonalized (Turner et.al., 1992). As described by Tajfel and Turner (1979), the membership in groups tends to increase an individual’s self-esteem. The created self-image that is associated with the social identity, can be enhanced through a lowering of the status of out-group members. Simultaneously, the use of positive attributes for the imagined in-group increases the self-esteem through an enhanced perception of the social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

In the case of the German foreign fighters who climbed up to the last phase of the Staircase Model, the focus of their hostility lies especially on Germany, since it is the country they have been the most familiar with during their lives. It is also the country in which they experienced a chain of disappointments or failures and which they now consider the source of injustice, confirmed through the in-group ideology of ISIS. The justification of violence has in this stage shifted towards a glorification of violence. Many of the statements foreign fighters make in this stage reveal that they perfectly adopted the notion that everyone who’s living outside of ISIS and denying to join or convert to Sunni Islam, does not deserve to live and has to be treated as an enemy. For ISIS, this end-phase radicalization is a beneficial and easily controllable since the foreign fighters do not question the radical doctrine or arbitrary violence anymore.
The justification of violence against civilians is also expressed in the willingness of German foreign fighters to kill Muslims in ISIS occupied territory, who do not adhere to the Sunni interpretation of Islam. Because their new identification with ISIS does not allow any flexible interpretation of Islam but only the radical Salafi doctrine, the foreign fighters at this stage purely defend the in-group without questioning their conviction or violent acts anymore. Apart from this, the feeling of power seems to mark a significant differentiation between foreign fighters who escaped from ISIS at the fourth stage and those who climbed further up. One of the foreign fighters expresses how much he and other German foreign fighters wish to find someone that they can execute with a blunt knife. In the documentary, laughter of the foreign fighters follows their words, which seems to reveal their glorification of violence and worship of power over others. As revealed in the first interview with a German returnee, he enjoyed the humiliation of people who did not obey the rules of ISIS. According to him, the confiscation of mobile phones and the punishment of others gave him a feeling of being righteous.

According to Moghaddam (2005), there is no flexibility in the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ thinking at the last stage anymore. This is also found in the case of last-stage German foreign fighters of ISIS. They humiliate their enemies with words that are meant to put them into an inferior, dehumanized position. Manuel and Fabian Gerhardt, two brothers who left Germany together express how much they consider their father an enemy, and stress that they apostatize from him since he would harm the Muslim population (Herrmann, 2016). The in- and out-group thinking has become an obsession to many of the foreign fighters who justify their violent behaviour with a bigger cause that stands above them. Although many of the German foreign fighters do not know Arabic by this time, their promise to fight and die for ISIS is sufficient for the extremist group.

5.3 Illustrative Case of a German Foreign Fighter: Christian Emde

One of the most well-known German foreign fighters, Christian Emde, is today member of the highest tier within ISIS’s hierarchy. While some of the German men returned and thus left their radicalization process at stage four, when they realized that the reality in Syria and Iraq differed from what has been suggested to them, Christian Emde gave his full commitment to
the in-group. Beginning at the ground floor of the Staircase Model, Christian was described by his mother as an extremely curious young man who always questioned injustice and the existence of the world (Todenhöfer, 2017). What appeared to be most important to him, was to find meaning in life and to understand why injustice exists at all. Besides, he cared the most about the well-being of his friends and family. Oftentimes, he felt responsible for the lives of others to an unusually great extent and perceived injustice towards them as injustice towards himself. As pointed out by his mother, Christian was highly talented and therefore, received special school education. However, he soon defended weaker pupils and requested to be expelled from school when one of his Muslim classmates was expelled for a minor offense. To him, the school’s treatment towards his classmate revealed discrimination towards the Muslim population in Germany. According to the concept of Moghaddam, Christian first faced perceived deprivation through unjust behaviour towards people in his social environment. When his best friend, who also had a migration background, was supposed to be deported years later, Christian unsuccessfully tried to hide him in his mother’s flat. This proceeding had a further impact on his worldview and perception on injustice and justice. However, the German foreign fighter also experienced injustice towards himself, and thus, he even fulfils both perceived and experienced injustice. For a long time, he struggled to find a role model, a guiding identity to advise him on what is wrong and right in life. Although Christian’s father was still alive, he never seemed to care about him or his development. Apart from this, his career as a competitive sportsman ended when he had an accident and his attempt to become self-employed years later ended in criminal charges against him. On a personal level, his first relationship to a woman ended and he felt meaningless and powerless at that time. What can be drawn from this is that a chain of failures led to the overall feeling of injustice that could not be explained to the German adolescent. Generally speaking, Christian Emde found himself in a situation, in which he felt left alone and disappointed from the attempts he made to live a life.

Since Christian sought to explain this situation, he then moved on to the first floor of the Staircase Model. His career options came to an end at this point, his closest relationships had ended and his relationship to his father still could not improve (Todenhöfer, 2017). To him, most of the options available seemed dissatisfying and limited. Further options he explored were of a religious nature. Although baptized Christian, and converted to Islam in 2003, he still felt a great discontent. In Christianity and moderate Islam, he was searching for clear answers that could justify experienced and perceived injustice. However, he then turned
to the radical Salafi group in Germany, because it provided clear answers that simplified concepts such as life and death. His enthusiasm and appreciation for his new identity and belonging led him to a trip to Egypt, where he visited a radical Salafi school (ibid.). Although again, this phase has been rather a transitional phase to the foreign fighter, just like in many other cases, it proved to be a crucial connection phase between the period of forlornness and deprivation and the radical milieu.

In 2011 then, Christian and another German foreign fighter, Robert Baum, were arrested in England, when they were already in a hardening phase, which relates to the third floor of the Staircase Model. Their attempt to enter the United Kingdom with construction plans for bombs ended with imprisonment (Kister-Preuss, 2014). After their release, Christian and Robert visited their old mosque, which was under observation and still active at that time, the now classified as radical mosque ‘Millatu Ibrahim’ in Solingen (ibid.). A video shows the two later-to-be foreign fighters giving away Qurans on the street, under the surveillance of the Salafi group ‘Lies!’ Their clothes reveal their deeply adapted identification with their radical group, and their words clearly indicate the association to an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ perspective. Both young men speak of ‘non-Muslims’ in Germany, who hopefully will end up converting to the only true religion, Islam (Erasmus Monitor, 2015). Nevertheless, this perspective seems to also exclude Muslims who are not adherents of radical Salafism. This matches the statements of Christian’s mother who found her son experienced a shift in behaviour and his outward appearance, which should demonstrate his affiliation to his imagined in-group. A beard and long, veiling clothes, as dictated by the Salafi doctrine, should distance him from his previous environment (Todenhöfer, 2017). When his second partner issued an ultimatum between his new identity and the relationship, the foreign fighter did not hesitate and decided for the Salafi milieu. Out of his strengthened in-group affiliation, Christian decided to move from a non-violent stance to a violent action towards the out-group. His belief that he had finally found a belonging and reason for all of the world’s injustice was constantly reinforced by his in-group members. The subsequent attention he was given by the ‘Lies!’ group, through public and online appearance, could have been the reason for Christian Emde to decide to further climb up the staircase.

After his travel to Syria, his potential for the in-group was soon also recognized by ISIS itself. Unlike many others, Christian did not recoil from the in-group pressure, intimidation and forced group conformity. What differentiated him from other German foreign fighters, and potentially many other foreign fighters, was his early joining and his
high skills. Christian’s accession to the extremist group on-site happened in 2012, before the media presence of ISIS in Europe could have been a relevant factor to recruitment of potential foreign fighters (Kister-Preuss, 2014). Besides, he must have been recognized as a highly skilled and educated person that could benefit ISIS in the long run. Compared to potential suicide bombers, Christian became the figurehead for German ISIS-recruits. In his case, ISIS continued to give him attention and thus, the German foreign fighter developed a strong bound to the extremist group. Instead of being afraid of higher ISIS-tiers and only trying to survive within the group, Christian climbed up to the highest tier and a commander that others had to obey to.

Recent interviews and videos reveal how much Christian Emde identifies himself with the ideology and image of ISIS nowadays. His statements do not show any relevant differentiation between him as a person and the in-group anymore (Todenhöfer, 2017). His in-and out-group thinking has led him to the fifth stage and has become an indispensable part of him. As he states in the interview with Todenhöfer, it does not matter to him how long the capture of the world is going to take for ISIS, he knows that he will be a part of it. Besides, the number of his estimated enemies, that is all non-adherents of Salafism, is completely irrelevant to him, he pleads to execute all of them (ibid.).
6  CHAPTER SIX

6.1  Conclusion

This work examined the motivating forces and pathways of German foreign fighters of ISIS with the help of the Staircase Model to Terrorism. Although many scholars and studies have attempted to identify the motivations of young men to join ISIS over the past years, they have mostly focused on the socio-economic situation of the foreign fighters. However, this work sought to explain the reasons for German men to decide to join the extremist organization in Syria or Iraq from a socio-psychological perspective.

What can be drawn from the underlying analysis is that the questions of why German men radicalize and how, seem to be inevitably intertwined. Many of the German foreign fighters went through a long radicalization process, in which their motivations hardened through a newly found identity and furthermore an adopted group thinking. However, in the beginning most of the men found themselves in a similar situation, in which failures, disappointment and most importantly the perception of injustice were predominant in their lives. This was primarily due to a chain of failures, such as a low employment, failed relationships and a bad or non-existent relationship to the father. The majority found that they were trapped in a situation of disadvantage and forlornness, regardless of their economic or educational backgrounds. Because of their personality, which was usually described as curious and very social by their former environment, many of the men felt unsatisfied by the concepts and solutions that were offered to them in order to make a sense of life and injustice in the world. Resulting from this was often a crisis of identity that was only identified by their environment in hindsight. While most of the German foreign fighters struggled with finding a sense in life and dealing with personal failures, they actively searched for solutions but perceived all of their options to be either very limited or non-existent.

The lack of hope, dreams and solutions in their life led most of the later-to-be foreign fighters to believe that they had to break with their previous environment and find a new identity. This notion was often reinforced by a close friend or a person of trust that connected them with a radical milieu. Once part of this radical milieu, the perception of a thinking in black-and-white terms was hardened and a new identity was adopted. Clear answers that simplified complex matters served as a main point of attraction for all of the German foreign fighters. They eventually did not have to search for a meaning anymore; they could adopt a worldview that provided solutions and answers, and blamed out-group members for injustice.
Furthermore, the given attention to the new in-group members ensured a stronger feeling of belonging and inspired the German men to continue with their radical behaviour. Subsequently, some of the foreign fighters began to convince their former social surroundings to become members of the in-group, so that they did not have to lose the connection to them. Others had already adopted an extremely radical in- and out-group perception of the outside world and tried to missionize their old, moderate mosques or moderate Muslim families.

Not only did the initial situation in which the German foreign fighters began their radicalization process constitute a motivating force, but the membership in a radical milieu confirmed their radicalization with pull factors such as attention that was given to them. Although the long period of feeling lost and useless in this world drove them into a radical milieu, it was only the allegedly stable and clear structure of the respective network that encouraged them to climb further up to the extremist group ISIS in Syria or Iraq. Nevertheless, not all of the underlying cases necessarily went through every stage of Moghaddam’s Staircase. Given their personal circumstances and individual perceptions of the current situation, the process went faster in a few cases and skipped one of the stages. Besides, not all of the foreign fighters decided to climb up to the last stage. In the fourth stage, many of the foreign fighters came to realize that their imagined brotherhood and identity of a jihadist does not match the reality of ISIS, which was surrounded by arbitrariness and extreme violence – against Muslim civilians but also in-group members. However, the fear of non-conformity and the resulting punishment of ISIS became a motivating force for some of the German foreign fighters to stay and continue fighting for the group. Other foreign fighters decided at this stage that although they are trapped in a dilemma, they would rather risk the criminal prosecution of the German state instead of the in-group fear.

The very few of the German foreign fighters who climbed up to the last stage of the Staircase Model and found themselves to be either prepared to die for ISIS or to become a high-tier member, developed a new form of motivating forces. To them, the in-group has become a substitute family which can protect them from their previous environment and the world they grew up in. Due to the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ thinking, they now consider the outside world as their enemy, which they can blame for all of the injustice they experienced or perceived as well as injustice that has been done to Muslims in the world. The defense of the new in-group and adopted identity has become the motivating force on the very last stage of the staircase. Therefore, the use of (lethal) violence and towards out-group members is considered a necessary and justified action in the eyes of German foreign fighters.
In summary, the motivating forces of German foreign fighters shifted from a firstly perceived or experienced feeling of injustice which was often combined with personal failures or a crisis of identity to a thinking of in- and out-group members that were considered either good or bad, regardless of their actual behaviour. The radical milieu further shaped their way of thinking and overwhelmed them with attention as well as an imagine of a role of significance. As their radicalization developed, a fear of the in-group became the main motivating force of staying with ISIS since the potential of stepping out alive dropped to zero.

6.2 Further Research

As examined in this work, research on the phenomenon of foreign fighters for ISIS is highly limited. Due to the currency that this topic gained in the past years, it remains necessary to explore the motivations of people who are willing to fight for an extremist organization. Additional research in this field will add to the understanding of the actual motivating forces that drive people into violent extremism in the first place. Further research would greatly help to develop countermeasures that support the prevention of violent extremism in general. Especially the socio-psychological side to the radicalization process needs to be given greater attention since the existent focus on the socio-economic situation of foreign fighters has failed to explain why Western men joined ISIS on-site.

A future comparison between the motivations of men from Western and Muslim countries could help tackling structural problems that exist in the respective countries and lead young men to the perception that they do not have an alternative but to join the alleged jihad for ISIS. Besides, the roles of parents and the early childhood seem to have been greatly overlooked in the existent literature. Nevertheless, they could be analysed in a larger context.

Due to a word limitation, this dissertation only examined the motivating forces of men who joined ISIS. However, further research should comprise the differences in motivations of men and women from the Western world to join the extremist organization. In this way, different ways of tackling the causes of violent extremism can be designed in the future. Regarding the already existing countermeasures, various de-radicalization models could be analysed in order to assess their impact on the further development of former foreign fighters.

Apart from this, the recruitment tactics and forms of spreading an Islamic extremist ideology of ISIS could be explored in further detail. Since all the German foreign fighters in the underlying work got in contact with conspiracy theories and ISIS-propaganda on the
internet and in social media on their paths to ISIS, this aspect could be explored in further research.

Furthermore, this work’s focus lies on the violent side to radicalization, which excludes the non-violent conviction of radical persons. However, a radical conviction can also pose a threat to democratic values such as human rights, even if violence does not necessarily become a part of this development. Nevertheless, research on this would always require a strict separation between violent and non-violent radicalization. Yet, a comparison between the causes of the two paths could contribute to the overall understanding of becoming radical and subsequently to the prevention of radicalization.
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