

# EXPERT PAPER

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## "I would have planted the explosives in the crowd"

An analysis of the foiled terrorist attack on the mass event "Taylor Swift concert" in Vienna in August 2024

## IMPRINT

The European Institute for Counter Terrorism and Conflict Prevention (EICTP) is a research association operating worldwide and with its headquarters in Vienna, Austria. As a non-profit institution the focus of EICTP is on key topics around security policy-related issues. It carries out projects with renowned partners in Austria and abroad, maintains close relationships with high-level research organizations and a network of prominent experts and scholars, offers profound sets of actions, consultations and strategies related to counter-terrorism, hybrid conflicts, and de-radicalization measures and aims at creating policy-related recommendations based on research and expert assessments for decision-makers.

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## 1 The narrowly thwarted attack

On August 7, 2024 in the early hours of the morning, law enforcement officers raided an inconspicuous house in the town of Ternitz (approx. 15,000 inhabitants, approx. 60 km from Vienna) and arrested the 19-year-old suspect Beran A. (Aliyi). Among other things, machetes, 21,000 euros in counterfeit money (for a possible escape), components for the explosive triacetone triperoxide (TATP) as well as sulphuric acid, ignition cables, detonators and blank ammunition were seized - acquired either on a black market in Vienna or on the Darknet. Beran A. was suspected of storing a kind of DIY bomb in the fridge. The Austrian police had previously observed Beran A. for days as he presumably handled the highly explosive TATP, wearing gloves and a face mask. According to reports, Bernan A. had also stolen substances from his former employer (he worked at a stainless steel plant in Ternitz until shortly before his crime). He had resigned on July 18.<sup>1</sup> He had previously attended the commercial school in Neunkirchen. He is said to have visited the Albanian mosque in Gliederstraße in Ternitz every Friday.<sup>2</sup>

The suspected target of the attack was a large-scale act of terrorism at a mass event in Vienna. Specifically, one of the three upcoming Taylor Swift concerts at the beginning of August 2024. Swift is currently the most successful pop star in the world. Around 200,000 tickets were sold for the three concerts on August 8, 9 and 10, 2024, which were later canceled. According to the findings of the Directorate of State Security and Intelligence (DSN), the 19-year-old potential terrorist is said to have joined the radical Islamist terror militia "Islamic State" (IS) and to have sworn allegiance to its leader on July 7. On August 8 or 9, he planned to get as close as possible to the Ernst-Happel-Stadium in his car with the help of a blue light and a siren. He wanted to cause as many casualties as possible with a terrorist-motivated rampage

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<sup>1</sup> See Falter, 33/24 (2024), pp. 12-14.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the career of the suspect, in: Profil (32), August 10, 2024, pp. 10-13.

and kill Taylor Swift fans gathered in front of the stadium with his homemade explosive device or a machete and knives. According to his defense lawyer Werner Tomanek, the 19-year-old no longer maintains his initial, full confession. "*His plan was to kill as many people as possible outside the stadium,*" explained the head of the Directorate of State Security and Intelligence (DSN), Omar Haijawi-Pirchner.<sup>3</sup>

There is also information about the flow of intelligence that led to the arrest. According to a report by the APA news agency, two foreign intelligence services, including one from the USA, had already warned the Austrian authorities 10 to 14 days before the concerts. Apparently the warning came from the CIA, as the New York Times exclusively reported on August 28th. The deputy director of the CIA, David S. Cohen, confirmed that the planned terrorist attack was aimed at killing a large number of people. He even spoke of tens of thousands.<sup>4</sup>

The cooperation office of the three Austrian intelligence services denies the excessively long lead time, which has been criticized. The decisive factor for the information and the subsequent arrest was certainly the aforementioned oath of allegiance to IS, which the suspect is said to have made. According to reports, the Austrian Army Intelligence Office, the responsible foreign intelligence service of the Austrian Armed Forces, was informed first. The latter informed the civilian domestic intelligence service DSN, which is part of the structures of the Ministry of the Interior, as reported by the daily newspaper "Der Standard".<sup>5</sup>

The suspected attempted terrorist posed in a portrait published by the Ministry of the Interior with a full beard typical of the scene and machetes, which looks like a likeness of the terrorist

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted from Attack on Taylor Swift concerts: The terrorists from Ternitz, Profil.at, August 16, 2024, <https://www.profil.at/oesterreich/terror-ternitz-islamismus-wien-beran-a/402936231> (accessed September 4, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> C.I.A. Warning Helped Thwart ISIS Attack at Taylor Swift Concert in Vienna, New York Times, August 28, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/28/us/politics/cia-isis-warning-taylor-swift-concert.html> (accessed August 29, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Terror investigation: Plan was to "kill people outside the stadium", in: Der Standard.at, August 8, 2024, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000231602/nach-festnahmen-und-absage-der-swift-konzerte-was-ueber-die-terrorverdaechtigen-bekannt-ist> (accessed August 20, 2024).

Kujtim F., who shot four people in a terrorist attack in Vienna in November 2020.<sup>6</sup> Another parallel: Beran A. was also born in Austria, his parents are ethnic Albanians from North Macedonia and Muslims. Beran A. grew up in Vienna. He was unfit for service in the army, apparently for physical and psychological reasons.<sup>7</sup>

The martial image clearly suggests an affinity for weapons:



The 17-year-old Luca K., who is considered a terror suspect, visited the Tewhid Mosque in Vienna-Meidling. The Vienna attacker of November 2, 2020, Kujtim F., already frequented the mosque.



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<sup>6</sup> See Nicolas Stockhammer: Trügerische Ruhe: Der Anschlag von Wien und die terroristische Bedrohung in Europa, Vienna 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the career of the suspect, in: Profil (32), August 10, 2024, pp. 10-13.

Source: Kurier<sup>8</sup>

The mosque in Vienna-Meidling is officially no longer part of the Islamic Religious Community (IGGÖ). It was closed as part of the investigation into the events leading up to 2 November 2020 because the later assassin is said to have become radicalized there. The then 16-year-old who planned an act of terror with a 17 cm knife blade at Vienna Central Station in September 2023 and refrained from doing so at the last second also reportedly frequented the mosque on a weekly basis.<sup>9</sup> The faith center has not actually been a mosque since December 2023<sup>10</sup>, as the IGGÖ has (only officially) dissolved it. The association authorities had withdrawn the original closure after no violation of the law could be proven.<sup>11</sup> Muhammed P., the imam who should have been replaced according to the IGGÖ's requirements, is likely to continue working there. He is still demonstrably teaching Arabic there.<sup>12</sup>

For years, numerous rumors have been swirling around Muhammed P. the radical Bosnian preacher and the Tewhid Mosque in Meidling. He is said to have links to the radical Islamic scene in Bosnia-Herzegovina. A few years ago, he also published anti-Semitic sermons.<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>8</sup> After attack in Vienna: Tewhid Mosque dissolved as official house of prayer, in: Kurier.at, February 2, 2024, <https://kurier.at/chronik/wien/anschlag-in-wien-tewhid-moschee-aufgeloest/402766222> (accessed on September 4, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Aborted terror plan: 16-year-old wanted suicide attack, in Puls.at, September 20, 2023, <https://www.puls24.at/news/chronik/abgeblasener-terror-plan-16-jaehriger-wollte-selbstmordattentat/308424> (accessed on September 4, 2024).

<sup>10</sup> After the bloody terrorist attack on Schwedenplatz in November 2020, the mosque was initially closed by the authorities. Security circles had long regarded the building as a meeting point for the Salafist scene. The association lodged an appeal, was partially vindicated and was allowed to reopen in 2021.

<sup>11</sup> After the attack in Vienna: Tewhid Mosque dissolved as official house of prayer, in: Kurier.at, February 2, 2024, <https://kurier.at/chronik/wien/anschlag-in-wien-tewhid-moschee-aufgeloest/402766222> (accessed on September 4, 2024).

<sup>12</sup> Balkans as a Salafist bridgehead. IS instrumentalizes young migrants: Austria finds solutions, Germany not yet, in: focus.de, August 25, 2024, [https://www.focus.de/experts/balkan-als-salafistischer-brueckenkopf-is-instrumentalisiert-jugendliche-migranten-oesterreich-findet-loesungen-deutschland-schaut-weg\\_id\\_260238954.html](https://www.focus.de/experts/balkan-als-salafistischer-brueckenkopf-is-instrumentalisiert-jugendliche-migranten-oesterreich-findet-loesungen-deutschland-schaut-weg_id_260238954.html) (accessed September 4, 2024).

<sup>13</sup> After the attack in Vienna: Tewhid Mosque dissolved as official house of prayer, in: kurier.at, February 2, 2024, <https://kurier.at/chronik/wien/anschlag-in-wien-tewhid-moschee-aufgeloest/402766222>; Wiener Moschee behält berüchtigten Prediger - als offizielles Gebetshaus aufgelöst, in: Der Standard.at, February 2, 2024, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000205674/wiener-moschee-behaelt-beruechtigten-prediger-als-offizielles-gebetshaus-aufgeloest> (accessed on September 4, 2024).

official representation of Muslims in Austria has so far largely held back from making any statements on the planned Islamist-motivated attack on the Swift concert in Vienna.

## 2 Immediate consequences

### 2.1 Loss of reputation

Austria's reputation suffers as a result of the fact that the cancellation of the concert was noted in public reports worldwide. While a concert by a world star, in this case Tylor Swift, could take place in other (European and non-European) countries without any problems, Austria's reputation has now been damaged (even though Coldplay concerts were able to take place a little later with increased security).

### 2.2 Economic damage

Up until the cancellation in Vienna, the three concerts were expected to generate up to 100 million euros in added value.<sup>14</sup> The economic damage caused by canceled major concerts is high regardless of this. Around 200,000 people were expected to attend the three concerts in Vienna. The organizer announced that it would refund the tickets for the visitors. In addition, there are further costs for the organization of the major event. According to the Association for Consumer Information (VKI), the organizer bears the risk for the concert cancellation, as the reason for the cancellation is force majeure, which is not within the consumer's sphere of influence.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Between euphoria and reality: The impact of Taylor Swift on Vienna's economy, in: Der Standard.at, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000231202/zwischen-euphorie-und-realitaet-die-auswirkungen-von-taylor-swift-auf-wiens-wirtschaft> (accessed September 4, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> Swift rejection - Wifo expects no lasting economic damage, in: Die Presse, August 8, 2024, <https://www.diepresse.com/18744771/swift-absage-wifo-erwartet-keine-nachhaltigen-oekonomischen-schaden> (accessed September 4, 2024).



### 2.3 Loss of confidence

In general, there is a loss of confidence in national security policy - especially because the attack could only be prevented externally (by friendly services).

## 2.4 Non-reaction of the IGGÖ

The IGGÖ website has so far failed to find any expressions of "dismay" or "concern" about the suspected attack on the Taylor Swift concert in Vienna. There is only a brief statement on "X" (formerly Twitter), but it is very general and does not address the Islamist network behind the attack.<sup>16</sup> There is a lack of concrete discussion of the verified information on the planning of the attack and the presumed environment behind it, and thus ultimately a lack of credible distancing.

## 3 Political reactions & debate

Austria's Interior Minister Gerhard Karner (ÖVP) explained at the press conference immediately after the thwarted attack became known that the authorities had intervened *in extremis* with imminent danger: "*The situation was serious, the situation is serious. But we can also state: A tragedy was prevented.*"<sup>17</sup> The threat situation in Europe has generally intensified, as Karner stated. Austria is certainly no exception. Concerts are also often a preferred target for Islamist attackers, says Karner, citing recent examples such as the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester. The attempted attack took place in the middle of the election campaign period. Austria elects the National Council at the end of September. The threat of terrorism from radical Islamism could and probably will continue to dominate the upcoming "hot phase" of the election campaign. The debate will also continue because the detailed background to the attack, including the networks, still needs to be determined.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://x.com/IGGiOE/status/1821500443253448732>: It states: "The Islamic Religious Community in Austria (IGGÖ) firmly rejects any form of violence and terror in the name of religion! Our faith and our community stand for peace, tolerance and the respectful coexistence of all people. The abuse of our religion and the ever-growing danger posed by the spread of extremist content on social media channels is one of the challenges we are currently facing more and more. The cancellation of these long-awaited evenings by the Swifties fills us with great regret."

<sup>17</sup> See What is known about the terror plans in Vienna, in: tagesschau.de, August 8, 2024, <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/europa/swift-konzerte-absage-faq-100.html#:~:text=%22Die%20Situation%20war%20ernst%2C%20die,zu%20200.000%20Fans%20erwartet%20w orden> (accessed September 4, 2024).

"*Now the dream has been shattered*", FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl declared on Facebook. Kickl wrote that "*the red-black-green-pink unity party*" was to blame for the concert cancellation. Neos leader Beate Meinel-Reisinger also criticized: "*Organizers and security authorities can hold concerts anywhere. But not here,*" she wrote on X. "*Have we been run down like this?*" Immediately after the concert was canceled, Chancellor Karl Nehammer and the ÖVP praised the decisive action of the police and state security - after all, the attack was thwarted in time. Shortly afterwards, the political debate focused on the lack of powers of the security authorities in "messenger service communications surveillance" in Austria due to the fact that foreign services had provided the decisive tip-off.<sup>18</sup>

In "Zeit im Bild 2", Nehammer explained that there is still an "abstract danger" of terrorism in Austria. In the course of the interview, he mentioned that investigators need to be "technically upgraded" as there are too few options for observing potential terrorists. An assessment that is shared by terrorism researchers.<sup>19</sup> However, the coalition partner, the Greens, who are currently in charge of the justice department, warned against a so-called federal Trojan, the implementation of which was overturned by the Constitutional Court in 2019. In ZiB 2, criminal law expert Ingeborg Zerbes confirmed that a federal Trojan could be implemented in accordance with the constitution.<sup>20</sup> One thing is certain: The discussion about the so-called "federal Trojan", a misleading term which, incidentally, is factually inaccurate and negatively judgmental, will be given new impetus by the incident. This should lead to an intensive debate on the tension between the necessities of modern counter-terrorism and the requirements of data protection and civil rights.<sup>21</sup> Karl Nehammer's package of demands

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. How the parties are starting the intensive election campaign with the Swift rejection, in: Der Standard, August 9, 2024, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000231909/wie-die-parteien-mit-der-swift-absage-in-den-intensivwahlkampf-starten> (accessed on September 4, 2024).

<sup>19</sup> See Nicolas Stockhammer: Freiheit und Sicherheit sind keine Gegenspieler, in: Die Presse.at, December 21, 2023, <https://www.diepresse.com/17937154/freiheit-und-sicherheit-sind-keine-gegenspieler> (accessed on September 4, 2024).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. lawyer Zerbes on messenger monitoring: "Extremely restrict use by the state", in: Kleine Zeitung, August 9, 2024, <https://www.kleinezeitung.at/oesterreich/18749965/juristin-zerbes-zur-messenger-ueberwachung-nutzung-durch-den-staat> (accessed on September 4, 2024).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. e.g. Must state security look the other way when it comes to chat messages?, in: Kurier.at, August 9, 2024, <https://kurier.at/politik/inland/terror-taylor-swift-handy-verfassungsschutz/402934576>; Nicolas Stockhammer: "Wir können so nicht weitermachen!", in: Krone.at, August 9, 2024, <https://www.krone.at/3487867> (accessed September 4, 2024).

as a result of the prevented attack was harshly rejected by the other parties in the National Security Council. None of the other parliamentary groups agreed to demands such as messenger monitoring, a tightening of the Political Parties Act and an extension of detention for non-deradicalized persons. However, the ÖVP package was rejected by all other parties. The FPÖ, which had agreed to the original law in full, now particularly opposed the monitoring of messenger service communication. SPÖ leader Andreas Babler was also cautious in this regard. It must be ensured that there is "*no clumsy mass surveillance*."<sup>22</sup> It is therefore clear that there is still no far-reaching consensus in the Austrian party spectrum on how to deal with the threat of Islamist terrorism.

#### 4 Key characteristics of the foiled attack: continuation of several trends in the context of an EICTP analysis

A systematic analysis of the Taylor Swift attack attempt can be seen as a preliminary confirmation of some of the developments in Islamist extremism (and relevantly motivated terrorism for the next 3-5 years) identified in the software-supported EICTP trend analysis. This results from a presumptive assessment based on certain key trends already established prior to this case, which are briefly discussed here and specifically applied to the case evidence:

##### 4.1 Small cell terrorism in jihadism

Initially, observers believed it was a lone perpetrator, until the DSN expressed the concrete suspicion that the suspected jihadists were probably part of an "Islamist network". Just a few hours after Beran A.'s arrest, police officers arrested 17-year-old Luca K. at the Ernst Happel Stadium in Vienna. Beran A. was in close contact with 17-year-old Luca K. K. was working there

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. ÖVP outvoted on messenger monitoring, in: ORF news, August 14, 2024, <https://orf.at/stories/3366490/> (accessed on September 4, 2024).

as an employee of a facility company that was in charge of logistical preparations for the upcoming Swift concerts. According to information, the young man had only registered for the job a week beforehand. The terror suspect was able to move freely around the venue. IS stickers were found in the wallet of the teenager with Croatian-Turkish roots.

The traces of the 17-year-old also lead to other security-related incidents that dominated the political debate in Austria until the Swift concert: the violent clashes between Syrians on the one hand and Chechens and Turks on the other. He had been active in a Telegram group in which the mood was stirred up against a gang of Syrian youths for weeks. This is why the teenager can currently be seen in police mugshots. At the beginning of July, hooded Chechens stabbed an Afghan to death not far from Meidling train station. The 17-year-old was filmed in the immediate vicinity by surveillance cameras, but his involvement in the crime could not be proven.<sup>23</sup> Luca K. was already under observation by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. He visited the Tewhid Mosque, an institution in Vienna-Meidling known as a radical Islamist mosque, which enjoys great popularity among IS sympathizers. The mosque was actually officially closed. It was only in March of this year that Luca K. was the focus of a criminal trial in Vienna because he allegedly punched a Muslim in the face in the presence of others in Pasching, Upper Austria, allegedly to convert him to the "right" Islam.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, a 15-year-old teenager was also (briefly) in police custody, but was only heard as a witness. While the two older boys are strongly suspected of having planned or known about a terrorist attack on one of the three concerts in Vienna, the role of the youngest remains unclear. Later, another person was arrested in Vienna, reportedly an 18-year-old Iraqi citizen. He is said to come from the immediate circle of the 19-year-old Beran A. and to be on friendly

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<sup>23</sup> Auf den Spuren des Ternitzer Anschlagplaners Beran A., in: Der Standard.at, August 9, 2024, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000231904/auf-den-spuren-des-ternitzer-anschlagsplaners-beran-a>; Der Werdegang des Verdächtigen, in: Profil (32), August 10, 2024, pp. 10-13.

<sup>24</sup> Die Terrorgang: Gewalttätig, verurteilt und leicht zu manipulieren, in: Kurier.at, August 9, <https://kurier.at/chronik/oesterreich/terror-gang-taylor-swift-wien-beran-luca-anschlag-konzerte-era-tour/402934517> (accessed September 4, 2024).

terms with him. Al Jazeera also reported on the "network".<sup>25</sup> However, based on the ongoing investigations, it remains to be seen exactly how the network was organized.

## 4.2 Influence through hate preachers

In July, Beran A. took the customary oath of allegiance to IS, the so-called "Bai'a". He did this freely available and openly accessible on his social media channel on Instagram. On Tik Tok, Beran A. reportedly followed the idol of the digital Salafist scene, Abul Baraa (actually Ahmad Armih). The 51-year-old Palestinian<sup>26</sup> ran a mosque in Berlin, which was searched in 2018 on suspicion of terrorist financing and closed in 2019. Baraa has travelled throughout Germany and is active in many relevant ways, apparently also having friendly and or business ties with the Salafist Pierre Vogel.<sup>27</sup> Vogel is considered a dangerous man in Germany and has repeatedly been targeted by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. The Cologne-based Salafist preacher, who calls himself Abu Hamza, is regarded as an advocate of a Sharia-based parallel society of radical Muslims.<sup>28</sup>

The Federal Public Prosecutor General's Office in Germany has already charged Abul Baraa in 2021 for allegedly defrauding the state together with his wife in connection with coronavirus aid. In June, his Salafist association Deutschsprachige Muslimische Gemeinschaft e. V. (DMG) in Braunschweig was banned and his apartment in Berlin was searched again.<sup>29</sup> Baraa

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<sup>25</sup> Third suspect detained over plan to attack Taylor Swift shows in Vienna, in: Al Jazeera, August 9, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/9/third-suspect-detained-over-plan-to-attack-taylor-swift-shows-in-vienna> (accessed September 4, 2024).

<sup>26</sup> Ahmad Armih was born in 1973 to Palestinian parents, but lived for some time with his family in poor conditions in Lebanon until they finally came to Germany in the course of the civil war.

<sup>27</sup> He has also been active as a tour group leader for Hajj and Umra trips for several years: on the website of "Bakkah-Reisen" (see <https://bakkah-reisen.com/>), for example, two-week luxury pilgrimages are offered by and with Armih, which cost over EUR 5,000 per person. Cf. Annemieke Munderloh, in: Fodex, 2009 (5) <https://www.fodex-online.de/demokratie-dialog-artikel/ahmad-abul-baraa-portraet/> (accessed August 20, 2024).

<sup>28</sup> See Thorsten Hasche: Islamismus in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, in: Eckhard Jesse/Tom Mannewitz (eds.): Extremismusforschung. Handbuch für Wissenschaft und Politik, Bonn 2018, Federal Agency for Civic Education, pp. 389-426, here p. 409.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Berlin IS preacher influenced the Swift terrorists, in: focus.de, August 9, 2024, [https://www.focus.de/panorama/welt/anschlag-bei-swift-konzert-in-wien-berliner-hass-prediger-radikalisierte-taylor-terroristen\\_id\\_260209013.html](https://www.focus.de/panorama/welt/anschlag-bei-swift-konzert-in-wien-berliner-hass-prediger-radikalisierte-taylor-terroristen_id_260209013.html) (accessed on August 20, 2024).

continues to operate successfully online. Almost 82,000 people follow him on TikTok.<sup>30</sup> He is considered the most influential hate preacher in the German-speaking world, with international attention. CNN even describes him as the "rock star" of the scene.<sup>31</sup>



Screenshot YouTube Abul Baraa.



Image source URL: <https://youtu.be/mC1iESeL5I4?t=137>

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<sup>30</sup> Wie die Radikalisierung zum Islamisten auf Tiktok funktioniert, in: Der Standard.at, 11 August 2024, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000231964/auf-tiktok-reichen-fuenf-schritte-um-ein-radikaler-islamist-zu-werden> (accessed on 20 August 2024).

<sup>31</sup> The 'rock star' preacher influencing young people online, CNN, August 15, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/08/15/europe/abul-baraa-salafi-preacher-intl-latam/index.html> (accessed on August 20, 2024).



According to Armih, women represent one - if not the - greatest threat to the self-control of a devout Muslim. They are considered to trigger "fitnah" (temptation or upsetting the divine order). Little things are enough to make a devout Muslim forget God and cause them to lose control of their instincts: the outline of their body when their clothes are too tight, uncovered hair and skin, even the sound of their voice or footsteps can be enough. For this reason too, young women are not allowed to leave the house unveiled, with a few exceptions, and above all without the permission or accompaniment of their husband or a "mahram" - neither to visit their family nor to go to the mosque, because the best place for them (also to pray) is at home. This also makes reference to Taylor Swift as an enemy, especially as the American pop icon is seen as a symbol of Western liberalism, tolerance and freedom of movement. These values are slandered by Baraa as decadent.<sup>32</sup> Islamists also find Swift's support for the LGBTQ communities and her commitment to their causes a thorn in their side.

Baraa skillfully uses fear pedagogy in his statements. In an older lecture circulating on TikTok, he preaches to his audience in an agitated manner: "*Allah has only given you this life so that you can serve him.*" A relaxed view of Islam is not an option for Baraa. "*You don't have time*

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Annemieke Munderloh, in: Fodex, 2009 (5), <https://www.fodex-online.de/demokratie-dialog-artikel/ahmad-abul-baraa-portraet/> (accessed on September 4, 2024).



*to learn how Allah wants to be worshipped? Shame on you!"* Those who prefer money, women and power to the Prophet, says Baraa, will feel the wrath of Allah: *"On that day, you will not be able to hide anything from Allah, the Almighty, you will stand before him naked and barefoot - weak."* And those who commit sins will face nothing less than hellfire. Those *"rotten hearts"* are *"kaffir"* ("unbelievers"). Baraa thus makes a clear distinction between what he considers to be *"true"* Muslims and *"hypocrites"*.<sup>33</sup> As early as 2018, ZDF emphasized the dangerousness of the Islamist hate preacher in a documentary.<sup>34</sup>

### 4.3 Successive emergence of "teenage terrorism"

Significant for the Taylor Swift plot is once again the young age of the already known network, the suspects are 19, 18, 17 and 15 years old and all belong to Generation Z. This confirms the Europe-wide trend that (attempted) terrorists are getting "younger" all the time, which is obviously due to increasing online radicalization and the heightened appeal of this age group. In this specific case, it seems to be confirmed that Islamist (Salafist) hate preachers not only target young people via channels such as YouTube and Tik Tok, but can also have an influence on their radicalization with their dichotomous messages.<sup>35</sup> Terrorist organizations such as ISIS convey clear ideological guidelines to young radicalized people in closed networks (such as Telegram) and inspire a virtual community that is more willing to commit acts of terrorist violence, as the inhibition threshold for manifest violence is usually lower.

### 4.4 Increasing online and offline radicalization

Dynamics in the radicalization process are diverse and multicausal. Radicalization is never linear and always requires a platform and catalysts or amplifiers.

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Annemieke Munderloh, in: Fodex, 2009 (5), <https://www.fodex-online.de/demokratie-dialog-artikel/ahmad-abul-baraa-portraet/> (accessed on September 4, 2024).

<sup>34</sup> See ZDF zoom: Hass aus der Moschee - Wie radikale Imame Stimmung machen, documentary 2018, Doku <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CeI8OGohlil> (accessed on September 4, 2024).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Tik Tok preachers and their problematic understanding of Islam, in: Demokratie leben, German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Women, Senior Citizens and Youth, 2025, <https://www.demokratie-leben.de/magazin/magazin-details/tiktok-prediger-und-ihr-problematisches-islamverstaendnis-179> (accessed on September 4, 2024).

According to the approach of renowned US radicalization researcher Arie Kruglanski, there are three main system levels or "components" that determine radicalization: the *needs* component, the ideological (*narrative*) component and the *networks* component.<sup>36</sup> In principle, amplifiers must map all three system levels. This is increasingly done online, but the aspect of real-world confirmation must not be lost sight of. Online and offline worlds are increasingly interdependent - from visits to radical mosques and meetings with like-minded people at sports clubs to specific instructions via Tik Tok or later Telegram. This can be confirmed as a trend in the relevant case, especially as there seems to be concrete evidence of this dual radicalization: "*The partner service provided the DSN with the 19-year-old's telephone number, his Telegram profile and announced that the suspect called himself "Abu Dujana" in a relevant channel.*"<sup>37</sup>

#### 4.5 Exploding Tik Tok radicalization

German constitutional protectors are now sounding the alarm: the instrumentalization of TikTok by Islamists in Germany has developed into a "fire accelerator" for radicalization.<sup>38</sup> Radicalization via TikTok can also be observed in this case. Tik Tok currently offers masses of staged videos from Gaza. These include not only misinformation and propaganda, but also Salafist preachers, some of whom achieve enormous reach with their posts. They deliberately spread victim and revenge narratives that are designed to incite young people. Another recurring aspect is the dichotomous division into "*halal*" or "*haram*", a theologically dressed-up division of the world into "good" and "evil", which runs like a common thread through the messages of influencer preachers and is essentially designed to demand a Sharia-compliant

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<sup>36</sup> Arie W. Kruglanski Jocelyn J. Bélanger/Rohan Gunaratna: *The Three Pillars of Radicalization: Needs, Narratives, and Networks*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019, pp. 173 ff.

<sup>37</sup> Austria Press Agency: *Swift terror suspects have been under surveillance since August 2, August 15, 2024*, <https://apa.at/news/swift-terror-verdaechtige-wurden-seit-2-august-observiert-3/#:~:text=Der%2019%2Dj%C3%A4hrige%20mutma%C3%9Fliche%20Anh%C3%A4nger,August%20observiert> (accessed on September 4, 2024).

<sup>38</sup> Verfassungsschutz warns: *TikTokisierung des Islamismus*, in: ZDF heute, 21 April 2024, <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/deutschland/islamismus-tiktok-verfassungsschutz-radikalisierung-muslime-100.html> (accessed on 20 August 2024).

life from young people in contrast to non-Muslim society, which can hardly be reconciled with the requirements and principles of the liberal constitutional state.

#### 4.6 Increasing abuse of closed virtual communication platforms

The ISPK and its supporters also use closed, encrypted peer-to-peer chat groups to carry out virtual terror planning. Conspirators in one location give online instructions to radicalized followers in another location on how to carry out attacks in their respective target countries. The instructions from these virtual "entrepreneurs" can take different forms: Recommendations on targets, the tactical approach and *modi operandi*, as well as ideological and/or logistical support.<sup>39</sup> Terrorism researcher Peter R. Neumann formulated this in an interview for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) as follows: "*They send each other videos of attacks and get excited about the violence depicted*".<sup>40</sup>

#### 4.7 Massive increase in the virtualization of terrorism

The current manifestations of terrorism indicate that the phenomenon of extremist violence has gradually become virtualized. Terrorists operating clandestinely regularly use digital technologies to set up secure peer-to-peer communication networks in which they exchange information on topics such as terrorist plans, targets or tactics. They host illegal extremist content and disseminate terrorism-related information (target selection, planning, tactics, *modus operandi*, etc.) in closed communication channels. Both terrorist organizations and inspired or affiliated individual perpetrators are increasingly using the entire "digital value chain" of terrorism. From the first virtual contact with extreme positions, narratives and ideologies, through recruitment, propaganda and radicalization, to the direct planning and organization of attacks - almost everything is commissioned online. Over the past decade, the

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<sup>39</sup> See Nicolas Stockhammer/Colin P. Clarke: Learning from Islamic State-Khorasan Province's Recent Plots, in: *Lawfare*, August 11, 2024, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/learning-from-islamic-state-khorasan-province-s-recent-plots> (accessed September 7, 2024).

<sup>40</sup> Terrorism in Europe: "There are enough indications that something bigger is on the horizon" (Interview with Peter R. Neumann), in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, August 23, 2024, <https://www.nzz.ch/international/terrorismus-in-europa-die-tik-tok-generation-peter-r-neumann-ld.1844746> (accessed September 7, 2024).

World Wide Web has increasingly become the main arena for all types of terrorist activities, especially with regard to the Generation Z, which is currently in charge. Not only at the level of motivation, but also in terms of capabilities, it describes the virtual possibilities and ability to carry out online operations ranging from the provision of propaganda platforms to the preparation of attacks. The virtualization of terrorism is advancing in parallel with technological development and is now even influencing low-threshold planning projects and scenarios. In the present case surrounding the Taylor Swift scenario, the significance of the virtual dimension is evident, particularly with regard to the radicalization, recruitment and alleged planning of crimes on online platforms of the young people suspected of the crime.

#### 4.8 Increasing use of conspiracy narratives

Conspiracy narratives are increasingly playing an important role as an ideological underpinning for extremism and terrorism, as they can serve both as an ideological justification for violence and as a driver for terrorist acts. The internet and social media play a central role in the spread of conspiracy theories. Platforms such as YouTube, Facebook or Telegram enable such theories to be spread quickly and widely, which helps them to reach a broad audience and are often seen by recipients as the absolute "truth", even if they are, as in the vast majority of cases, simply factually false. It stands to reason that the network has become radicalized in the sense of a fight against the West.

#### 4.9 Migration and poor integration

A debate is currently developing about the (original) countries of origin of Islamist terrorists and the relationship of ethnic origin to the respective radicalization background: The Taylor Swift plot terror suspect Beran A., an ethnic Albanian, has his roots in North Macedonia. Islamist preachers are highly active there.<sup>41</sup> The propaganda of the Salafist-jihadist groups in North Macedonia, which is predominantly written in Albanian, targets the male Albanian

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Jihadists specifically recruit children from the Balkan diaspora, in: Der Standard.at, August 12, 2024, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000232039/jihadisten-rekrutieren-gezielt-kinder-der-balkan-diaspora> (accessed August 29, 2024).

Muslim minority. Some of them have now adapted their extremist language to avoid being classified as hate speech.<sup>42</sup> The case is not related to the large influx of refugees in 2015/16. Rather, it points to other problems. It is clearly about integration problems of the second generation. In general, difficulties arise, and are currently culminating once again, from the integration of people who come from countries influenced by Islamism.

In view of the fact that the 2020 attacker in Vienna also came from an Albanian family from North Macedonia and may have been recruited by 'Islamic State' just like Beran A., this immediately raises the question of whether young men whose families come from the region are particularly susceptible to radical Islamism. Of course, this could just be a coincidence, but this aspect needs to be examined more closely. The terror suspect from Ternitz and the attacker from 2020 were not the only cases associated with North Macedonians. In 2015, an Austrian citizen with roots in North Macedonia was suspected of belonging to a radical Islamist terrorist organization and recruiting jihadists. A North Macedonian was also arrested in an anti-terror raid the following year.

#### 4.10 The importance of psychological sensitivities

This raises the question of the extent to which psychological abnormalities influence or reinforce terrorist acts of violence. Poorly integrated people, in the first or even the second generation, could be particularly predisposed to drift into radicalization or criminality or develop mental illnesses. This trend is being reinforced by the latest cases in the phenomenon area.<sup>43</sup> The main suspect in the Swift terror plot is said to have had mental health issues.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See the scientific study on this: Ioannis Armakolas/Bledar Feta: Understanding the prevention of radicalization in North Macedonia, in: Juline Beaujouan et al. (ed.): Vulnerability and Resilience to Violent Extremism. An Actor-Centric Approach, London/New York: Routledge 2024, pp. 163-182.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. representative Emily Corner/Paul Gill Paul (2014): A false dichotomy? Mental illness and lone-actor terrorism, in: Law Hum Behav. 2015 Feb; 39 (1), pp. 23-34; Jérôme Endrass et al.: Der Weg zum (terroristischen) Attentäter: Gewalt legitimieren, um Gewalt ausüben, in: Kriminalistik: Unabhängige Zeitschrift für die kriminalistische Wissenschaft und Praxis, (2015) 5, pp. 328-334.

<sup>44</sup> Swift terror plans: Main suspect mentally conspicuous, in: Puls 24, September 3, 2024, <https://www.puls24.at/news/politik/hauptverdaechtiger-zu-swift-terrorplaenen-psychisch-auffaellig/347992> (accessed September 3, 2024).

#### 4.11 Choice of targets as part of the jihadist strategy

Taylor Swift is not only probably the most famous and most successful pop singer in the world. Swift has released more number one albums than any other female artist in the history of the US charts and has sold more than 300 million albums. She is an advocate for sexual minorities and feminism and also condemned the US Supreme Court's decision last year to overturn the federal abortion law. For this very reason, Swift and her fanbase represent the decadence of the West from an Islamist perspective. The Taylor Swift concert in Vienna was reportedly targeted as a potential terror target, which can be attributed to several factors:

1. **Symbolic value and high media attention:** Concerts by international stars such as Taylor Swift are mega-events that not only attract thousands of fans, but also generate widespread media attention. A terrorist attack at such a concert, which brings together hundreds of thousands of people and attracts worldwide attention, would make considerable headlines and increase fear among the population.
2. **Soft targets and crowds:** Concerts are considered "soft targets" because they bring together large numbers of people in a confined space, making them attractive to terrorists. Such events are difficult to fully protect and the high density of people offers the potential for numerous casualties in the event of an attack.
3. **Western culture as a target:** Terrorist groups such as IS specifically target symbols of Western culture and the liberal way of life in their attacks. Concerts by international pop stars represent Western entertainment culture, which is rejected outright by extremist groups. From the terrorists' perspective, an attack on such a mega-concert is therefore a unique opportunity to demonstrate the Islamist rejection of Western values.
4. **Past attacks at similar events:** The attack on the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester in 2017 is considered a blueprint for Islamist terrorist attacks on mass events. Concerts are preferred targets for terrorists primarily due to their symbolic significance and their ability to attract large crowds.

## 4.12 Reconfiguration of IS as a global jihadist organization

The United Nations recently warned of a growing threat of attacks in Europe, particularly from the Afghan branch of the jihadist militia Islamic State (IS). The franchise-affiliated Islamic State Province of Khorasan (ISPK) poses "*the greatest external terrorist threat*" to Europe, the head of the UNODC Counter-Terrorism Branch, Vladimir Voronkov, recently warned the UN Security Council.<sup>45</sup> With regard to the Taylor Swift plot, it remains to be determined whether and, if so, what links there are to the ISPK, although reputable sources now also consider this to be the case.<sup>46</sup> After all, the ISPK claimed responsibility for an attack on a concert hall in a suburb of the Russian capital Moscow in March, in which 145 people were killed.<sup>47</sup>

## 4.13 Narratives as part of the strategy

The anti-Western victim-justification and revenge narrative is an essential basis for the revitalization of Islamist terrorism. This is first and foremost about a fundamental hatred of Western symbols of our liberal way of life, in this case the pop singer Taylor Swift. In this case, she stands for supposed decadence and alleged moral decay. In addition, the enormous significance of the victim and revenge narrative remains. The current conflict situation around Gaza in particular is being exploited in Islamist propaganda and framed as a justification for violence against infidels. This recently became apparent when IS claimed responsibility for the terrorist knife attack in Solingen, alluding to "*revenge for Palestine*".<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. UN Warns IS Afghanistan Branch Growing in Strength, in: The Defense Post, August 9, 2024, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2024/08/09/islamic-state-afghanistan-growing/> (accessed September 4, 2024).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. How IS-K group linked to Taylor Swift terror plot is increasing in strength and influence, in: Sky news, <https://news.sky.com/story/how-is-k-group-linked-to-taylor-swift-terror-plot-is-increasing-in-strength-and-influence-13206097> (accessed September 3, 2024); [https://www.isdglobal.org/digital\\_dispatches/one-click-away-foiled-plot-targeting-taylor-swift-concert-highlights-minors-access-to-terrorist-content-online/](https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/one-click-away-foiled-plot-targeting-taylor-swift-concert-highlights-minors-access-to-terrorist-content-online/) (accessed September 4, 2024).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. UN warns: Risk of attacks in Europe from IS offshoots growing, in: Kurier.at, August 8, 2024, <https://kurier.at/politik/ausland/taylor-swift-is-isis-islamischer-staat-islamismus-terror-anschlag-wien/402934229>. A case-based analysis of the development of and threat from the ISPK by Nicolas Stockhammer/Colin P. Clarke: Learning from Islamic State-Khorasan Province's Recent Plots, in: Lawfare, August 11, 2024, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/learning-from-islamic-state-khorasan-province-s-recent-plots> (accessed on September 3, 2024).

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Islamic State claims Solingen knife attack for itself, in: n-tv.de, August 25, 2024, <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Islamischer-Staat-reklamiert-Solinger-Messerattentat-fuer-sich-article25180295.html> (accessed on September 3, 2024).

#### 4.14 Transnationalization of jihadism

Transnational terrorism is characterized by transnational networking. This shows the influence of the diaspora. As far as jihadism is concerned, the "Islamic State" (IS) - alongside Al-Qaeda - remains one of the two major jihadist organizations operating worldwide, both now and in the future. IS has a support base in both the "Islamic world" and the "Western world". Jihadism in the 21st century benefits decisively from the developments of rapid globalization, from open borders that are weakly or not at all controlled and - as already explained - from modern means of communication. Its groups and actors exploit both weak or failed statehood (Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia) and liberal European states, which are seen as soft targets. International jihadist organizations have organizational structures such as (micro) cells and recruitment hubs in Islamist milieus in Western, democratic states and are also networked through such milieus with structures in conflict regions such as Africa, the Middle East and the Caucasus. The IS offshoot ISPK in particular has rapidly advanced this cross-border ambition of transnationalization.<sup>49</sup> If the existing suspicion that the ISPK also played a leading inspirational, logistical or tactical role in the planning of the Taylor Swift attack is confirmed, this would be strong evidence for the thesis of the progressive transnationalization of jihadism.

#### 4.15 Nexus of crime and terrorism

The direct connection and causal relationship between crime and terrorism, the communicating milieus and mutual dependencies indicate a lasting benefit for both sides. The term "crime-terror nexus" is a technical term that describes the structural connection between crime and terrorism. It refers to the numerous interactions, collaborations and mutual benefits that can arise between criminal organizations and terrorist groups. Essentially, the crime-terror nexus describes a phenomenon based on the direct connection

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<sup>49</sup> Haroro J. Ingram/ Andrew Mines: From Expeditionary to Inspired: Situating External Operations within the Islamic State's Insurgency Method, ICCT Analysis, November 23, 2023, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/expeditionary-inspired-situating-external-operations-within-islamic-states-insurgency> (accessed September 3, 2024).



(nexus) between (mostly) petty crime, but also organized crime and terrorism as overlapping milieus. This connection, which is particularly noticeable among young jihadists, has become increasingly important worldwide in recent years and represents a serious challenge for the international fight against terrorism. The mutual synergies are particularly relevant here. Areas in which there are clear overlaps and benefits for both sides are those of financing, logistics, recruitment, knowledge transfer and, finally, the aspects of protection and support. The crime-terror nexus is best illustrated by the biographies of young extremists who first came into conflict with the law, later financed their livelihoods through petty crime and finally emerged as terrorists. In the specific case of the Taylor Swift assassination plans, this is the case with 17-year-old Luca K., who was reportedly deeply involved in clan crime and rivalry before he was linked to the attack planning.<sup>50</sup>

#### 4.16 Indiscriminate selection of victims among jihadist groups

The seemingly or actually indiscriminate tactical approach of jihadist groups refers to the selection of targets that are chosen without specific regard to individual identities, affiliations or concrete targets. Instead, these mostly soft targets are deliberately chosen to maximize impact through a strategy of maximizing casualties, fear and chaos. Reduced victim selectivity on the part of the attackers can be described as "indiscriminate mass victimization" (indiscriminate mass victimization). The increased effectiveness ("effort" vs. "yield") of jihadist terrorist attacks results from this simplified approach. Indiscriminate target selection and victimization go hand in hand. The perpetrators target crowded public places and highly frequented locations such as markets, public transportation systems (buses, trains, subways), sports arenas, concert events and urban areas. The rationale behind this is that these places offer the highest potential for mass casualties. The randomness of the victims ensures a far-reaching psychological effect, as the feeling of individual safety is overlaid by fear. Focusing on so-called soft targets, sometimes places with symbolic value such as churches, reinforces this strategy. The seemingly random selection of targets and the choice of low-threshold

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<sup>50</sup> Die Terrorgang: Gewalttätig, verurteilt und leicht zu manipulieren, in: Kurier.at, August 9, 2023, <https://kurier.at/chronik/oesterreich/terror-gang-taylor-swift-wien-beran-luca-anschlag-konzerte-era-tour/402934517> (accessed September 3, 2024).

security environments, such as schools, hotels, shopping centers, tourist destinations and hospitals, make such places the focus of jihadists. The logic behind this: Soft targets are easier to attack and generate greater media attention due to the vulnerability of the victims. The same applies to random attacks by lone perpetrators on pedestrians, guests in cafés or travelers at airports. Despite a general downward trend in suicide attacks in Europe, there is still an increased risk of bombings in densely populated areas, resulting in scenes of chaos and mass casualties. Suicide bombings are a hallmark of indiscriminate attacks, as they typically aim for maximum impact without regard to specific individuals. Such attacks are particularly well suited to stoking widespread fear among the population. In this light, high casualty events become more likely.

Scenes of mass shootings, bombings and vehicle attacks that emphasize the scale of devastation and indiscriminate violence towards victims contribute to the strategy. The strategic aim of such mass casualty attacks is to project an image of ubiquity and unpredictability, suggesting that anyone, anywhere, can be a target of terrorist attacks. Media coverage and propaganda reinforce the idea that no one is safe and that jihadist violence can strike at any time, in any place and against anyone. This randomness is a crucial part of the terror strategy, as it increases fear and disrupts normal life far beyond the immediate consequences of an attack. The potential assassin Beran A. apparently wanted to use a car with a bomb etc. to kill victims indiscriminately, especially in large numbers ("tens of thousands"), who were united by (only) one thing: fans of Taylor Swift.<sup>51</sup>

#### 4.17 Conflict-terror nexus in Europe's neighborhood

In this case, the connection between ethnic roots, migration and integration as well as radicalization must be discussed. Beran A.'s parents came to Austria from North Macedonia (as ethnic Albanians) - a parallel to Kujtim F., the Vienna assassin from All Souls' Eve 2020. This raises the question of the particular conflict situation as well as the connection to

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. CIA: Tens of thousands wanted to kill tens of thousands at Swift concert, in: Faz.net, August 29, 2024, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/taylor-swift-konzert-in-wien-laut-cia-wollten-terroristen-zehntausende-toeten-19949581.html> (accessed August 29, 2024).

Islamism. Islam is the religion with the second largest number of followers in North Macedonia after Christianity (approx. 33% of the total population). Since North Macedonia gained independence in 1991, Salafists have also become increasingly widespread among Muslims. Last but not least, it is also about the local influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, as stated in a study from 2022: "*Today, the presence of political Islam in Macedonia is clear. But it is not public! It also poses a threat to the national identity of the country by creating fears or leading to a conflict between the components of the Macedonian social system.*"<sup>52</sup> Although the Taylor Swift context is less likely to be a case of imported Islamism than one cultivated in the diaspora, the relevance of the ancestral cultural area and the place of origin - at least of the main suspect - must in any case be examined more closely as the investigation progresses. Especially with regard to local networks in Austria and possible links to Salafist preachers or other radicalization boosters from the Balkan region.

#### 4.18 Business cycle of stochastic terrorism

Stochastic terrorism (*more likely in the sense of "the more hate messages and angry comments circulate online, the more likely it is that a person will make the associated violent fantasies a reality"*) describes the disparagement of certain groups spread by the media and digitally with the aim of inciting acts of violence against members of these groups.<sup>53</sup> Jihadist groups primarily attack and denigrate people of other faiths and non-believers verbally and threaten them with attacks that are often justified as retaliation for suffering and oppression, and even extermination. This group also includes the Israeli state and the "Jews", who are declared in the propaganda to be one of the "main enemies" of Muslims and slandered in connection with conspiracy theories, among other things.

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. The Muslim Brotherhood in North Macedonia, in: Mena Researchcenter, February 4, 2022, <https://www.mena-researchcenter.org/de/die-muslimbruderschaft-in-nordmazedonien/> (accessed August 20, 2024).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Mario S. Staller/Swen Koerner/Thomas Kron: Stochastic Violence and Stochastic Terrorism as Phenomena of a Digitalized World, in: Thomas-Gabriel Rüdiger/Petra Saskia Bayerl (eds.): Handbuch Cyberkriminalologie 2, Wiesbaden: Springer 2023, pp. 165-188.

Even low-threshold radical messages from influencer preachers and Salafist role models on relevant platforms such as Tik Tok or YouTube can trigger a turn to extremist-motivated violence. This relates in particular to content that contains elements of Islamist or Salafist beliefs and can ultimately incite violent radicalized individuals to commit acts of terrorism.<sup>54</sup> In this respect, the path from hate commentary to an act of terrorism is becoming ever shorter. Based on the available evidence, this case shows signs of stochastic violent connectivity. The mere indication that several suspects are likely to have radicalized themselves on relevant social media and the fact that an exchange took place on encrypted messenger services and the rather short-term planning of the act point to a stochastic element. However, the gradual change in the main suspect's appearance, which was not merely external, to become a jihadist along the lines of Kujtim F. speaks against this.

#### 4.19 Return of small cell tactics within IS

Small cell terrorists usually act autonomously and generally have no direct connection to larger terrorist networks or the structures behind them, which makes it difficult for security authorities to recognize and prevent their activities in advance. IS has long relied on small networks in Western Europe that operate effectively and "strike out" on their own - with IS confessing after the fact. The trend that the temporary weakening of IS has temporarily promoted the development of using such attrition tactics to stabilize the West. This small cell tactic was probably perfected by the ISPK offshoot. In December 2023, the authorities in Austria and Germany arrested members of the ISPK who had allegedly planned attacks on Cologne Cathedral and St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, among others.<sup>55</sup> Since 2020, the ISPK has repeatedly attempted to carry out terrorist attacks in Europe.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Stochastic terrorism: From hate commentary to assassination, September 12, 2023, <https://hateaid.org/stochastischer-terrorismus/> (accessed on August 29, 2024).

<sup>55</sup> See Nicolas Stockhammer/Colin P. Clarke: Learning from Islamic State-Khorasan Province's Recent Plots, in: Lawfare, August 11, 2024, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/learning-from-islamic-state-khorasan-province-s-recent-plots> (accessed on September 3, 2024).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Petter Nesser / Wassim Nasr: The Threat Matrix Facing the Paris Olympics, CTC Sentinel, June 2024, pp. 1-16, [https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/CTC-SENTINEL-062024\\_cover-article.pdf](https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/CTC-SENTINEL-062024_cover-article.pdf) (accessed on September 4, 2024).

Most of the characteristics mentioned above appear to be becoming more consistent in Austria and Western Europe. For example, low-level terrorism by small cells and radicalized individual perpetrators remains an increased threat, especially in the sense that religious targets or large concerts and mass events in general are increasingly being targeted by radical Islamists. The Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, which triggered an escalation of violence in the Middle East that is being gratefully received by Islamist propagandists, is certainly a driver of the current development. This is also evident in IS's current letter of confession following the knife attack in Solingen, in which reference is made to the events in Gaza and the attack is stylized as a kind of revenge attack on the part of the attacker.<sup>57</sup> The past year and a half has shown that, alongside Germany, Austria has also become a massive target of IS terrorism. In particular, the IS offshoot ISPK from the Afghan province of Khorasan has been trying for some time to generate a kind of unique selling point for itself in Europe under the guidance of Germany. North Rhine-Westphalia was long regarded as the offshoot's virtual headquarters, from where terror scenarios in Germany, Belgium, France and Austria were and possibly still are planned.

## 5 Conclusion

The free and democratic basic order must be protected from its enemies. It stands for our freedom, for democracy and the rule of law. It enables us to live in an open, pluralistic society. That is why all forms of extremism must be combated. At present, Islamist terrorism is the main threat to our liberal way of life and the institutions that guarantee it. The new anti-Semitism in Europe is a particular cause for concern, especially as it is also a case of "imported" Islamist anti-Semitism.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Terror expert Stockhammer: "Austria has been massively targeted by IS terror", in: Salzburger Nachrichten, August 25, 2024, <https://www.sn.at/politik/weltpolitik/terrorexperte-stockhammer-oesterreich-visier-is-terrors-163990210> (accessed on September 4, 2024).

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Gustav Gustenau/Florian Hartleb (eds.): Antisemitismus auf dem Vormarsch. Neue ideologische Dynamiken, Baden-Baden 2024.

The recent past shows that the concrete threat of Islamist terrorist attacks is on the rise in this country. In June 2023, three suspects aged 14, 17 and 20 were arrested for planning an attack on the Pride parade in Vienna. They had apparently sympathized with IS and wanted to use the mass event with around 300,000 participants for a terrorist attack. In September 2023, a 16-year-old drove to Vienna Central Station to stab passers-by indiscriminately. At the last moment, the teenager turned back without having achieved anything.<sup>59</sup> On December 7, 2023, the Upper Austrian State Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism arrested a 16-year-old near Steyr. The Austrian with Turkish roots had posted plans to attack a synagogue in Vienna online and had obtained money to do so.<sup>60</sup> Around New Year's Eve 2023/24, the Austrian security authorities were able to thwart a terrorist attack on St. Stephen's Cathedral.<sup>61</sup> The near-attackers, who were slightly older than the average Islamist currently under arrest, were part of an ISPK Islamist cell structure. The suspects involved in the attempted Swift concert terror scenario fit seamlessly into the profile of young Islamists. They are all united not only by their sympathy for a murderous ideology, but also by their young age and migration background. For a long time, "deceptive calm" was the best way to describe how to deal with a subcutaneously existing, generally heightened Islamist threat.<sup>62</sup>

The attempted terrorist attack scenario surrounding the Taylor Swift concerts in Vienna at the beginning of August 2024 and the subsequent cancellation have triggered a worldwide media response and an intense debate on how to counter violent Islamist extremism with the available means of the rule of law. Extremism and terrorism research is faced with the difficult task of analyzing such cases on the basis of openly accessible information and drawing conclusions about possible future scenarios and how to prevent them. The characteristics

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. aborted terror plan. 16-year-old wanted suicide bombing, in: Puls 24, September 20, 2023, <https://www.puls24.at/news/chronik/abgeblasener-terror-plan-16-jaehriger-wollte-selbstmordattentat/308424> (accessed on September 4, 2024).

<sup>60</sup> Cf. 16-year-old arrested in Upper Austria for terror plans, in: Der Standard.at, December 11, 2023, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000199050/16-jaehriger-in-oberoesterreich-wegen-terrorplaenen-festgenommen> (accessed September 4, 2024).

<sup>61</sup> Terror threat: Drones and police officers from the federal states protect New Year's Eve trail, in: Kurier.at, December 29, 2023, <https://kurier.at/chronik/wien/terror-gefahr-in-wien-wie-sicher-ist-silvester/402723328>

<sup>62</sup> See Nicolas Stockhammer: Trügerische Ruhe. Der Anschlag von Wien und die terroristische Bedrohung in Europa, Vienna 2023.

identified above provide an analytical basis on which comprehensive counter-strategies must be derived.

The thwarted Taylor Swift concert plot results in **key recommendations** based on the trend analysis presented:

- **More target group orientation and offender profile adequacy in counter-terrorism and extremism prevention measures**

The trend towards ever younger radicalized teenagers currently seems unstoppable. The radicalization of this category mostly takes place online, coupled with a generally real-world component. In addition, young people are currently turning to extremist ideologies and narratives more quickly and without lengthy processes. There are also isolated indications that the inhibition threshold for terrorist violence may occasionally be lower among adolescents than among people who have passed their teenage years. Peter R. Neumann, for example, correctly states that of the "*around sixty jihadist (sic!) suspects arrested in Western Europe in the last ten months, two thirds were teenagers - in some cases even very young teenagers*".<sup>63</sup> The internet-savvy Generation Z has successively taken over the stage of Islamist-motivated terrorism, as the evidence of relevant terrorist attacks since 2015 suggests. Similarly, DIY terrorism in the context of low-level attacks, predominantly committed by self-radicalized individual perpetrators or smaller cells, has occupied a dominant position for some time. The assassin profile is therefore in a state of continuous change, with the aforementioned constants providing the framework.

Relevant research may therefore need to realign itself and take a closer look at the sharp increase in case constellations with the outlined characteristics of the Taylor Swift terror plot. Perhaps even the area of research that supports the prevention of extremism and deals with radicalization needs to be fundamentally reconsidered. There is a suspicion that too much focus has been placed on past cases, but that hardly any useful criteria have been developed

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Peter R. Neumann: 5 points on combating terrorism, Substack channel "The terror situation", August 31, 2024, <https://prneumann.substack.com/p/5-punkte-zur-terrorismusbekämpfung> (accessed September 4, 2024).

to prevent or at least better understand future constellations. The radicalization of Generation Z must be viewed completely differently from that of the 9/11 attackers or the gangster jihadists responsible for the Bataclan attacks. In the absence of such an update, there is no need to start with possible deradicalization. For the longest time, teenagers, especially those under the age of 15, were not necessarily the focus of the security authorities and were therefore less likely to be classified as Islamist threats. There also needs to be an open debate about Islamism and the violent radicalization context that leads to Islamist-motivated terrorism. As Germany has shown as a warning example (e.g. the recent attacks in Mannheim, Solingen and Munich in 2024)<sup>64</sup>, the increasing threat of Islamist terrorism should no longer be taboo.

*The security authorities are now required to integrate this new attacker and radicalization profile into their portfolio of measures without blinkers or delay and to develop procedures tailored to this category or adapt existing ones accordingly.*

- **More effective measures against Islamist messages and extremist propaganda in the virtual space**

The importance of social media in the radicalization of Generation Z youth like Beran A. underscores the growing challenge of monitoring and combating extremist content online. This has triggered intensive discussions in German-speaking countries about the need for better regulation of platforms such as Tik Tok, YouTube and Instagram, where extremist content - sometimes openly, but usually in low-threshold packaging - can be placed and disseminated.

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<sup>64</sup> See "Solingen and Mannheim: Is the great terror coming back to Germany?", Bayerischer Rundfunk (September 5, 2024), <https://www.ardmediathek.de/video/possoch-klaert/solingen-und-mannheim-kommt-der-grosse-terror-zurueck-nachdeutschland/br/Y3JpZDovL2JyLmRIL2Jyb2FkY2FzdFNjaGVkdWxIU2xvdC80NzhiYWewOS00YTc4LTQ2NDktODU2MC00MWI0Y2ZkNzBINjA> (accessed September 6, 2024). In general: Nicolas Stockhammer: Das Morden geht weiter, in: Der Pragmaticus (November 2, 2023), <https://www.derpragmaticus.com/r/terroranschlag> (accessed on September 6, 2024); also Paul Schlieffsteiner/Florian Hartleb: Jihadist Terror with a Fatal Outcome. A comparative case study on attacks in Austria and Germany, in: SIAK-Journal. Zeitschrift für Polizeiwissenschaft und polizeiliche Praxis, Sicherheitsakademie (SIAK) im österreichischen Innenministerium, International Edition, 2023, pp. 49-67.



*For this reason, the operators of such platforms must be made even more accountable by means of a pan-European coordinated initiative to remove any form of content that contradicts the integrative fundamental and constitutional values of liberal European democracies from the internet as quickly as possible. This can be done, for example, by controlling or adapting relevant algorithms.*

In view of the current challenges faced by the Austrian security authorities in dealing with extremists suspected of terrorism, the situation is currently difficult to assess. Due in particular to the lack of legal powers to monitor communications on messenger service applications such as Signal or internet telephones, the competent security authorities are currently blind in at least one eye and simply dependent on the goodwill of friendly foreign intelligence services to monitor the relevant communications in closed networks through penetration and infiltration. In this light, the messenger service "Telegram" in particular is currently being criticized, especially since in the casuistry of recent years this platform has increasingly been misappropriated by young extremists for relevant planning and coordination. Terrorism and the use of digital peer-to-peer encrypted exchange platforms are closely linked, as terrorist organizations and extremist groups, but also radicalized individuals, are increasingly using the internet to plan and propagate their terrorist activities and recruit supporters. With regard to the specific planning and communication of the suspects in the run-up to the Taylor Swift terror scenario, it is also clear that Telegram and other analog messenger services were definitely relevant in this case.<sup>65</sup>

*Consequently, the legislator must make legal improvements here and quickly create an option that is compatible with fundamental rights in order to close an existing security gap with drastic consequences for the fight against terrorism in Austria. In any case, concerns about possible consequences of misuse must be taken into account.*

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. references according to the US Secret Service report, <https://orf.at/stories/3365988/>, in: ORF, August 8, 2024, (accessed on September 4, 2024).

- **Demanding responsibility from Muslim Institution the fight against Islamist extremism**

All Institutions of all denominations and political persuasions, also Muslims, have a democratic responsibility to actively contribute to the fight against extremism. This can be done by promoting tolerance, counteracting radicalization within the religious community and working constructively with the authorities. For example, recognized Muslim religious leaders and scholars could make it clear that extremist interpretations are not in line with the core teachings of Islam. Members of Muslim communities could act as mentors to support young people at risk of radicalization and keep them away from extremist influences. This could be done through youth groups, sports activities or educational programs. In addition, early intervention is indicated in the prevention of radicalization. This includes recognizing and reporting radicalization. The immediate environment of those affected, i.e. families and friends, but also communities (e.g. sports clubs) could play a key role by recognizing early signs of radicalization in individuals and reporting them to the relevant authorities. These measures could help to prevent the Islamist radicalization of young people and, ultimately, potential terrorism.

As the legal representative of a large proportion of Muslims in Austria, the IGGÖ has a special responsibility in this regard.

Ruşen Timur Aksak, media advisor and former press spokesman for the Islamic Religious Community in Austria (IGGÖ), calls for a *"firewall against Islamism"* in a guest commentary in "Falter": *"Why are there actually no demonstrations against Islamism? Why are there no civil society alliances seeking to combat this form of totalitarianism? Why is there no democratic firewall against it, perhaps even led by fellow Muslims themselves? Seriously. I've been asking myself this since the plans for an attack on the Taylor Swift concerts in Vienna became public. Why do we as a society find this topic so difficult? You would think that an immigration country like Austria would be the one that can least afford to look the other way when it comes to problems that affect basic coexistence. We don't look the other way when it comes to right-wing extremist threats. That's where civil society comes together. That's where anti-*

*democratic tendencies are shown the red card. Or are demonstrations by small groups of Identitarians a greater danger than the specific threat of terrorism from Islamists?"*<sup>66</sup> This statement reflects the thoroughly sobering findings of an expert with relevant knowledge of the structures and connections within the local Islamic religious community.

- **Measures against hate preachers in radical mosques, Salafist influencer preachers and consistent action against Political Islam**

1. Regular media reports about segregated parallel societies with their own judiciary, about hate preachers and radicalization tendencies significantly shape the public image of the mosque.<sup>67</sup> The case of the radical Meidling "Tewhid Mosque", for example, which has repeatedly made headlines in the context of Salafist preachers such as the former Imam Muhammed P. (he is said to have maintained contacts with radical Muslims in Bosnia and a Bosnian training camp for mujahideen) and as the preferred place of worship of later (attempted/suspected) terrorist actors (Kujtim F., Luka K. etc.), more than underlines this relevance in the local context.<sup>68</sup>

*The main aim is to revoke the "professional license" of hate preachers and prevent them from agitating in the vicinity of mosques. In order to have a proactive effect here, it must be ensured that preachers who come to Austria act in accordance with the constitution and ideally also have an integrative effect. Religious institutions have a duty to be inclusive and to work for the observance of Austrian laws and values. The activities of institutions that promote extremism must be prohibited without exception.*

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<sup>66</sup> Ruşen Timur Aksak: *Brandmauer gegen Islamismus*, guest commentary, in: Falter 33/24, 2024, p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. hate preachers targeted by the authorities, in: Spiegel TV, July 15, 2023, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/gesellschaft/salafistischer-imam-hassprediger-im-visier-der-behoerden-spiegel-tv-a-cf7538ab-5a88-4db8-bb5c-535111c526f5> (accessed on September 8, 2024); Sechs Monate bedingt nach Hasspredigt in Wiener Moschee, in: Kurier.at, February 11, 2021, <https://kurier.at/chronik/wien/sechs-monate-bedingt-nach-hasspredigt-in-wiener-moschee/401186032>; Radikale Imame rufen in deutschen Moscheen zu Hass auf, in: focus.de, November 16, 2018, [https://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/verfassungsschutz-machtlos-radikale-imame-rufen-in-deutschen-moscheen-zu-hass-auf\\_id\\_9918828.html](https://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/verfassungsschutz-machtlos-radikale-imame-rufen-in-deutschen-moscheen-zu-hass-auf_id_9918828.html) (accessed on September 4, 2024).

<sup>68</sup> Cf. How should Germany deal with young radicals?, in: Focus.de, August 25, 2024, [https://www.focus.de/experts/nach-anschlag-von-solingen-wie-soll-deutschland-mit-jungen-radikalen-umgehen\\_id\\_260217955.html](https://www.focus.de/experts/nach-anschlag-von-solingen-wie-soll-deutschland-mit-jungen-radikalen-umgehen_id_260217955.html) (accessed September 4, 2024).

2. Political Islamism (also known as legalistic Islam) strives to replace the existing secular democratic order with a system based on Islamist ideas, thereby also pursuing a state-political goal.<sup>69</sup> The often-circulated message that the majority of society is against Muslims and that Muslims should not integrate themselves represents the first stage of radicalization. Political Islam is the preliminary stage, both a flow heater and a fire accelerator for violent Islamism. Political Islam has once again become the focus of public and political debate in Austria as a result of the thwarted terrorist attack in the run-up to the Taylor Swift concerts.<sup>70</sup> Several political parties are calling for tougher measures against political Islam organizations such as Muslim Brotherhood, Milli Görüs and ATIB, including a possible ban.

Awareness of the challenge posed by political Islam also seems to be growing in Germany at the moment. A few months ago, the CDU-CSU parliamentary group tabled a specific list of demands on political Islam in the German Bundestag, which was rejected: *"No one should call for our democracy to be abolished and replaced by Sharia law or a caliphate. Anyone who publicly calls for an Islamist theocracy, Sharia law or a caliphate in Germany must expect severe penalties:*

- *possible prison sentences for people who incite against our democracy*
- *Loss of citizenship in the case of dual citizenship*
- *Loss of the right of residence*
- *No more money from the state for anti-democratic Islamist asylum seekers*
- *Prohibition of activity, including through bans on associations."*<sup>71</sup>

The future Austrian government is therefore urgently required to enact the necessary legal provisions in this regard.

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. now fundamentally Thomas Jäger/Ralph Thiele (eds.): Handbook of Political Islam in Europe, Cham 2024.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. ÖVP urges package of measures against political Islam, in: Der Standard.at, August 13, 2024, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000232203/oevp-draengt-auf-massnahmenpaket-gegen-politischen-islam> (accessed September 4, 2024).

<sup>71</sup> CDU Germany, 2024, <https://www.cdu.de/artikel/klares-nein-zum-politischen-islam> (accessed September 4, 2024).

## 6 About the authors

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