RESOLVE
N E T W O R K

Research on Islamist Extremism in the Swiss Context:

ASSESSING AND ANALYZING A SENSITIVE PHENOMENON

Miryam Eser Davolio

ABSTRACT

Researching and addressing "radicalization" within smaller European countries is particularly challenging. Not only is it incumbent that research and approaches take into account analyses, findings, strategies, and measures from other contexts, they must also work to craft their own national understanding of the extent and nature of the phenomena and approaches to address it. This chapter discusses the author's reflections on experiences conducting two studies on violent jihadist[1] radicalization in Switzerland at a time of heightened concern over potential jihadist violent extremist threats.[2] In doing so, the chapter focuses on the ethical and methodological challenges specific to the Swiss context, as well as issues impacting research on violent extremism more generally. The two studies—both of which the author served a role in—additionally navigated the tension inherent in researching a topic of heightened public interest and media coverage.

Given the context and the focus on jihadist extremism specifically, the research processes themselves carried risks, including the risk of inadvertently enhancing social polarization and Islamophobia in the very act of examining a phenomenon focused on minority populations in a small country. Methodological challenges additionally complicated the research, but also provided opportunities brought on by the diverse backgrounds of the researchers in terms of their disciplines, the nature of their work on violent extremism, and their sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds (from German-, French- and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland). The researchers also faced demanding timelines, undertaking research during a time when concerns over a possible terrorist attack were heightened, placing additional pressure on the researchers in charge of making decisions focused on both handling emergency and ethical concerns in an accurate, institutionally prescribed manner and addressing societal concerns pragmatically. Additional issues specific to the Swiss context included: (1) the challenge of managing and safeguarding data and anonymity in a country with a relatively small population; and (2) gaining and maintaining access to the trust of research participants.

This chapter reflects on approaches to mitigate these challenges and examines the research process in retrospect from the perspective of the author. It concludes with recommendations based on the research projects focused on mitigating potential risks, particularly those to research participants and their associated demographic populations, when researching violent extremism and other sensitive topics in the Swiss context. While the chapter focuses on research conducted on violent extremism in Switzerland, its insights may have utility in addressing similar challenges elsewhere.

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1   The author uses the term "jihadist" to define violent extremist groups, including the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, that define themselves and their ideologies as Islamic and advocate for violent "jihad." The term "jihadist" can carry multiple meanings and does not necessarily connote violence or violent extremism.

2   Miryam Eser Davolio, Elisa Banfi, Milena Gehrig, Brigitta Gerber, and Burim Luzha, *Hintergründe jihadistischer Radikalisierung in der Schweiz. Eine explorative Studie mit Empfehlungen für Prävention und Intervention [Background to jihadist radicalization in Switzerland: an exploratory study with recommendations for prevention and intervention]* (Zürich: ZHAW, 2015) https://digitalcollection.zhaw.ch/handle/11475/17733; Miryam Eser Davolio, Mallory Schneuwly Purdie, Fabien Merz, Johannes Saal, and Ayesha Rether, *Research report: Updated review and developments in jihadist radicalisation in Switzerland – updated version of an exploratory study on prevention and intervention* (Zürich: ZHAW, 2019), https://www.zhaw.ch/no_cache/de/forschung/forschungsdatenbank/projektdetail/projektid/2895/.

Introduction

In 2014, Swiss government officials publicly announced that a small number of individuals—fifteen suspected, but only five confirmed—had left Switzerland to fight in the Syrian conflict.[3] This announcement brought to the forefront awareness of violent jihadist radicalization in the small European country as well as questions of how to address it. While its neighbors—France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Germany—had experienced comparatively higher flows of foreign fighters and actual attacks, Switzerland had, to date, been spared from large-scale attacks. The question of what had rendered Switzerland unique in this respect, yet still seemingly affected by violent jihadist radicalization trends, remained a mystery. Conducting exploratory research examining the phenomenon of violent jihadist radicalization in Switzerland, therefore, required a twofold approach: (1) collecting existing information in Switzerland and similar states and (2) conducting original field research and analyzing new data in Switzerland to draw a holistic picture of the phenomenon.

The Swiss Federal Department of Home Affairs and the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs commissioned a study in 2015[4] on the backgrounds of radicalization and a follow-up study in 2019,[5] focusing on potential methods of prevention of violent jihadist extremism in prisons. The research was commissioned based on concerns that radicalization could spread in prisons, which was happening in other European contexts.[6] I had the opportunity to be part of both research teams because of my similar work on prevention and intervention in previous research on right-wing extremism. These prior studies on right-wing extremism focused on the societal conditions that enabled and promoted extremist attitudes and violence and pointed to the importance of empowering civil society in responding to extremism risks among youth. They were also based on an understanding of extremism as a phenomenon that may arise in populations with indifference to implicit, or even explicit, xenophobia and/or extremist ideologies.

Conducting similar research on jihadist violent extremism, however, carried with it additional implications and difficulties. First, given the political context and heightened focus on jihadist violent extremism at the time, our research inevitably carried the risk of inadvertently placing blame on Muslim minorities in Switzerland for violent extremism and, in the process, potentially exacerbating Islamophobia. In addition, heightened public interest in violent extremism and polemicized public discourse increased the difficulty of gaining access to and building trust with research participants. Switzerland's small but diverse and multilingual population posed further challenges associated with conducting research on sensitive security issues in small, multicultural constituencies.

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3   See: Daniel Glaus and Lorenzo Vidino, "Swiss Foreign Fighters Active in Syria," *CTC Sentinel*, no. 7 (July 2014), https://ctc.usma.edu/swiss-foreign-fighters-active-in-syria/.

4   Eser Davolio et al., *Background to jihadist radicalization in Switzerland*, 2015.

5   Eser Davolio et al., *Updated review and developments in jihadist radicalisation in Switzerland*, 2019.

6   Elizabeth Mulcahy, Shannon Merrington, and Peter Bell, "The Radicalisation of Prison Inmates: A Review of the Literature on Recruitment, Religion and Prisoner Vulnerability," *Journal of Human Security* 9, no. 1 (2013): 4-14, http://www.librelloph.com/journalofhumansecurity/article/view/johs-9.1.4/html; Humberto M. Trujillo et al., "Radicalization in Prisons? Field Research in 25 Spanish Prisons," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 4 (2009): 558-579, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550903153134.

This chapter discusses these challenges and the ethical and methodological implications they gave rise to in these two violent jihadism-focused research projects. Contextualized within dynamics ongoing in Switzerland at the time of the projects, the chapter presents the author's own reflections on the methods the research teams adopted to address those challenges and important considerations related to researcher positionality and background, as well as related to risks in conducting research on sensitive and publicized topics within a small population. finally, the chapter provides recommendations for researchers undertaking research on violent extremism in similar contexts or facing similar issues.

Context: radicalization and terrorism in Switzerland

Unlike its European neighbors, Switzerland has yet to experience a large-scale extremist attack. For a long time after 9/11, despite attacks in neighboring countries, Swiss authorities did not appear to perceive a need for the urgent implementation of terrorism prevention measures.[7] Attitudes towards the prevention of right-wing extremism were seemingly similar. In the absence of attacks or virulent manifestations, public pressure for political reactions and prevention measures related to violent extremism and terrorism can be low. The following section provides a brief snapshot of Switzerland's experience with jihadist violent extremism, mainly related to flows of foreign fighters to fight in Syria and Iraq with the so-called Islamic State, the majority of which occurred in 2013 and 2014.[8] The section also provides and overview of the government's response around the same time in adopting measures to prevent and address radicalization, spurred in part by incidents of radicalization and terrorism in neighboring countries.

The flow of foreign fighters

Despite its limited history of terrorist attacks, Switzerland has not been immune to the influence of jihadist violent extremist groups, including the so-called Islamic State. As of May 2019, seventy-seven (known) Swiss citizens had traveled to fight with violent extremist groups in Iraq and Syria.[9] Although this number is much lower than in France, Belgium, and Austria (see Table 1), the statistics are often presented without contextualizing the number relative to characteristics and the size of the populations from whence they came.

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7   See: Darius Farman and Fabien Merz, "Das Engagement muslimischer Organisationen in der Schweiz gegen gewaltbereiten Extremismus," in *Bulletin 2017 zur Schweizerischen Sicherheitspolitik*, eds., Christian Nünlist and Oliver Thränert (Zürich: Center for Security Studies, ETH Zürich, 2017), 33–57.

8   Johannes Saal, "The Case of Jihadi Foreign Fighters from Switzerland," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, January 9, 2020, https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/case-jihadi-foreign-fighters-switzerland-24759.

9   See: Fabian Merz, *Switzerland and Jihadist Foreign Fighters* (Zürich: Center for Security Studies, ETH Zürich, 2016), https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse199-EN.pdf.

Table 1 : A comparison of jihadist-motivated travelers from selected European countries[10]

Country	Jihadist-motivated travelers (Syria/Iraq since 2011)	Population (in millions)	Ratio to population (per million)	Muslim population (in millions)[11]	Ratio to Muslim population (per 10,000)
Belgium	413	11.4	36.2	0.9	4.6
Germany	1050	82.8	12.7	5.0	2.1
France	1910	67.1	28.5	5.7	3.4
Italy	125	60.6	2.1	2.9	0.4
Austria	300	8.8	34.1	0.6	5.0
Switzerland	77	8.4	9.2	0.5	1.5

Cases of Swiss foreign fighters appeared mainly in urban centers and their metro areas, but the cases were not necessarily indicative of a trend existing only within Swiss borders.[12] One of our research team members, Johannes Saal[13] conducted research that indicated that Swiss foreign fighters were primarily in contact with jihadist groups or recruiters in countries with shared languages, i.e., radicalized individuals in the French-speaking area of Switzerland were connected to France and Belgium, while those in German-speaking areas of Switzerland were connected to Germany and Austria, and those in the Italian-speaking cantons were connected to Italy. This paints a picture of networks with strong connections abroad, rather than domestic networking clusters across Swiss language barriers.

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10   Fabien Merz and Johannes Saal, "Backgrounds to Jihadist Radicalisation in Switzerland," in *Research report: Updated review and developments in jihadist radicalisation in Switzerland – updated version of an exploratory study on prevention and intervention*, edited by Miryam Eser Davolio, Mallory Schneuwly Purdie, Fabien Merz, Johannes Saal, and Ayesha Rether (Zürich: ZHAW, 2019), 7–19, https://www.zhaw.ch/no_cache/de/forschung/forschungsdatenbank/projektdetail/projektid/2895/.

11   Conrad Hackett, "5 Facts about the Muslim Population in Europe," *Pew Research Center*, November 29, 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/29/5-facts-about-the-muslim-population-in-europe/.

12   For a map detailing the regional distribution of jihadist-radicalized persons in Switzerland, see Figure 2 in Merz and Saal, "Backgrounds to Jihadist Radicalisation in Switzerland," 14.

13   Johannes Saal, "Das Sozialkapital Schweizer Jihadisten," *Schweizer Kirchen-Zeitung* 24 (2017): 313–314, http://g-cm.ch/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/skz_24-2017-gzd.pdf.

The proportion of foreign travelers in relation to the population was greater in the French-speaking region of Lake Geneva; whereas the proportion of foreign fighters in relation to the Muslim population was largest in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino.

The government's response

While media interest in the Islamic State was high from 2015–2018, public awareness of the degree of radicalization risk in Switzerland was not. The implementation of an official national action plan took some time to come to fruition, as measures such as an extension of the Federal Intelligence Service law [14]had to pass through an extensive democratic process.[15] Moreover, Switzerland's decentralized federalist system limited the central government's capacity to lead the efforts to address radicalization, the conviction of returnees from Syria, for example, takes place at the canton-level.[16]

In November 2017 Switzerland finally announced its National Plan to Prevent and Counter Radicalization and Violent Extremism.[17] The delay in the government's response, however, benefited to some extent from the experiences of other European countries—Denmark,[18] Germany,[19] and the Netherlands[20]—that had previously created and implemented plans and projects aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism.[21] While Switzerland's nationwide plan was delayed, several municipal administrations had

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14   The proposal of the new Federal Intelligence Service law included enhanced counterterrorism and diffusion of weapons of mass destruction methods by extended surveillance (monitoring email, erecting surveillance systems, or installing listening devices abroad).

15   The campaign started in spring 2016; popular vote took place on September 25, 2016. The extension of the law of the Federal Intelligence Service was accepted by 65.9 percent of the voters, and the new law took effect on September 1, 2017.

16   There are twenty-six Swiss cantons, each with legislative, judicial and executive competence. See: Julia Slater, "Managing the police in the 21st century," *Swiss Info*, April 17, 2013, https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/partners-in-crime-fighting_managing-the-police-in-the-21st-century/35508618; Simon Bradley, "Minister vaunts Swiss model to halt extremism," *Swiss Info*, April 8, 2016, https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/radicalisation_foreign-minister-vaunts-swiss-model-to-halt-extremism/42075460.

17   The National Action Plan aims to create practicable pre-conditions for preventing and countering radicalization and violent extremism in all its forms, while at the same time respecting fundamental and human rights. In order to prevent radicalization and violent extremism, the aim is to achieve institutionalized interdisciplinary cooperation, for example in the form of regular roundtables. This strategy, developed at a local level (canton, region, city) and supported at a political level, is supposed to define the networks of relevant players and the common course of action in prevention, in particular in preventing radicalization and violent extremism. Interdisciplinary networks are also seen as important to support the reintegration of an individual and to coordinate the measures required to achieve disengagement. A rapid and coordinated exchange of information and experiences (vertical and horizontal) between the various players is supposed to be guaranteed. Suitable instruments shall be made available and work process models defined that allow the process of radicalization towards violent extremism to be recognized and prevented. Civil society's commitment to and active participation in initiatives and projects are assessed as essential for the prevention work. See: "National Action Plan to Prevent and Counter Radicalisation and Violent Extremism," *Swiss Security Network*, December 4, 2017, https://www.newsd.admin.ch/newsd/message/attachments/50703.pdf.

18   See: Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen, *An Introduction to the Danish Approach to Countering and Preventing Extremism and Radicalization* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2015), https://www.ft.dk/samling/20151/almdel/reu/bilag/248/1617692.pdf.

19   Strategie der Bundesregierung zur Extremismusprävention und Demokratieförderung [Strategy of the German Federal Government for the Prevention of Extremism and the Advancement of Democracy], 2016, https://www.bmfsfj.de/blob/109002/5278d578ff8c59a19d-4bef9fe4c034d8/strategie-der-bundesregierung-zur-extremismuspraevention-und-demokratiefoerderung-data.pdf.

20   "The Netherlands comprehensive action programme to combat jihadism," Operational Data Portal, January 8, 2016, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/44369.

21   See: "Radikalisierung und gewaltbereiter Extremismus - Bericht zur Studienreise nach Vilvoorde," Fachstelle für Integrationsfragen, Direktion der Justiz und des Innern, Kanton Zürich, accessed February 10, 2022, https://www.zh.ch/de/direktion-der-justiz-und-des-

already taken steps to implement prevention and intervention measures in their own jurisdictions. These included the establishment of counseling services, community policing, designated school personnel, and the establishment of other positions intended to identify and address signs of radicalization.

In this context, in 2015, our first study on violent jihadist radicalization in Switzerland was commissioned by the federal government.

The research: preparation and design

PREPARATION

Conducting research projects on jihadist radicalization through the Department of Social Work at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences was considered unusual at the time, as the topic is generally considered to fall under the domain of security studies. Our department's previous experience researching the prevention of right-wing extremism in Switzerland and Liechtenstein and its possible parallels to prevention and intervention measures regarding jihadist extremism, as well as the interdisciplinary and inter-university composition of the team,[22] were key factors in the commissioning of the study and selection of our research team. Just as in our previous research on right-wing extremism, our approach to researching jihadist extremism focused on community development and civil society strategies, given that findings suggest those areas have proven beneficial in the prevention of right-wing extremism.[23]

We began the first study commissioned by the Federal Department of Home Affairs in 2015 to explore jihadist radicalization in Switzerland. While the prospect of cooperation with Federal Police and the Federal Intelligence Service was new to most of the team, the agencies' unique knowledge of and experience with suspected and convicted extremists was fundamental to our analysis of radicalization. On the other side of the spectrum, and also essential to our research, were the service providers in direct contact with individuals at risk of radicalization—youth workers, schools, Muslim organizations, and counseling services—who were also interested in prevention and intervention methods.

The Swiss State Secretariat for Migration, the Directorate of International Law of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, and the Service of Combating Racism in the Federal Department of Home Affairs initiated and contracted the study and, together with the Federal Police, their agents attended regular meetings with our research team and gave access to anonymized data from the Federal Intelligence Service.

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innern/fachstelle-integration.html.

[22] In the first research project (Eser Davolio et al., *Background to jihadist radicalization in Switzerland*) researchers from the University of Geneva, Lausanne, and Zurich were involved. In the second research project (Eser Davolio et al., *Updated review and developments in jihadist radicalisation in Switzerland*) researchers from the University of Lucerne and Fribourg as well as the Center for Security Studies of the ETH Zurich were involved.

[23] Miryam Eser Davolio, Matthias Drilling, and Monique Eckmann, "Local Communities Facing Right-Wing Extremism: Evaluating Intervention Approaches," in *Right-Wing Extremism in Switzerland – National and International Perspectives*, ed. Marcel Alexander Niggli (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2009); Miryam Eser Davolio, "Early detection and prevention of extremism through community development programmes," in The Fragility of Order: Essays in Honour of K.P.S. Gill, ed. Ajaj Sahni (New Delhi: Kautilya Books, 2019), 177–92.

Our team was consequently able to analyze this data. The government's motivation in commissioning our research was the urgent need for further evidence-based knowledge to understand risk factors in the Swiss context and define and direct prevention and intervention measures. Due to the urgency of the situation, the government asked us to develop and conclude the research in six months, which limited its scope to an explorative study with some specific insights.

At the time we began the study, the government had established a "terrorist tracking" taskforce called TETRA,[24] composed of federal and cantonal agencies with weekly meetings to exchange information, discuss current cases, and coordinate joint strategies. A few Swiss cantons had established local programs, such as specialist units of the police force intended to build mutual trust between counseling services, schools, Muslim organizations, and the police. To cover the entire country, the government had to raise awareness of the need to implement necessary prevention measures in other cantons. Switzerland's federal system limits government power to establish measures in the cantons. Our research results and recommendations enabled these actors to define adequate prevention measures, promote them, and convince hesitant cantonal authorities to invest in them.

Research design

Study implementation first required determining a) if key stakeholders involved in prevention were aware of current developments related to extremism, b) if they knew of the factors involved in radicalization processes and extremist dynamics, and c) if they were ready to cooperate with other stakeholders to exchange information and develop common strategies.

The first explorative study in 2015[25] had two focal points: (1) at the individual level, persons at risk of radicalization; and (2) at the collective level, institutional reactions to the phenomenon of radicalization. The study asked:

1. What contexts and individual psychosocial and socio-demographic backgrounds influence jihadist radicalization of adolescents and young adults in Switzerland?

2. What resources does civil society have at its disposal for preventing and intervening in jihadist radicalization? In what manner are teachers, social workers, and Muslim organizations confronted with young radicalized individuals and how do they respond? To what extent is there a need for counseling and case management? What are appropriate intervention approaches and how can they be applied to different situations and contexts?

The methodological approach consisted of four parts:

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24 TETRA members consisted of the Federal Intelligence Service (FIS), Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland (OAG), Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), Swiss Border Guard (SBG), State Secretariat for Migration (SEM), Federal Office of Justice (FOJ), Conference of Cantonal Police, Commanders of Switzerland (CCPCS), and its affiliated National Police Command (FSTP).

25 Eser Davolio et al., *Background to jihadist radicalization in Switzerland*.

1. Analyzing the state of research on prevention and intervention through desk research and interviews with experts, ten Swiss and eleven from other European countries;

2. Analyzing a grid of socio-demographic and psychosocial data of foreign fighters from the Federal Intelligence Service (FIS) (N=66) and interviewing a returned foreign fighter;

3. Interviewing Muslim organizations and youth (N=33) to understand the relevance of jihadist radicalization and compiling their experiences and reactions; and

4. An online study of the effects of extremist propaganda and fake Facebook profiles. In addition, the FIS distributed letters to parents of the foreign fighters (translated into their presumed mother tongue) asking them to contact us, but with no success.

The second exploratory study in 2019 primarily focused on an updated review of the preceding study and questions related to new findings about radicalization processes in Switzerland, in order to determine the effect of prevention measures. The goal was also to publish new recommendations for prevention, intervention, and reintegration based on the knowledge acquired. The study focused on three main research questions:

1. What are the individual, psychological, social, and group-specific demographic backgrounds of the young people and adults who are categorized as radicalized jihadists?

2. What preventative and risk-increasing factors and contextual conditions in the prison system must be taken into account with regards to jihadist radicalization?

3. Which prevention and intervention strategies have proven effective for both bridge-building and extremism specialist units?

The research team selected the following approaches to answer these questions in this exploratory study:

1. A quantitative analysis of anonymized data from selected cases of radicalization (N=130) provided by the FIS.[26] Its defined variables were divided into four groups: (1) socio-demographic infor-

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26 The data was provided to the research team on the base of a data delivery contract as part of the implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP) to Prevent and Combat Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (see: "National Action Plan to Prevent and Counter Radicalisation and Violent Extremism," *Swiss Security Network*). "The sample includes 130 people in total. It is a selection by the FIS of cases that have been prioritized over the past ten years. The selected persons met the following criteria: Their place of residence was or had been in Switzerland and they could be assigned to the jihadist spectrum—if they had exercised violence or at least legitimized it ideologically in the context of their ideological and religious beliefs. The persons selected by the FIS were mainly "high-risk persons." The only exceptions were a few older cases where the term was not yet used. The FIS uses the term "high-risk persons" to designate persons who "present an increased risk to Switzerland's internal and external security." The FIS uses a combination of precise criteria where a specific connection to violence is the decisive factor. However, the group called "high-risk" does not only include violent extremists but also includes supporters and propagandists of jihadist groups. This high-risk group also includes persons who have come

mation, such as age, gender, relationship status, origin, place of residence, level of education, and occupation; (2) social context and personality including family issues, drug use, psychological abnormalities, criminality, and experience of violence; (3) radicalization factors, such as peer groups, the internet, missionary activities, and contact with Salafist preachers; and (4) jihadist activities with particular emphasis on jihadist-motivated travel.

2. Structured interviews[27] in the prison system and with experts (N=13) regarding the challenges presented by the presence of radicalized inmates for day-to-day management, combining the views of the directors and heads of security. The interviews' second focus was the role of imams and chaplains of the institutions, who are seen as potential agents of radicalization by some and as agents of prevention by others, with the aim to outline how they see their position and role in the institutions.

3. Structured interviews on determining means of prevention and intervention with extremism specialist units[28] (N=12), case analysis of consultations regarding suspected jihadist radicalization (N=47), and interviews with bridge-building specialist units of the police[29] (N=7) regarding the units' existing resources, areas of activity, and networking, as well as their prevention strategies for mosques and Muslim organizations.

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to the attention of the FIS due to jihadist-motivated travel as well as persons who have been identified due to indications of radicalization, whether through online activities or specific patterns of behavior." Eser Davolio et al., *Updated review and developments in jihadist radicalisation in Switzerland*, 10.

27　To meet these objectives, semi-structured interviews with five categories of people were carried out: 1) prison directors (N=6); 2) heads of security (N=2); 3) Christian chaplains (N=2); 4) Imams or Muslim chaplains (N=4); 5) external experts, such as criminologists and federal prosecutors (N=3). The sample of persons interviewed was compiled using a multifaceted approach. First, the prison directors dealing with the incarceration of detainees suspected of violating §122 of the Systematic Compilation of Federal Legislation or §260 of the Swiss Criminal Code were contacted. Second, interlocutors provided the names of prisons faced with radicalization. Third, the prison imams and Muslim chaplains were contacted. Finally, fifteen persons performing various roles in eighteen establishments in seven different cantons (three in the French-speaking part and four in the German-speaking part) were interviewed. Institutions dealing with pre-sentencing detention, custody on remand, short custodial sentences, and execution of sentences were represented. Most of the establishments accommodate only men (twelve), some have a section for women (three), two are only for women, and one for minors.

28　A total of twelve interviews were conducted with all ten extremism specialist units (Geneva, Lausanne, Biel, city of Bern, Basel Stadt, Aargau, city of Zurich, canton of Zurich, Winterthur, and Lugano) on the existing personnel resources, the integration of the specialist unit, target groups, their consultation and casework activities, and their intervention strategies.

29　A total of seven interviews (five verbal and two written) were conducted with the existing specialist units in the cantons of Zurich, Bern, and Fribourg as well as in the cities of Zurich and Winterthur. The new specialist unit in the canton of Schwyz was also interviewed by telephone, but they had not yet obtained experience. The new bridge-building units in Lugano and Baden operating in an urban environment and the coordination unit for religious issues in the canton of Basel Stadt were not included. The content of the interviews was recorded with written notes and was analytically evaluated. The text and the interview quotes were sent to the participants for review.

Diversity

Ensuring inclusion: diverse stakeholders in the research process

As Erich Marks points out,[30] effective prevention strategies are generally based on the interdisciplinary cooperation of research, practice, and political institutions. This triangle functions interdependently and requires a well-functioning exchange of information in order to develop collective understanding and adoption of preventative strategies. Switzerland's relatively small population size of about eight million actually made it easier to facilitate personal contact between key actors in research, practice, and administration and informal exchanges in committees and working groups strengthened our team's triangulated cooperation. Still, in a small country without much focused on violent extremism prevention and intervention in the past, local expertise proved difficult to come by. As such, intervention strategies developed elsewhere had to be adapted to our local context.

The goal of both our exploratory studies was to analyze the impact of backgrounds and risk factors on the individual and societal level of jihadist radicalization in the Swiss context, including its connections to neighboring countries. The research team collaborated with numerous prosecuting authorities (FIS, Federal Police, cantonal police, community police, penal system), the prevention arena (intervention, counselling centers, schools, and youth work), and Muslim organizations (umbrella organizations, Islamic and ethnic communities, and mosques).[31] We interviewed them not only for their expertise but also to determine their level of cooperation in shared efforts to address radicalization. In the years following the 2015 study, the research team witnessed a reciprocal promotion of trust and common ground, especially with regard to Muslim organizations, in the areas of policing, education, and youth work.

Of course, increased threat and stress levels increase the difficulty of improving cooperation. Cantons that had already improved their contacts with prevention actors and Muslim organizations could build on an established foundation, whereas other cantons had to start from scratch and were skeptical of the prospect of finding reliable partners from within the Muslim community. Therefore, the research project functioned as a foundation for further cooperation between actors, helping to establish mutual understanding of their positions. The Muslim organizations were in a uniquely difficult position. While seeking to identify and address potentially signs of radicalization, they were simultaneously targets of the media, which at times portrayed them as facilitators of extremism. We found that, Muslim organizations preferred to exclude individuals with radical views from their organizations to avoid negative media coverage–in doing so, relinquishing the avenues for continued contact.

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30   Erich Marks, "Zur Eröffnung des 19. Deutschen Präventionstags in Karlsruhe," in *Prävention braucht Praxis, Politik und Wissenschaft. Ausgewählte Beiträge des 19. Deutschen Präventionstages 2014*, eds. Erich Marks and Wiebke Steffen (Mönchengladbach: Forum Verlag Godesberg, 2015), 43–52.

31   Islam is not an officially recognized religion in Switzerland. Mosques are generally organized along ethnic lines as cultural associations, mosque associations, or foundations. They are mostly funded through donations and contributions from active members of the community—hence often find themselves in difficult financial situations—and much of their work, like youth work, for example, is done on a voluntary basis.

This is particularly important in light of ongoing (both then and now) notably Islamophobic political actions in Switzerland, including the anti-minaret initiative,[32] put to the vote and into law in a 2009 referendum,[33] and a referendum to ban burkas in public in the Italian-speaking canton of Tessin, which was passed in 2013 and came into force in 2016.[34] In 2021, the Swiss electorate voted to outlaw face-covering headgear, de facto banning wearing burkas at a constitutional level.[35] Furthermore, there are latent and blatant Islamophobic prejudices in the society, as for example toward Muslim applicants (with Arab names) which can lead to discrimination.[36]

CONSTRUCTING COOPERATION: DIVERSITY ON RESEARCH TEAMS

Conducting research with a wide spectrum of actors required a diverse research team. Our team included sociologists, ethnologists, anthropologists, historians, and researchers in the educational sciences, Islamic studies, and social work. Their areas of expertise included extremism, violence, Islam, prevention strategies, and community development. This diversity facilitated the establishment of cooperation among a broad range of stakeholders but also necessitated internal discussions to establish a common understanding of the project and its goals.

Our research strategy was to synthesize various stakeholder experiences with forms of jihadist radicalization. For this reason, it was important to involve not only researchers with expertise in Islam, but also those from a Muslim background (three out of our thirteen total researchers came from a Muslim background). Doing so was fundamental not only in facilitating access to Muslim stakeholders, but in providing important perspective and insight in team discussions. We had to address majority and minority views, the "othering" of Muslim communities, dominance and power, and the impact of geopolitical issues on cultural identities. Differences in experience, interpretations, and analysis that were reflected in our research team allowed us to gain deeper insights on these issues.

ADDRESSING A PARTICULARITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

Conducting any type of nationally representative research in Switzerland can be complicated given its cultural and linguistic complexity and requires a similarly diverse research team. Linguistically, Switzerland is comprised primarily of four language regions: German, French, Italian, and Romansh. Our study focused on three of the four language regions and therefore required local researchers from each of these regions who were both fluent in the respective language and knowledgeable about local con-

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32 The anti-minaret-initiative was put to vote in 2009 and approved by the majority of the Swiss population. It bans the construction of any minarets in Switzerland.

33 The initiative sparked discussion in Arab countries and was officially condemned by the Arab League in November 2010. See: "Swiss Minaret Ban Violates Muslim Rights: Arabs," *al Arabiya*, December 1, 2009, https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/12/01/92878.html.

34 Adam Taylor, "In Switzerland, a 'burqa ban' has consequences—for soccer fans," *The Washington Post*, August 8, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/08/08/switzerland-burqa-ban-has-consequences-soccer-fans/.

35 Rim-Sarah Alouane, "Where Face Masks Are Required but Burqas Are Banned," *Foreign Policy*, March 10, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/10/switzerland-europe-burqa-ban-referendum-coronavirus-face-masks-egerkinger-komitee/.

36 Eva Zschirnt and Rosita Fibbi, *Do Swiss Citizens of Immigrant Origin Face Hiring Discrimination in the Labour Market?* (Neuchâtel: National Center of Competence in Research, 2019), https://doc.rero.ch/record/324131/files/nccr_WP20-Zschirnt-Fibbi_2019.pdf.

texts and networks. While this was necessary for carrying out interviews among a diverse linguistic and cultural population, the benefits of the team's linguistic diversity extended beyond the interviews. For example, regional team diversity raised awareness about different perspectives on social problems of young Muslims in disadvantaged quarters depending on actual regional experiences.

Challenges

ANONYMIZATION OF DATA IN A SMALL COUNTRY

Due in part to Switzerland's population, the small number of returnees to interview (N=16) presented a challenge. It would have been easy for journalists to deduce the subjects of presumably anonymous interviews and other data. This challenge made data protection and anonymization quite difficult. We sought to anonymize data to protect our testimonial sources through leaving out specific information when describing cases. However, the limited data pool made protecting subjects' anonymity even more challenging. For example, at the time of our research, there had only been three[37] cases of Swiss women foreign fighters who had travelled to Syria but reporting on their radicalization pathways and narratives without mentioning gender proved difficult. Discussions of gender and identity, including gendered dimensions of radicalization processes, were also essential to their narrative.

Additional demographic or personal identifying factors proved so distinctive and rare within the data that even if age, nationality, or location go unmentioned, the subjects could still likely be identified.[38] Yet still, these characteristics—and those of each individual—were integral to explaining their decisions to travel to fight in violent extremist conflicts in Iraq and Syria—which, while some might perceive to be irrational, were considered by them as entirely rational and necessary.[39]

Given these issues, we attempted to describe individual decision-making processes without any reference to the subject's identity. Given the small population size, we encountered similar issues in protecting the individual identities of professionals (for example street workers or prison chaplains) and experts who desired to stay anonymous. In those cases, however, we found it easier to conceal identities through omitting or obscuring particular details that were not deemed necessary in understanding their decision-making processes.

PRESENTING FINDINGS AND CREATING TENSIONS

Conducting research on preventing extremism in the social work field requires special attention to the challenges of relationship-building, the role of social workers as client advocates, and the level of interest (of both the general society and the relevant security forces) in prevention. The extent and success

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37   See: Eser Davolio et al., *Background to jihadist radicalization in Switzerland.*

38   For example identifying as LGBTQI+ or Kurdish.

39   See: Miryam Eser Davolio, "Hintergründe jihadistischer Radikalisierung in der Schweiz – eine Fallstudie," in *Radikalisierung und extremistische Gewalt: Perspektiven aus dem Fall- und Bedrohungsmanagement*, eds. Jens Hoffmann and Nils Böckler (Frankfurt: Verlag für Polizei und Wissenschaft, 2017), 155–165.

of these efforts depended on the established cooperation between social work and police forces and their past experiences. This differs considerably between Swiss cantons. For example, such cooperation is common in the German-speaking area of Switzerland, based on reciprocal trust formed by experience and similar goals of youth intervention, protection, and reintegration efforts.

In contrast, we found that distance and alienation between social workers and the police are often greater in the French-speaking areas of Switzerland, which impacted our research. We ran into an issue related to this divide during our interviews with social workers in a French-speaking area about information that related to a specific subset of Muslim youth. While we attempted to present findings related to this information in a careful, non-alarmist, and fair manner without altering the words of the interview subjects, some police officers who read our report felt anxious because of the information presented. They even pressured the social workers to hand over the names of the adolescents mentioned, which the social workers refused to do. At that moment, it felt like our research project led to increasing animosity between relevant actors in the field. Fortunately, the later establishment of an interdisciplinary prevention unit in the canton of Geneva as a platform for exchange and coordinated interventions enabled actors to avoid and move beyond such confrontations and enhance shared understanding and trust, strengthening prevention measures in the area.

Research on highly sensitive and securitized topics can inadvertently cause tensions and put a target on the back of practitioners. In the aforementioned case, the social workers' view that the adolescents did not represent an imminent risk to society and their fear of losing trust with them conflicted with the police's interest in identifying potentially dangerous individuals. While the researchers attempted establish a relationship of trust with the practitioners and present the findings without stoking alarmism, this information triggered apprehension among security forces. Even if the research report was anonymized, the security forces understood that the findings referred to dynamics within their territory (canton) and they tried to force the practitioners to give up the names of â€œdangerousâ€ individuals - but without success. This conflict underscores the importance of cooperation and trust among practitioners and security officials as opposed to animosity and forced relationships. In cantons with established cooperation between practitioners and special security units, there has been greater understanding of practitioners professional ethics and the necessary discretion. Personal level relationships can be beneficial in this regard, as establishing common ground can ease the process of sharing information, understanding the importance of confidentiality, and making decisions judiciously by weighing the possible risks and consequences of interventions together.

Interpretation issues and publicity

When we published our results of the second research project in 2019, one of the findings triggered a complicated chain of events. Among other results, we discovered that approximately 40 percent of the radicalized jihadist individuals with residence in Switzerland over the previous decade (N=130) lived on welfare. The term "welfare" here encompasses welfare benefits, unemployment assistance or disability insurance, and refugee assistance. We could not determine if this percentage was due to the effects of detention and difficulties of associated with social reintegration, radicalization and withdrawal from soci-

ety, or the loss of a job and social disintegration. However, after our report was published, some media outlets highlighted this statistic, some even using alarming headlines that neglected the nuances within our report.[40] A direct result of this generalization of complex data was discussions that, among other things, caused the political party *Legaticinesi* in the national parliament to propose a reduction of social assistance to radicalized migrants[41]—which at last did not gain the support of other parties and did not pass.

Jihadist radicalization is a sensitive matter with a high level of public interest, and the publication of research on the phenomenon carries with it the risk of unintended consequences. Here, the risk of stigmatizing the Muslim minority in Switzerland deserves special attention. Exploring individual and social risk factors for jihadist radicalization in Muslim communities involves a potential risk of reinforcing Islamophobia, thereby increasing the isolation of the Muslim community and damaging the possibilities for cooperation and joint intervention with them.

Research findings must always be transparent. Even a well-differentiated and reliable scientific publication cannot guarantee that readers will comprehend the presented information in the intended way. Researchers must acknowledge their responsibility in disseminating politically sensitive information to the public to ensure they do not harm the communities that are the focus of their research. This includes an increased attention to possible collateral damage, power dynamics, context and transparency as well as attention to research limitations and caveats.

Preventing violent extremism through research: personal reflections

In 2015, the pressure to create a scientific basis of understanding the rising phenomenon of jihadist radicalization, and the urgency to develop instruments to combat and limit Islamist extremism, was very high. The research team felt the expectationsâ€"not only from government partners and funders but also from key actors (e.g., cities considered to be radicalization hotspots, police forces, social workers dealing with radicalized persons) and the media. The team was also affected by the emotionalization of the issue in the general population, who were worried about possible terror attacks. At the time, we did not know if the situation would calm down or worsen, deteriorating into a greater crescendo of violence and undermining our sense of security and civil community.

These events also weighed on the shoulders of key actors participating as experts in our research project. As authorities in public safety, they had to work much harder and far exceeded their normal workload. It was common to communicate outside of office hours and to get an immediate answer, as all stakehold-

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40 "Aiuti sociali al 40% dei jihadisti," *Corriere del Ticino*, June 13, 2019, https://avenue.argusdatainsights.ch/kundenartikel_archiv/2019-06/1053061/73821753.pdf.

41 Answer of the Swiss government to the request of reducing social welfare for radicalized individuals (in Italian): The Federal Assembly—The Swiss National Parliament Official Bulletin, National Council Special Session, May 4, 2021, https://www.parlament.ch/it/ratsbetrieb/amtliches-bulletin/amtliches-bulletin-die-verhandlungen?SubjectId=52848.

ers worked intensively. Heavy time pressures burdened the research project—we had only six months and we knew that the presentations of the findings and recommendations would engender great public interest and media resonance. This increased our motivation but also exacerbated the pressure to satisfy the expectations of government funders and the public.

Furthermore, we wished to contribute constructively to methods of dealing with radicalization in congruence with the ethical guidelines of social work: to build bridges and include minorities in joint action, rather than promoting repression and exclusion (as in repressive interventions of the police forces, the exclusion of radicalizing youngsters in youth work, etc.) or blaming groups or individuals for their actions. Researchers tend to adopt impartiality towards divergent (political) positions and objectify the research topic.[42] This topic was not only of concern to social scientists but also of prime interest to security forces, the administrative bureaucracy, and politicians charged with reducing and preventing Swiss extremism. All were simultaneously concerned and engaged in seeking to better understand the phenomenon of radicalization to improve interventions.

Of course, we desired to identify and better comprehend the causes of radicalization—and here are three important tasks of researchers in this regard:

1. Avoid convenient simplifications,

2. Seek to broaden public discussion around issues associated with radicalization, and

3. Situate findings and public discussion on solid scientific grounds.

When I recall this period, it was a unique situation for all the experts working on the front line. Since Lorenzo Vidino's 2013 report on jihadist radicalization in Switzerland,[43] there had been a lack of research on this topic, which enhanced the spotlight on our own research project, even though we were newcomers in the field of jihadist radicalization. In this space of discovery and anxiety, the research team invested all their energy into the project.

Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter afforded a rare opportunity to reflect on the specificity of the Swiss context and its implications for research on extremism and strategies against it—and a quite singular chance to disclose such self-referential findings to an interested international public, hopefully of help to other researchers. The chapter discussed the conditions of engaging in research on jihadist radicalization in Switzerland in 2015

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42   Such challenges have been reflected particularly in the dispute between Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel in France about the origins of and reasons for radicalization. See: Cécile Daumas, "Olivier Roy et Gilles Kepel querelle française sur le jihadisme," *Liberation*, April 14, 2016, https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/04/14/olivier-roy-et-gilles-kepel-francaise-sur-le-jihadisme_1446226.

43   Lorenzo Vidino, *Jihadist Radicalization in Switzerland* (Zurich: Center for Security Studies (CSS), 2013, https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CH_radicalization_report.pdf.

and again in 2019, including the implications for research design in countries with small populations and challenges and considerations based on the author's experience, including the following:

- Research on jihadist radicalization in small nations must be based on both international state-of-the-art research and evidence-based experience in prevention and intervention. On the other hand, it must consider the nation-specific context of radicalization, possible historical and/or political grievances, and the resources and conditions for establishing prevention measures.

- The small, federalist nature of a country like Switzerland can limit both research and measures addressing radicalization. It can also offer special access or direct contact, networking, and proximity to key stakeholders. Furthermore, a small population facilitates relationship building and overview of the key actors working on extremism.

- Research projects in federalist states require efforts to include all cantons and their stakeholders, which are not concerned to the same extent by the threat of extremism.

- Research on the community development approach to extremism is focused on involving all concerned stakeholders. The collaborative involvement of stakeholders contributes to a sensitizing process and helps to detect possible obstacles for cooperation, such as a lack of trust and other factors to be taken into account for joint interventions.

- Most of the aforementioned ethical questions and obstacles may emerge regardless of a given nation's size. But the protection of privacy in a small data set in a context where the subjects are known in the mass media presents an extremely demanding challenge. Other small nations, such as the Netherlands, Belgium, and Austria, likely encounter similar research challenges—on extremism and social research in general.

- The presence of more than one national language can influence the approach to the topic or to the field of practice. Researchers often gravitate toward researching in their own language but can benefit from research in areas or regions in other languages as well.

- A research team should not only represent multilingual abilities but also different disciplinary and cultural backgrounds (especially ethnic or religions backgrounds in order to provide insight and balance the research process).

- Dissemination of the research results in mass media must be handled with sensitivity. The communication of findings on jihadist radicalization enjoys a high level of public attention, and information can easily be distorted or misinterpreted, creating or enabling Islamophobia.

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About the Author

Miryam Eser Davolio is a researcher and lecturer at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences, Department of Social Work. She focuses on jihadist and right-wing extremism as well as migration, integration, and social work.

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