

**FROM CALIPHATE
TO PRISON:
GERMANY'S
APPROACH TO
REHABILITATING
ISLAMIC STATE
RETURNEES**

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Executive Summary

- The rise of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has led to the departure of tens of thousands of individuals to Syria and Iraq since 2011, including at least 1,150 men, women, and minors from Germany. More than 40 percent of those who left have returned to Germany, either voluntarily or as a result of repatriation missions by the German government. Simultaneously, a mid-double-digit number of German citizens or people with a connection to Germany remain in the Kurdish-administered camps and prisons in Northeast Syria. In Germany, these developments have led to an increase in the number of convicted offenders in the area of Islamist terrorism and thus to comprehensive adjustments at federal and state level. These include concepts and regulations for dealing with extremism, targeted (further) training of specialists, and increased cooperation with civil society and governmental exit counseling organizations.
- The profiles and experiences of returnees from Syria and Iraq pose particular challenges for the actors involved. These include, for example, military training and participation in combat (especially for men); experience in handling weapons of war and suicide belts (including for women); psychological and physical stress, among other things due to the (long-term) stay in a war zone; and the simultaneous return of children who were (at least partially) socialized according to ISIS ideology.
- As of 2025, the wave of departures and returns has significantly leveled off and many prison sentences as well as probation and guidance supervision orders for returnees who have already been sentenced have expired or will expire in the coming months and years. Hence, this publication presents existing findings regarding the rehabilitation of returnees so far. To this end, the author conducted and analyzed 22 interviews with governmental and civil society actors within and outside the prison system in Bavaria, Berlin, Hamburg, Hesse, Lower Saxony, and North Rhine-Westphalia as well as one interview with a female returnee.
- The main challenges in dealing with returnees include assessing and dealing with security risks; false compliance; difficulties in processing the crime; mental health issues (e.g., dealing with trauma); contact with the children of returnees; transition management; and, after release from prison, the coordination of a large number of different governmental and civil society actors, mutual mistrust (especially between returnees and representatives of the justice system and security agencies), and stigmatization as “terrorists” or “ISIS returnees.” When dealing with returnees, the dominance of security and sanctions measures continues to make rehabilitation during and after detention more challenging. Although only individual cases of recidivism have been reported so far, interviewees also emphasized that the success of social reintegration after release from prison could only be assessed in the long term and that there was still little experience, especially with regard to female returnees.
- While concepts and approaches to rehabilitating offenders do not differentiate between men and women, there are important gender-related differences. These include inexperience in assessing and dealing with the risks posed by female returnees; difficulties in coming to terms with their offence experienced by some female returnees who, for example, refer to their role as a “mere” housewife and mother within ISIS; processing of trauma, including sexualized violence (in some cases, experiences of violence predate departure); and the organization of contact with children during and after imprisonment or the role as a single mother of several children.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report as well as existing research, the author makes the following recommendations (a detailed explanation of the individual recommendations can be found at the end of this publication on pages 28–31):

- Further expand cooperation, including trust-building and information exchange between different stakeholders and departments, and regulate it, where possible, by law.
- Strengthen cross-departmental cooperation in transition management and conceptualize probation with rehabilitation plans as a reward system.
- Ensure long-term funding for civil society actors.
- Strengthen further education and training, including for prison and probation staff, on the topics of extremism in general and dealing with returnees in particular.
- Strengthen expertise on mental health in rehabilitation and exit work.
- Strengthen research on the role of gender in radicalization, rehabilitation, and disengagement processes, as well as on the topic of extremist offenders and probation or social reintegration after release from prison, and adapt approaches accordingly, including promoting research on the role of gender in radicalization and exit processes, rehabilitation in the prison system, and transition management and probation services for extremist offenders.
- Ensure long-term support for children and other relatives of returnees.
- Evaluate approaches to dealing with returnees.
- Strengthen external communication of German approaches and public relations work on the topic of rehabilitation.
- Repatriate the remaining German nationals from Northeast Syria.

About CEP

The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) is an international, non-profit, and non-partisan international policy organization formed to combat the growing threat from extremist ideologies. One area of focus for CEP is the analysis of responses to (returned) foreign terrorist fighters, including their prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

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CEP Resources

- CEP policy paper by Sofia Koller & Iva Mrvová, "A Lawless Space – Alleged ISIS-affiliated Men and Boys from Germany Detained in Northeastern Syria," May 2025: https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2025-05/CEP%20Policy%20Paper_%20A%20Lawless%20Space_May%202025%20FINAL.pdf
- CEP policy paper by Sofia Koller, "Six Years Later. A Status Update on the Prosecution of Female Returnees in Germany," February 2024: https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2024-02/CEP%20Update%20Prosecution%20of%20Female%20Returnees%20in%20Germany_February%202024.pdf
- CEP webinar with Sofia Koller, Helmut Grauer, and Sonka Mehner, "Sechs Jahre Strafverfolgung von IS-Rückkehrerinnen in Deutschland," November 2, 2023: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLMgGq1NecSpaPDjxlUSl4gOskPgmGniRT>
- CEP blog series by Sofia Koller, "ISIS Women in Court," February – September 2023: <https://www.counterextremism.com/newsfreetags/isis-women-court>
- CEP webinar with Sofia Koller, Dr. Sharon Weill, and Constance Wilhelm-Olympiou, "A Sisyphean Task? Prosecuting Returnees from Syria and Iraq in France," May 2, 2023: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UQZkZoY6pw&list=PLMgGq1NecSpYvhzx9fihRuPwi3QEF6Px1&pp=iAQB>
- CEP policy paper by Sofia Koller, "Prosecution of Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in France," March 2023: https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2023-03/CEP%20Policy%20Paper_Prosecution%20of%20Returnees%20from%20Syria%20and%20Iraq%20in%20France_March%202023.pdf
- CEP webinar with Sofia Koller and Tanya Mehra, "A New Momentum – The Repatriation and Prosecution of Alleged European ISIS Affiliates from Northeast Syria In 2022," December 6, 2022: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6z7CSb70rvs&list=PLMgGq1NecSpaPcO_IsUTcuaaieNXvNZha&pp=iAQB
- CEP webinar with Sofia Koller, Alexandra Lily Kather, and Anne-Clémentine Larroque, "Back from Raqqa: The Prosecution of Returnees in Germany and France," October 17, 2022: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLMgGq1NecSpbPXEsZj4WhlrOlqkqGY-IR>
- CEP policy paper by Sofia Koller, "Prosecution of German Women Returning from Syria and Iraq," October 2022: <https://www.counterextremism.com/de/content/update-prosecution-german-women-returning-syria-and-iraq>
- CEP report by Dr. Robert Pelzer and Mika Moeller, "Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Released Islamist Extremists in Germany," August 2020: https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Report_Rehabilitation%20and%20Reintegration_Aug%202020.pdf

Context

The rise of ISIS has led to the unprecedented mobilization of tens of thousands of people from many different countries. From Western Europe alone, at least 6,600 men, women and minors made their way to Syria and Iraq.¹ German security agencies estimate that 1,150 people—25 percent of whom were women—have left for Syria and Iraq since 2011.² Around 65 percent of those who left are known to have supported ISIS, al-Qaeda, or other terrorist groups. After 2015, there were significantly fewer departures and around 40 percent of those who left have now returned to Germany, including at least 130 women.³ In addition to self-organized returns before and during the fall of the so-called “caliphate”, the German government also repatriated a total of 113 individuals (84 minors, 29 women, and one young man) between 2019 and 2025.⁴

The large number of travelers, returnees,⁵ and terrorist group-supporting individuals led to a significant increase in legal proceedings and convictions in the area of Islamist extremism and terrorism.⁶ In 2021, the German Federal Public Prosecutor at the Federal Court of Justice (GBA) initiated 243 investigations into allegations under Section 129b of the German Criminal Code (StGB) with connection to religiously motivated extremism or took them over from the State Public Prosecutor’s Offices (GenStA).⁷ The GBA initiated 210 investigations relating to international Islamist terrorism in 2022, 465 such investigations in 2023 and 97 such investigations in 2024 (up to September 2024), the vast majority of which were for membership in or support for a terrorist organization abroad (Sections 129a, 129b StGB).⁸ However, the majority of such investigations have been discontinued; for example, in 2021 and 2022, only 21 investigations were brought to trial and 34 defendants were convicted in 24 court proceedings under Section 129b of the StGB.⁹ While the charge of preparation of a serious act of violence endangering the state, which falls under Section 89a of the StGB, also plays a role in the prosecution of offences committed by returnees, the difficulty of proving this crime means that convictions are less frequent. However, there is currently no analysis of the convictions of male and female returnees.¹⁰ According to information provided by the German Federal Government in mid-April 2024, 111 returnees have been convicted, including for preparation of a serious act of violence endangering the state under Section 89a or membership of a terrorist organization abroad under Sections 129a and 129b of the StGB. 119 preliminary proceedings remain pending and 122 proceedings have been provisionally discontinued.¹¹

Overall, the number of detained Islamist extremists within the prison system in Germany has risen since 2014. In March 2020, the Federal Ministry of Justice (BMJ) reported in response to a question in the Bundestag that “the number of convicted offenders with an Islamist background [in Germany] is continuously” increasing.¹² As of June 2018, there were 136 people in custody in connection with Islamist terrorism (77 pre-trial detainees and 59 prisoners). As of June 30, 2023, according to the Federal Ministry of Justice, only 98 people were still in prison on suspicion or conviction in connection with Islamist terrorism, “of which 14 people are or will be released [in 2024] and a further 15 people in the next two years.”¹³ Hence, while there is no official statistic on the number of extremist offenders in Germany with a connection to Syria

1 Cook & Vale 2019, p.36.

2 Deutscher Bundestag (German Parliament) 2024a.

3 Koller 2025.

4 Compilation by the author; for an overview of repatriations by country, see here: <https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/action/resources/global-repatriations-tracker> (October 28, 2025).

5 Returnees is a working term that includes all persons who have left Germany for Syria or Iraq and returned to Germany after a stay of varying lengths. Since in many cases these are people who had joined ISIS and were convicted accordingly, the focus of this analysis is on this subgroup.

6 Pelzer & Moeller 2020.

7 Deutscher Bundestag (German Parliament) 2023a, p.15.

8 Deutscher Bundestag (German Parliament) 2023b; Deutscher Bundestag (German Parliament) 2024b.

9 Deutscher Bundestag (German Parliament) 2023a, p.19.

10 For an overview of convictions of female returnees in Germany, see Koller 2024b.

11 Deutscher Bundestag (German Parliament) 2024a.

12 Only since 2019 have the federal states been reporting to the Federal Ministry of Justice the number of radicalized inmates in connection with Islamist extremism in their prison system as of June of each year; Deutscher Bundestag (German Parliament) 2020.

13 Information provided by the Federal Ministry of Justice, dated April 25, 2024.

or Iraq, the overall number of extremist offenders in connection with Islamist terrorism appears to be declining.

At the same time, the topic of extremism and imprisonment remains highly relevant, and not just in Germany. According to Europol's EU Terrorism Situation & Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2023, "the release of radicalized individuals from prisons [remains a] concern for Member States as [these individuals] can continue actions of proselytism outside prisons and become involved in the preparation of terrorist attacks."¹⁴ For example, In March 2025, ISIS returnee Tarik S. was convicted for having planned an attack on a demonstration of solidarity with Israel in autumn 2023 and sentenced to eight years in prison.¹⁵ The German-Egyptian had already been sentenced to five years in prison after his return from Syria and was actually considered deradicalized after his release. Furthermore, with 30 arrests in connection with "jihadist-terrorist offenses" in 2023, Germany already occupied the third place in the EU after France (93) and Spain (46).¹⁶ The arrests made and charges pressed in connection with Islamist terrorism in 2023 and 2024 confirm this assessment. Examples include a group of Central Asian nationals who allegedly were in contact with the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan to plan attacks¹⁷ or the arrest of a group of minors who allegedly planned an Islamist-motivated terrorist attack inspired by ISIS.¹⁸

While in the first years of the "caliphate", male travelers, male returnees and supporters who remained in Germany were the main concern for criminal prosecution and security agencies, since the territorial and military collapse of ISIS in 2019, the focus has increasingly shifted to dealing with repatriated women and children. As of 2025, it can be assumed that the majority of returnees have already been prosecuted and convicted or the corresponding investigations have been discontinued and the returnee 'wave' has therefore subsided significantly. Furthermore, according to the German government's answer to a parliamentary inquiry in the Bundestag, there have only been isolated departures to Syria and Iraq since 2019.¹⁹ In fact, many prison sentences and guidance supervision orders will expire in the coming months and years.²⁰ At the same time, there are still men, women and minors in Northeast Syria who could return to Germany in the coming years.²¹ Finally, the profiles and experiences of returnees from Syria and Iraq pose particular challenges for the actors involved. Male returnees have often undergone military training and have sometimes been involved in combat.²² Female returnees may also have experience in handling weapons and suicide belts. In addition to the psychological and physical stress caused by long stays in a war zone in many cases, several experiences of loss (e.g., deaths of husbands, children, friends), and life under a totalitarian regime, women may have experienced (sexual) violence in their partnerships. Adding to the complexity of the case, women often return with several children who have grown up (at least in part) in ISIS territory or have been socialized according to ISIS ideology and can therefore be under particular strain. Finally, extraordinary media coverage, both overall and in individual cases of returnees, can lead to particular difficulties in social reintegration.

This raises the question of what findings exist with regard to the rehabilitation in Germany of returnees from Syria and Iraq. So far, the field of research on the topic of dealing with returnees in the prison system has been limited.²³ Therefore, there exists no recent systematic review of the rehabilitation of returnees—especially women—in German prisons. While the topic of Islamist extremism in the prison system has become somewhat less relevant in recent years, the current security policy situation with regard to this phenomenon—from the effects of the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023; the attack by ISKP supporters in Moscow in March 2024 to various foiled attack attempts in Paris in the run-up to the Olympic Games—will probably lead to a renewed increase in political, media and social interest.

¹⁴ Europol 2023, p.23.

¹⁵ Rheinische Post 2025.

¹⁶ TE-SAT 2023, p.28.

¹⁷ GBA (Federal Public Prosecutor) 2024.

¹⁸ Tagesschau 2024.

¹⁹ Deutscher Bundestag (German Parliament) 2024a.

²⁰ Interview with a probation officer in Lower Saxony on February 7, 2024.

²¹ Koller, S., Sallach, C. & Schiele, A. 2022.

²² See e.g. BKA (Federal Criminal Police Office); BfV (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution); HKE (Hessian Information and Competence Centre against Extremism) 2016, pp.29-30 and Koller 2022, p.7.

²³ Examples include Pelzer 2020; Röing 2021 and Neitzert, A. et al. 2021 (with a focus on North Rhine-Westphalia) as well as several articles in Benz & Sotiriadis 2023.

Methodology

The results of this publication are on the one hand based on a study by the International Center for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) in The Hague, which compares approaches to female offenders in the field of Islamist extremism in Belgium, France, Germany, and the Netherlands and for which the author wrote the chapter on Germany.²⁴ In addition, as part of a separate research project of the Counter Extremism Project (CEP) on the prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of male and female returnees, the author conducted further interviews with various governmental and civil society actors inside and outside the prison system in Bavaria, Berlin, Hamburg, Hesse, Lower Saxony, and North Rhine-Westphalia. These are the states with a high number of returnees and which have set up returnee coordinators.²⁵ The interview partners were relevant actors, practitioners and other experts from the fields of law enforcement, prison administration, rehabilitation in the prison system, probation services, exit counseling, returnee coordinators, and security agencies, as well as one female returnee.²⁶ Between March 2023 and April 2024, the author conducted a total of 23 semi-structured interviews²⁷ for this publication and analyzed existing relevant research literature in order to answer the following key questions:

1. What is the experience to date with the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees from Syria and Iraq in Germany?
2. What differences exist regarding the rehabilitation of male and female returnees or extremist offenders?
3. What challenges and good practices exist in the German states?
4. What do these findings mean for dealing with possible future returnees or extremist offenders?
5. What research needs to be carried out with regard to the further development of dealing with re-offenders and extremist offenders?

While each federal state and each correctional facility represent a unique context and for this reason a generalization of the challenges and needs is only possible to a limited extent, it is still possible to derive findings that are relevant for the rehabilitation of returnees as a whole. This publication covers approaches to extremist offenders in Germany in general, as well as an overview of findings on approaches to returnees so far, including risk assessment and management, false compliance, psychological needs, processing the crime and disengagement work, dealing with children of returnees, transition management, probation services and reintegration after release, recidivism and gender-related factors and differences. Based on these findings and previous research results, recommendations were then formulated for policy, practice and research.

All translations of direct quotes are the author's own. She bears full responsibility for any errors or inaccuracies.

24 Mehra, Renard & Herbach 2024a; Koller 2024a.

25 Deutscher Bundestag (German Parliament) 2023c, [p.4](#).

26 The identities of the interview partners are anonymized to varying degrees at their request.

27 One interview was conducted with a female returnee in 2025.

Dealing with extremist offenders in and after prison

Federal structure and decentralized imprisonment

Over the past ten years, the rising number of cases of Islamist-motivated extremism and terrorism has led to important adjustments at federal and state level. In Germany, domestic security and justice are a matter for the federal states, which means that the sixteen states have different systems, programs, and projects, but closely exchange information with each other and at the federal level. This exchange and work with extremist offenders in and after prison²⁸ has been intensified, particularly since the federal government's strategy to prevent extremism and promote democracy released in 2016.²⁹ In addition, the federal states have increased their efforts over the past decade to train prison staff in dealing with extremism and radicalization, to involve external actors with special expertise, and to promote the exchange of lessons learned and good practices.

A key challenge in dealing with extremist offenders is the potential formation of extremist cells during imprisonment or the radicalization of other prisoners. Other European countries (e.g., the Netherlands) have therefore opted for the complete separation of extremist offenders from other prisoners or, as with countries like France, a mixed approach with the possibility to isolate certain extremist offenders.³⁰ In Germany, on the other hand, extremist offenders are distributed among each state's normal prisons, albeit ones with special security areas. In some cases, detainees can be housed in separate units during pretrial detention.³¹ The state-level justice systems usually differentiate between individuals who have been convicted of a terrorist offense (category 1) and individuals who have been convicted of other, non-terrorist offenses but are considered radicalized (category 2). Returnees usually fall into the first category and are often detained with court-imposed conditions—e.g., special security measures for accommodation and transportation, as well as contact restrictions and monitoring of communication. In addition, the prison may apply further restrictive measures, such as prohibiting participation in group activities or prayers, or even isolation.

The decision against separate prisons or units for extremist offenders and in favor of decentralized accommodations with a focus on individual measures has reportedly proven successful.³² This may also be due to the fact that housing extremist offenders and individuals who are susceptible to radicalization together undoubtedly entails risks. However, compared to some other European countries, prisons in Germany are not considered “breeding grounds” for the spread of Islamist ideas per se; radicalization in prisons seems to remain more of a “marginal phenomenon”.³³ In addition, several interviewees emphasized that extremist offenders could be brought closer to “normality” through imprisonment with regular offenders.³⁴ At the same time, “certain accompanying circumstances of imprisonment certainly have the potential to reinforce extremist radicalization.”³⁵ In general, although imprisonment is a “painful, crisis-ridden and existential experience”, it also represents an important opportunity for rehabilitation and disengagement.³⁶ The rehabilitation of offenders during and after imprisonment can be divided into seven phases (see table 2): Pre-trial detention, admission to regular detention, serving the sentence, preparation for release, post-release, (social) reintegration as well as stabilization.³⁷ The central aim of the prison system is resocialization, i.e. prisons have the task of taking measures to help inmates lead a life free of crime after their release.³⁸ It is helpful to keep these different phases and relevant players in mind.

28 In Germany, a prison is usually referred to as JVA (Justizvollzugsanstalt).

29 BMBFSFJ (German Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth) 2016, p.31.

30 Neumann & Basra 2020.

31 Said 2020.

32 Interview with Kai Abraham, head of the prison for women in Berlin on March 26, 2024.

33 Yilmaz 2018, p.33.

34 Interview with a prison employee in Berlin on March 11, 2024.

35 Neitzert et al 2021, p.7.

36 Neuber 2022, p.176; Hatton 2020.

37 See Radicalization Awareness Network; Violence Prevention Network 2020, pp.6-7 and 24-25.

38 Hatton 2020, p.37.

Table 1: Definition of Terms

Rehabilitation: “A process that, once completed, enables people in a democratic society to lead self-determined and responsible lives and no longer hold extremist views that could pose a risk to themselves or society.”³⁹

(Re)integration: The “process of social (e.g. friendships, families or communities) and functional (e.g. housing, employment or health insurance) [re]integration into society.”⁴⁰

Exit work (also tertiary prevention): Measures designed to support an already radicalized person in refraining from extremist-motivated violent acts and turning away from corresponding underlying beliefs. A distinction is often made between a cognitive change (deradicalization, i.e. turning away from extremist attitudes) and a pure change in behavior (disengagement, i.e. turning away from certain extremist behavior patterns).

Extremism: The “holding of extreme political or religious views, often advocating illegal, violent, or other forms of extreme behavior.”⁴¹ Extremism is often considered to be a necessary condition of terrorism.

Terrorism: “The use of violence by a non-state actor to pursue a political end or to intimidate civilians.”⁴² Although there is no universally recognized definition for terrorism as codified through international law, national and international agencies employ workable understandings of terrorism to cooperate meaningfully on counterterrorism efforts.

Rehabilitation in Custody

Individuals suspected or accused of terrorist offenses can be detained without further conditions as soon as an arrest warrant has been issued by an investigating judge (Section 112, 3 StPO, German Code of Criminal Procedure). In custody, the detained individuals first undergo an admission and diagnostic procedure by the prison’s admission or committal department. The German Prison Act (specifically Section 152 StVollzG, Penitentiary Act) continues to form the basis of this approach and the German prison system in general, but has been replaced after the 2008 federalism reform by the state penitentiary laws, which regulate the execution of sentences in the federal states. During this assessment, the so-called enforcement plan is drawn up, which regulates, for example, accommodation, and aims to identify potential stress factors (e.g., suicide risk) at an early stage and take needs (e.g., psychological support) into account.⁴³ As soon as the verdict is legally binding, the offender is transferred from pretrial detention to regular prison. During imprisonment, the offender’s enforcement plan is regularly updated. In Lower Saxony, for example, an enforcement plan conference is held every six months with the specialist services (responsible psychologist, ward manager, head of department, prison management, addiction counseling service, and possibly also external providers) and the inmate to discuss next steps, such as progress of treatment, possible relaxation measures, transfer to open prison, and special wishes of the inmate.⁴⁴ In some federal states, the list of participants in these conferences is standardized, while others involve relevant actors depending on the individual case.⁴⁵ In the case of extremist offenders, the security risk is also assessed both within the prison and via external risk assessment procedures. For example, in the Berlin prison system itself, as well as in Hamburg and Lower Saxony within the state justice authorities and ministries, there are specifically trained employees who can use the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment 2 Revised (VERA-2R) risk assessment tool.⁴⁶ Based on the individual enforcement plan, the prison’s rehabilitation measures usually include work and educational

39 Radicalization Awareness Network; Violence Prevention Network 2020, p.16.

40 Ibidem.

41 Counter Extremism Project 2025.

42 Ibidem.

43 Pelzer & Moeller 2020, p.13.

44 Interview with a prison employee on September 25, 2023.

45 Pelzer & Moeller 2020, p.22.

46 VERA-2R was developed in the Netherlands and is one of the best-known and most widely used risk assessment tools in the field of Islamist extremism; it is a so-called ‘Structured Professional Judgement Tool’ in which specially trained experts assess statistical and dynamic factors and evaluate them in a structured manner; see e.g. Berg 2019.

measures, offers to maintain physical and mental health, as well as systematic preparation for release.⁴⁷

While every inmate who has been sentenced to a prison sentence without probation can be released after having served at least half of the sentence (Section 57 StGB), such early release is rare. The prerequisite for early release is a positive social prognosis, including appropriate social behavior in prison, distancing from the crime, understanding the crime, and low recidivism potential. The prison can submit a recommendation for release, which is reviewed by the competent court and usually supplemented by external psychological or psychiatric expert opinions.⁴⁸ About a year to a few months before the end of the prison sentence, preparation for release begins—so-called transition management. During the relevant conferences, actors from outside the prison system such as probation services, security agencies, and exit counseling centers are also involved in order to support “close coordination between all actors involved.”⁴⁹ In North Rhine-Westphalia, for example, the probation service has access to offenders’ electronic files via shared software so that key aspects such as housing or insurance can be prepared before release.⁵⁰ As with non-extremist offenders, the “most critical phase” is the first few months after release.⁵¹ However, the social reintegration of released extremist offenders should be seen as a long-term process that can take many years. Probation service and guidance supervision, civil society, governmental exit counseling, and other independent providers, such as addiction counseling and family support, provide crucial aid in this process.

Probation service and guidance supervision

Probation service comes into play when prison sentences of a maximum of two years have been suspended before the start of the sentence or when the remaining sentence is suspended after serving half or 2/3 of the sentence (Section 56 StGB). Court-appointed social workers—who are the probation officers—ensure that offenders released on probation comply with court-ordered conditions such as contact bans and, in coordination with other actors, support the released offenders in leading a crime-free life. To this end, factors that promote offending—such as unemployment, addiction, homelessness, and lack of prospects—and protective factors, such as partnership or therapy, are identified. Further, jointly defined goals are worked towards and relevant services are provided.⁵²

If prison sentences of more than two years are served in full because there was no positive social prognosis and therefore no early release, the judiciary assumes an increased risk and guidance supervision is applied (Section 68f StGB).⁵³ Guidance supervision for released extremist offenders usually applies for five years, during which offenders must comply with special conditions and instructions, i.e., bans on leaving the country, contact bans, reporting obligations (for example, mandatory reporting to the police station once or more per week and regular reporting to the probation service), prohibited zones, and residence obligation (for foreigners). In the case of extremist offenders, there are also contact persons at the state security departments of the police.⁵⁴ If one of the conditions is breached, a court will decide whether a new charge and conviction is appropriate.

Disengagement work

In addition to the regular rehabilitation measures in prison and reintegration measures after prison, there is also exit counselling for extremist offenders (also referred to as exit work, deradicalization counselling, or tertiary prevention; see table 1 on page 10). Civil society or governmental counselling centers outside the prison are aware of the particular challenges and needs of this target group and support them in disengaging from extremist views, attitudes, and actors. Specifically, the aim of case-specific exit counseling is to establish a relationship of

47 UNODC 2016.

48 Interview with a prison employee on September 25, 2023.

49 Pelzer & Moeller 2020, p.28.

50 Neitzert et al 2021, p.25.

51 Pelzer & Moeller 2020, p.28.

52 Interview with a probation officer in Lower Saxony on February 7, 2024.

53 An exception applies if the inmate is transferred to a mental health correctional facility (German: Maßregelvollzug) after release. Guidance supervision can also be ordered by a court if the offender is a recidivist or particularly troubled offender.

54 Interview with a probation officer in Lower Saxony on February 7, 2024.

trust, prevent support from extremist actors, and thus help extremist offenders to lead a self-determined, crime-free life in which they do not pose a danger to themselves or others.⁵⁵ In order to achieve this goal, some civil society counseling centers focus on behavioral disengagement, while others—such as governmental exit programs—aim for cognitive deradicalization.⁵⁶ While imprisonment is an exceptional situation and a drastic experience, prisoners are usually no longer exposed to the influence of the extremist scene and it is easier to establish contact to exit counseling, among other things.⁵⁷ At the same time, exit counseling centers must apply for access to every prison in order to work with extremist offenders and coordinate with the public prosecutor's offices and courts.⁵⁸ Based on the discussions with their clients, exit counselors also prepare expert opinions for the prison and the court.⁵⁹

Either prison staff refer extremist offenders to appropriate exit counseling services or potential clients proactively contact counseling centers—for example, on the recommendation of friends or relatives.

Table 2: Phases of Rehabilitation for Extremist Offenders⁶⁰

Phase	Measures
Pre-trial Detention	Admission and diagnostic procedure in the prison to draw up the enforcement plan, initial psychosocial support, and possibly first contact with exit counseling
Admission to Regular Detention	Risk assessment (internal and external) and start of rehabilitation measures (psychosocial support), including exit counseling
Serving the Sentence	Regular updating of the enforcement plan and coordination of the actors involved in case conferences; possible relaxations if the social prognosis is positive
Preparation for Release	Preparatory measures for the time after release; coordination between internal and external actors (probation service, security agencies, counseling centers, etc.) in case conferences
After Release	Support with readjustment processes through probation service (in the case of early release) or guidance supervision (usually for prison sentences of more than two years served in full); compliance with certain conditions and instructions; possible transfer to other exit counseling outside the prison
(Social) Reintegration	Support in the process of functional (work, housing, health insurance, finances, etc.) and social (friendships, family, etc.) integration; provided by probation services (up to approximately five years after release from prison) as well as exit counseling and other independent providers (job search, addiction counseling, family support, etc.)
Stabilization	The overall objective is the released offender's independence from governmental or civil society support structures; in the case of extremist offenders, the aim is a disengagement from extremist structures and ideally cognitive deradicalization from extremist ideologies

Support from exit counseling centers

55 Expert interviews on March 15, 2023 and April 13, 2023.

56 Röing 2021, p.33.

57 Hatton 2020, p.17.

58 Röing 2021, p.27.

59 Ibidem, p.28.

60 Own illustration based on Radicalisation Awareness Network; Violence Prevention Network 2020, pp.24 - 25.

In some federal states, exit counseling centers can also offer individual prisoners an exploratory meeting or meetings during pretrial detention, but most start the actual counseling during the prison sentence and often continue it after release. Regardless of whether the counseling center seeks out potential clients or is proactively contacted, in Germany “the final counseling process . . . is based on voluntariness and the (at least medium-term) development of intrinsic motivation for self-change.”⁶¹ At the same time, participation in exit counseling can be specified by the prison as a measure in the enforcement plan and by the court as a recommended condition in the context of guidance supervision or probation.⁶² This means that if a person does not want to speak to the exit counselor or meets with him or her but does not engage in conversation—even after several sessions—this can have a negative impact on the social prognosis and lead, for example, to the prisoner not being granted relaxation of measures.

Structures of prevention work at federal and state level

In Germany, the prevention of Islamist extremism, including exit work, benefits from decades of experience with right-wing and left-wing extremism. At the same time, several interviewees criticized the “wild actionism” after 2015, in which new funding opportunities led to the creation of many new prevention and exit counselling services without sufficient expertise always being available.⁶³ However, according to several interviewees, the prevention and countering of extremism (PCVE) community has now become more professionalized. For example, exit counselors from civil society counseling centers now use standards for counseling the social environment of radicalized individuals when advising relatives.⁶⁴ At federal level, the Federal Ministry of Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMBFSFJ) and the Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI) are among the most important actors regarding measures against different types of extremism, as they “[finance] a significant part of the prevention work at the state level and [support] municipalities . . . as initiators.”⁶⁵ The available funding for the BMBFSFJ’s Demokratie Leben! [English: Live Democracy!] program was increased from €40.5 million in 2015 to €182 million in 2023, and in 2018 the program area “Prevention and Deradicalization in Prison and Probation” was expanded to fund a model project in each federal state, which can then be continued by the federal states.⁶⁶ In 2024, €171.8 million of the available €182 million was handed out by the BMBFSFJ as part of the „Demokratie leben!“.⁶⁷ One of the program areas is the funding of the federal states’ state democracy centers, which serve as interfaces between administration and civil society as well as between federal, state, and municipal levels, and are located in various ministries (justice, social affairs, home affairs, education, etc.).⁶⁸ Additional funding, including for prevention and deradicalization in the prison system and in probation services as well as for evaluation, research, and networking, was available between 2017 and 2023 through the National Prevention Programme against Islamist Extremism (NPP), which was coordinated by several ministries.⁶⁹ In 2025, the BMI has, for example, established the Task Force Prevention of Islamism, who developed policy recommendations, focusing on prevention online.⁷⁰ Finally, the counseling or advice center Radicalization at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), which is subordinate to the BMI, has provided support for the social environment of potentially radicalized individuals since 2012. Important civil society actors at federal level are the German Council on Preventing Extremism (BAG ReEx), the Prevention Network against Religiously-Based Extremism, and the Competence Network Islamist Extremism (KN:IX and its successor, KN:IX connect, which has been promoting networking, knowledge transfer, and professional development in the field of Islamism prevention since 2020).⁷¹ Over the last ten years, exit work has developed differently in each federal state and is therefore often referred to as a “patchwork.”

Since the founding of the BAMF advice center in 2012, several civil society and governmental exit counselling services for potentially radicalized

61 Pelzer & Moeller 2020, p.17.

62 Similar to therapy, however, participation in exit counseling cannot be enforced, i.e. in the worst case, the person is present but (initially) not willing to talk; interview with Amelie Schröder, Head of the Referral Department of the Berlin Prison for Women on March 26, 2024.

63 Interview with employees of the probation service on February 7, 2024 and April 29, 2024.

64 Violence Prevention Network 2020, p.14.

65 Bpb (German Federal Agency for Civic Education) 2020.

66 BMBFSFJ (German Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth) 2023.

67 Deutscher Bundestag (German Parliament) 2025.

68 Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (Federal Agency for Civic Education) 2020.

69 BMI (German Federal Ministry of the Interior) 2017.

70 BMI (German Federal Ministry of the Interior) 2025.

71 Bpb (German Federal Agency for Civic Education) 2020, p.10 and www.kn-ix.de.

individuals and their social environment have been organized in a network. While most actors are only active at the state level, the Violence Prevention Network (VPN) e.V., ufuq e.V., and Grüner Vogel e.V.⁷², for example, also offer nationwide services. The increasing number of relevant actors and potential clients has led to the most affected federal states setting up their own competence centers, networks (especially between security agencies and civil society), and programs between 2013 and 2016.⁷³ In Bavaria, for example, relevant cases of extremism in prison are coordinated by the State Criminal Police Office (LKA) and passed on to external providers, while in North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony, exit programs can be contacted directly by the prison. In Berlin, a network of providers was created to simplify the coordination of the justice system with the various exit counseling services.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, cooperation between these different actors in the rehabilitation of extremist offenders remains a challenge, including in terms of roles, objectives, and information transfer.⁷⁵ In addition, cooperation with the respective counselling centers has advantages and disadvantages. While some clients, for example, preferred to entrust themselves to civil society counselling centers, prisons and security agencies sometimes preferred governmental providers, partly because their employees often already have security clearances.⁷⁶

With the increasing number of prisoners with a connection to Islamist extremist, several federal states have adapted the training and further education of prison staff, often with the support of specialized counselling centers. For example, North Rhine-Westphalia has been training ‘Integration officers,’ ‘Prevention officers,’ and ‘Extremism officers’ in prisons since 2016, and all three groups have been systematically prepared for dealing with returnees since 2017.⁷⁷ In Lower Saxony, VPN has been training ‘Islamism officers’ for the justice system in a one-year additional training course since 2016.⁷⁸ There are now at least two Islamism officers in eleven central prisons as the first point of contact in relation to Islamist extremism, as well as three additional officers at the Lower Saxony probation service. In Hesse, ‘Structural observers’ are deployed as part of a Network Deradicalization in the Prison System (NeDiS) to identify radicalization trends and take countermeasures.⁷⁹

In addition to the measures already mentioned by the judiciary and security agencies, an extremist offender can be classified as Gefährder, or “dangerous person” (“a person about whom certain facts justify the assumption that he or she will commit politically motivated crimes of considerable significance”) or as a “relevant person” (including individuals who play a supporting role in these crimes) by the police forces of the federal states.⁸⁰ As of April 2025, according to media reports referring to the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA), 575 people were classified as Gefährder—fewer than in February 2023 (613 individuals) but a significant increase compared to the numbers from January 2024. A fifth of the 483 individuals classified as Gefährder in January 2024 were in custody at the time.⁸¹ The largest group among the 575 Gefährder, 458 individuals, are classified under the category “religious ideology.” In addition to the internal and external risk assessment processes, Gefährder—usually including returnees in custody—are also assessed using the BKA’s RADAR-iTE risk assessment tool.⁸² Furthermore, some cases of returnees are the subject of the Risk Management and Deradicalization working groups of the Joint Counter-Terrorism Centre (GTAZ) to promote exchange between the federal and state governments.⁸³

In order to develop “sustainable, interdisciplinary, and cross-sectoral cooperation in the holistic approach to dealing with returnees,” the BMI presented Guidelines for the holistic approach to returnees in 2019, which the federal states use as a basis for a standardized approach.⁸⁴ In

72 Grüner Vogel means ‘green bird’: according to a traditional saying of the Islamic prophet Mohammed, the souls of martyrs live as green birds in paradise (Book 33, Hadith 181). The symbol has been misused for the ideology of violence-oriented terrorism, which is why the exit counselling center Grüner Vogel aims to restore its original religious meaning.

73 Bbp (German Federal Agency for Civic Education) 2020.

74 See also Pelzer & Moeller 2020 p.10-11.

75 Koller 2021a.

76 See Pelzer & Moeller 2020, p.14 and Neitzert et al 2021, p.23.

77 Interview with Mustafa Doymuş, Department of Radicalization Prevention in the North Rhine-Westphalia Prison Service on June 7, 2023.

78 Interview with a rehabilitation expert on March 30, 2023.

79 HMDJR (Hessian Ministry of Justice and the Rule of Law) 2021.

80 BKA (Federal Criminal Police Office) n.d.a.

81 Tagesschau 2025, Zeit Online 2024.

82 Röing 2021; BKA (German Federal Criminal Police Office) n.d.b.

83 Deutscher Bundestag (German Parliament) 2022.

84 BMI (German Federal Ministry of the Interior) 2019, p.2.

these guidelines, the returnee coordinators are also listed as important players. From 2019 to 2023, the BAMF funded returnee coordinators in Bavaria, Berlin, Hamburg, Hesse, and North Rhine-Westphalia; the coordinators in Bremen and Lower Saxony—at first funded by the BAMF as well—are meanwhile funded by the respective federal states.⁸⁵ In each of these federal states, at least one person is based in the interior or social authorities, at the LKA or the State Office for the Protection of the Constitution (LfV), and is responsible for coordinating measures for returnees—often women and minors repatriated by the federal government.⁸⁶ This coordinated approach has proven its worth due to the complexity and uniqueness of the cases as well as the number of actors involved, including security agencies (police, LfV), social welfare agencies (youth welfare office, school, kindergarten), counseling centers, psychotherapeutic specialists, and, in some cases, the judiciary and probation service. In this context, it was considered important to “communicate your own limits and possibilities for cooperation” and “find a common language.”⁸⁷ During the returnee’s imprisonment, the returnee coordinators are no longer officially responsible, but usually remain in contact with the relevant actors and can support coordination after release. Although returnee coordinators is perceived as good practice in Germany and in Europe as a whole, concrete cooperation with the returnee coordinators is sometimes difficult. For example, some actors reportedly perceive the coordinators as competition and do not wish to cooperate.⁸⁸

For this diverse landscape of prevention actors, the short project funding periods remain one of the biggest challenges regarding staff continuity and long-term counseling. It is precisely the “imbalance in terms of resources that often makes it difficult for governmental and civil society bodies to work together on an equal footing.”⁸⁹ The third funding period of Demokratie Leben! (2025–32) started in January 2025 and a longer-term funding period of up to eight years is possible for individual program areas.⁹⁰ Despite fears of funding cuts, measures for the promotion of democracy (which include Demokratie Leben!) will have a budget of more than €200 million in 2025 (increased to €209 million in 2026).⁹¹

Similar structures, important differences

While approaches to extremist offenders continue to focus on security, the “tenor has generally shifted towards resocialization, treatment, and care” in all federal states.⁹² While in the past, initial precautionary measures—such as confiscating all Arabic- or Turkish-language literature—sometimes led to mistrust and could be counterproductive in radicalization processes, dealing with this target group has now become “increasingly differentiated.”⁹³ Not only have processes become more established, but the “first two waves [of convictions] are over”—i.e., the topic of Islamist extremism has become less explosive and the political pressure to act has decreased overall.⁹⁴

In general, similar structures have thus developed in all federal states. Nevertheless, there are important differences, e.g., due to the conditions in large federal states as opposed to city states, as well as political and financial framework conditions.⁹⁵ In Berlin, for example, the social services are very pronounced—it is the social workers who lead relevant work in the prison wards and accompany the inmates from the beginning of their imprisonment until their release.⁹⁶ Furthermore, the focus of treatment is on the prison itself—e.g., Berlin has the highest rate of prisoners in open detention and therefore counts fewer early releases than Bavaria or Baden-Württemberg.⁹⁷ There is also “a tendency

85 Koller, S. 2024a, p.83.

86 The returnee coordinators are also responsible for people who have returned to Germany on their own, for example by crossing the Syrian-Turkish border and being deported by Turkey; interview with a returnee coordinator on April 2, 2024 and Redaktion Infodienst Radikalisierungsprävention 2020.

87 Written information from a returnee coordinator on April 26, 2024.

88 Benz 2023 p.375.

89 Neitzert & Röing 2023, p.47.

90 BMBFSFJ (German Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth) n.d.

91 Wagner 2025.

92 Interview with Kai Abraham, head of the prison for women in Berlin on March 26, 2024.

93 Interview with a prison employee in Berlin on March 11, 2024.

94 Ibidem.

95 Pelzer & Moeller 2020, p.9.

96 Interview with Kai Abraham, head of the prison for women in Berlin on March 26, 2024.

97 Ibidem.

for northern German states to be seen as more progressive and treatment-friendly in contrast to the southern states.”⁹⁸ At the same time, both Berlin and North Rhine-Westphalia, for example, were among the first federal states to develop communication and cooperation concepts for dealing with extremism in prison. Finally, there are differences between small federal states and so-called territorial states. In the latter, for example, access to well-trained staff and a larger provider landscape is more difficult than in Berlin or Hamburg, which are considered more attractive locations for providers and employees.

Similar to other European countries, the German justice system does not differentiate between imprisoned women and men, nor between male and female extremist offenders. Based on the concepts developed for dealing with extremism in prison, the structures created were also implemented in the women’s prison system (also in response to the increased need). At the same time, however, the “practical design of the prison” varies.⁹⁹ For example, due to the low number of cases, it is often not possible for prison administrations to differentiate between first-time and recidivist female offenders or by length of sentence, and there is a focus on domesticity and motherhood for women (as opposed to employment for male offenders) as well as a tendency to “overexpose the victim experience of women, which goes hand in hand with an underexposure of the victim experience of men.”¹⁰⁰ Additionally, the prison system has less experience with female extremist offenders—e.g., their behavior in and after prison and the organization of contact with (young) children or imprisonment with children. Overall, there are not only fewer female offenders than male ones, but also far fewer imprisoned extremist women than men. Much smaller case numbers also mean that the care ratio for imprisoned women is better. However, as women are housed in separate institutions, external exit counseling centers, for example, have to submit separate applications to gain access, which can take months or even years.¹⁰¹ The treatment of female detainees and prisoners is also important to consider in this context, as Germany has the highest proportion of women among all suspects compared to 22 other European countries.¹⁰²

Findings on the Rehabilitation of Returnees to Date

1. Offenses and Length of Imprisonment

In principle, two main factors influence the rehabilitation of returnees in prison and after their release. The first is the offense for which returnees were convicted and the associated prison sentence. According to the Federal Government, preliminary proceedings have been initiated against 312 returnees, primarily in accordance with Sections 89a and 129a, 129b StGB, and the International Criminal Code (VStGB).¹⁰³ The majority of the returning men and women were convicted of membership of a terrorist organization abroad (Sections 129a, 129b StGB). The sentencing range for this offense is between one and ten years in prison. In addition, female returnees in particular have been convicted of other offenses, such as violating the War Weapons Control Act (Section 22a KrWaffKontrG) and violating their duty of care or education (Section 171 StGB) towards their children, as well as convictions under the VStGB. Convictions under Section 89a StGB appear to be much rarer, as the crime is more difficult to prove in court. To date, there exists no overview of convictions and average prison sentences for returnees in Germany. On the one hand, as of October 2025, 30 percent of all female returnees—at least 40 out of 130—have received a final verdict.¹⁰⁴ Female returnees have received an average prison sentence or suspended sentence of around four years. The longest prison sentence so far, 14 years, was handed down to Jennifer W. In addition, based on a dataset compiled by the author, 52 German male and female returnees convicted of ISIS membership in the first instance received an average sentence of just over four years.¹⁰⁵ These figures

98 Ibidem.

99 Neuber 2022, p.167.

100 Ibidem.

101 Statement made by Herding, M. during the online panel discussion “Haftnotizen der Zivilgesellschaft. Einblicke in Angebote der Demokratieförderung und Extremismusprävention im Justizvollzug,” AG Strafvollzug und Bewährungshilfe on March 7, 2024.

102 Karsted 2022, p.76.

103 Deutscher Bundestag (German Parliament) 2024b.

104 Koller 2024b and Koller 2025.

105 It should be noted that Omais A., Abdelkarim E. B., and Nils D. were each sentenced twice and the respective prison sentences are combined to form a total

allow the assumption that the length of the prison sentences of convicted returnees does not show any major differences between men and women. At the same time, apart from the fact that court rulings always take individual circumstances into account, a comparison of prison sentences by gender is only possible to a limited extent in this context. Women and men had very different roles within ISIS and, accordingly, the proceedings to date have dealt with different types of terrorist membership—e.g., the accusation of military training and participation in combat operations for men vs. supporting activities for women. In addition, court proceedings against male returnees so far have only dealt with criminal offenses that would affect both men and women in individual cases. To date, for example, 13 female returnees have been convicted of war crimes against property (Section 9 VStGB), but only one male returnee has been convicted of this offense.¹⁰⁶

The second main factor influencing the rehabilitation of returnees is the time they actually spend in detention. Firstly, experience shows that the complexity of these proceedings means that pretrial detention is relatively long—in some cases lasting several months or even years. As the time spent in pretrial detention counts towards the final sentence,¹⁰⁷ in many cases only one to two years remains for rehabilitation measures in prison and preparation for release. Here, too, a comparison of the actual duration of imprisonment between men and women is only somewhat possible. Based on existing experience, however, female returnees appear to benefit more often from a positive social prognosis and can therefore be transferred more often to open prison and released on probation after serving two-thirds of their sentence.¹⁰⁸ The fact that the majority of female returnees do not have a criminal record and are often highly motivated to be released in order to regain contact with their children could play a role here.¹⁰⁹ Male returnees appear to have served their entire prison sentences more often and are therefore more often released under guidance supervision.

2. Risk Assessment and Management

Regarding the internal risk assessments of returnees, prison staff reported that, just like other extremist prisoners, returnees display different behavior depending on their profile and can therefore pose different risks. For example, leaders and people who have mainly recruited others are unlikely to stand out in prison due to obvious violence. According to one interviewee, these people “bring a certain narcissism with them, benefit from their position by exercising power, control, sometimes also financially . . . they rarely do things that lead to disadvantages for themselves . . . they know how to behave . . . in order to attract little attention.”¹¹⁰ This could be problematic, as people who have caused obvious harm were assessed as being more dangerous than people who have organized seminars, for example.

While most risk assessment tools are designed to evaluate the risks posed by men, especially extremist acts of violence (as they are based on data from male offenders), such tools are “increasingly being used to assess the risks posed by women as well.”¹¹¹ As the majority of female extremist offenders are not involved in acts of violence but in supporting crimes such as propaganda, they are often evaluated differently in the risk assessment. In concrete terms, this means that with VERA-2R, for example, there are “many items that are naturally applicable and fit the biography, but are missing a bit the problems that women bring with them.”¹¹² A factor such as “contact with the children,” for example, is often evaluated by such instruments as an indicator of a favorable prognosis, but the correctional facility considers this contact to be unpromising or even problematic for some female returnees—e.g., if the women pass on their radical attitudes to the children, it can be a matter of child endangerment.¹¹³ While it cannot be ruled out that individual women have been or may be involved in terrorist attacks

prison sentence, but are counted as separate prison sentences in this data set.

106 Taz 2024; Koller 2024b, p.6; Oberlandesgericht (Higher Regional Court) Frankfurt am Main 2023.

107 The stay in Kurdish camps in Northeast Syria is not directly credited by German courts, but is taken into account when sentencing under Section 46 of the German Criminal Code. At the same time, according to a defense lawyer, this consideration remains very abstract and difficult to understand by how much time it actually reduces the sentence; interview with Gabor Subai on May 6, 2024.

108 Expert interview on April 24, 2023.

109 Koller 2024a, p.78.

110 Interview with a prison employee on September 25, 2023.

111 Radicalization Awareness Network 2023.

112 Interview with Amelie Schröder, Head of the Admissions Department of the Berlin Prison for Women on March 26, 2024.

113 Interview with Kai Abraham, Head of Prison and Amelie Schröder, Head of the Admissions Department of the Berlin Prison for Women on March 26, 2024.

themselves, prison staff report that the majority tend to work in network structures. “The risk is at least as high for women, but it is a different risk that emanates from women . . . which in the long term has almost more influence than someone who has once made propaganda and called for jihad. In the case of men, these tend to be individual offenses, while women are sometimes very prominent in these systems and have a high influence on a community, i.e., also on men.”¹¹⁴

Previous experience also shows that there are important differences in the risk assessment of female extremist offenders. On the one hand, new research findings indicate that the majority of female extremist offenders have no previous convictions, whereas extremist offenders often do.¹¹⁵ As the women’s prisons are relatively small but proportionately have to deal with many relevant cases due to female returnees, among other female extremist offenders, the women’s prison system in some federal states already has a great deal of expertise in risk assessment. In addition to the official online training courses, in some federal states all VERA-2R users exchange information via a network in which the cases are discussed together at regular intervals. This “view from the outside” is an important addition for the prison staff who work with the inmates every day.¹¹⁶ For these reasons, exchange formats with external actors such as security agencies or counseling centers have also proven successful. However, there are different regulations in the federal states as to which inmates are subject to risk assessments and who receives which results (see also 7. Transition Management). Finally, gender can also impact risk management: One female returnee reported that she had to take off her headscarf while being placed in solitary confinement, on the grounds that she was not allowed to have anything with her that she could use to harm herself.¹¹⁷

3. False Compliance

The issue of false or disguised compliance is receiving particular attention, i.e., if extremist offenders are accepting offers for intrinsic motivation or for tactical/strategic reasons. Indeed, there is “increasing evidence in many European countries that terrorist prisoners are successfully deceiving professionals involved in their rehabilitation.”¹¹⁸ Several attacks or attempted attacks in which false compliance played a role—e.g., of an extremist offender released early in London in November 2019, as well as the renewed conviction for a terrorist offense of a released extremist offender in Lower Saxony in 2023—illustrate the relevance of the topic.¹¹⁹ In addition, in October 2023, an ISIS returnee who had been released from prison and was considered deradicalized was also arrested on suspicion of having planned an attack.¹²⁰

Although the topic of deception is generally perceived as an important challenge, several interviewees emphasized that the topic should be understood in a differentiated way. “Nobody comes to [exit] counselling and says: ‘I want to disengage’. . . We always start with someone who is fooling us.”¹²¹ Therefore, initial contact—regardless of the intention—should always be maintained or followed up.¹²² In concrete terms, some prison staff report that some male prisoners initially use conversations with psychologists, for example, specifically for manipulation. However, the willingness to open up and question their own behavior can arise, for example, if the prisoners suffer disadvantages, such as frequent house searches at relatives’ homes.¹²³ One of the biggest challenges in this context is mistrust on both sides. In the case of extremist offenders in particular, several interviewees felt that the justice system preferred to play it safe and assume deception in the first instance, i.e., “either I believe [the detainee] and he is lying to me, or I don’t believe him but he hasn’t lied to me. You won’t find out the latter, so I’d rather make the mistake that is safer for me.”¹²⁴ The inmates themselves are burdened by this mistrust. “How should I behave, no matter what I do,

114 Interview with Amelie Schröder, Head of the Admissions Department of the Berlin Prison for Women on March 26, 2024.

115 Mehra, T., Renard, T., Herbach, M. 2024b, p.158.

116 Interview with Amelie Schröder, Head of the Admissions Department of the Berlin Prison for Women on March 26, 2024.

117 Interview with a female returnee on November 28, 2025.

118 Acheson 2021.

119 Zeit Online 2019; Interview with a probation officer in Lower Saxony on February 7, 2024.

120 Six-Sasmaz & Exner 2024.

121 Interview with André Taubert on April 25, 2023.

122 Interview with a prison employee on September 25, 2023.

123 Ibidem.

124 Interview with a prison employee in Berlin on March 11, 2024.

it's wrong . . . If I shave off my beard, I'm being completely subversive, if I let it grow, it's not right either, so I can't do it right."¹²⁵ However, this mistrust as a basic tendency is problematic, as it can also lead to re-radicalization in prisoners who are making a serious effort.¹²⁶ In some cases, it can also take months or years of trust-building before prisoners are willing to talk about their attitudes and motives and whether they would even make use of exit counseling.¹²⁷ As one prison employee put it, "The justice system was always the enemy [and] now they are with the enemy, so to speak."¹²⁸

Several interviewees also agreed that it was difficult to deceive staff in the long term.¹²⁹ For example, contact in social therapy and residential groups was very intensive and it was "very difficult in an intensive therapeutic setting to conceal such fundamental ideological attitudes."¹³⁰ In addition, the exchange between the various actors involved—the probation service and police's state security units, for example—was essential in order to compare the client's statements and identify inconsistencies at an early stage.¹³¹ Especially since the recidivism of a released extremist offender in Lower Saxony, there has been a nationwide increase in awareness of the issue of false compliance.¹³² Ultimately, however, it has so far been difficult to make reliable statements about such incidents, as court proceedings were still ongoing and prison sentences were still pending, for example.¹³³

There also appear to be important differences between male and female extremist offenders. For example, some prison staff reported that many female returnees contacted exit counseling while still in custody, as they knew that this would have a positive effect on their sentence, or agreed to counseling in order to increase their chances of early release.¹³⁴ Women also had more opportunities to adapt, e.g., through clothing, although this led to "sometimes excessive adaptations" for some female returnees.¹³⁵ Actors involved from outside the prison setting also reported that it was "very noticeable" how motivated or "over-motivated" female returnees with children were to accept existing offers.¹³⁶ In contrast, many male prisoners were much less willing to adapt, although a lot of attention was still paid to outward appearances in prison and even a shaved beard or the removal of certain items of clothing that are seen as Islamist, such as the kurta (a collarless, loose shirt), could contribute to a more positive social prognosis in prison.¹³⁷ Finally, actors report that although the vast majority of returnees attend all appointments, it was not always clear "whether there was an intrinsic motivation to accept offers," especially if law enforcement authorities were involved.¹³⁸ There are only isolated reports of incidents in which, for example, a returnee had made inconsistent statements to various authorities (but the motivation for this was not apparent), or a person committed a (non-terrorist) offense although they had previously explicitly denied this.¹³⁹ Based on new research findings on the topic of false compliance, it is "not useful for interactions between counselors and clients to be primarily aimed at detecting deception or false intentions."¹⁴⁰ Instead, measures such as dialogue, encouraging honesty, and information sharing are recommended.

125 Interview with a probation officer in Lower Saxony on February 7, 2024.

126 Interview with a prison employee in Berlin on March 11, 2024.

127 Interview with a prison employee on September 25, 2023.

128 Ibidem.

129 Expert interview on May 23, 2023.

130 Interview with Amelie Schröder, Head of the Admissions Department of the Berlin Prison for Women on March 26, 2024 and interview with a prison employee in Berlin on March 11, 2024.

131 Interview with employees of the probation service on April 29, 2024.

132 Interview with a probation officer in Lower Saxony on February 7, 2024.

133 Written information provided by a returnee coordinator on April 26, 2024.

134 Koller 2024a, p.77.

135 Interview with Kai Abraham, head of the prison for women in Berlin on March 26, 2024.

136 Interview with a returnee coordinator on April 2, 2024.

137 Interview with Kai Abraham, head of the prison for women in Berlin on March 26, 2024.

138 Interview with a returnee coordinator on April 2, 2024.

139 Ibidem.

140 Cherney et al 2023, p.36.

4. Mental Health and Psychological Needs

Mental health problems and psychological needs, some of which were already present before departure, play a special role in dealing with returnees. Experience has shown that returnees accepting appropriate support appears to be a particular challenge. This was a “much more difficult issue” for male returnees than for female returnees, as the advice centers, for example, do (repeatedly) offer them therapy as a supplement to exit counseling, but the returnees themselves often felt that the counseling is sufficient.¹⁴¹ In prison, male returnees often only make use of therapy if, for example, a mental disorder has already been diagnosed before leaving the country or as a result of a court ordered assessment. This is problematic, as experience has shown that returnees did suffer from psychological stress, sometimes in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which must first be dealt with before exit counseling is possible.¹⁴² Although female returnees generally found it easier to accept psychotherapeutic services, in these cases, according to some interviewees, the decisive motivation could be the fear of losing custody or access rights to their children.¹⁴³ At the same time, female returnees were reportedly reluctant to confide in psychologists in prisons, as they feared that security-relevant information would be passed on and that they would lose “sovereignty of interpretation” over their statements, potentially leading to misinterpretations to their disadvantage, for example.¹⁴⁴

Although some female returnees did show an interest in psychotherapy after their release from prison or actively look for such services, especially to work through traumatic experiences with ISIS, many felt overwhelmed by the many demands and appointments (youth welfare office, parents’ evenings, probation service, exit counseling, etc.), so “therapy is not seen as a priority”.¹⁴⁵ This was sometimes problematic, as many of the female returnees had experienced sexualized violence, in some cases even before leaving the country. Finally, one problem is also that adequate mental health support is not always available. One female returnee reported that during her time in detention, she had asked for trauma therapy twice but was told that this kind of therapy was not available.¹⁴⁶

However, interviewees were generally confident about the availability of appropriate counseling services. Prisons either had access to internal psychologists, some of whom even specialized in trauma, or were able to arrange counseling with external psychotherapists relatively easily.¹⁴⁷ At the same time, cooperation with external parties was sometimes difficult, including because psychotherapists had reservations about working in prisons or because security measures could make confidential conversations difficult.

5. Processing of the Crime and Disengagement

An important goal of rehabilitation work in prison is to come to terms with the crime for which the returnee was convicted. According to the available data, returnees generally respond well to the existing services, a finding that is also consistent with previous research on working with extremist offenders.¹⁴⁸ As one prison employee put it, “If I don’t talk to them, someone else will talk to them,” similar to organized crime.¹⁴⁹ However, one of the reported challenges when dealing with returnees was that it was much more difficult to understand crimes committed in a war zone and a so-called “caliphate” and to discuss alternative courses of action.¹⁵⁰ Interviewees in another research project

141 Interview with a returnee coordinator on April 2, 2024.

142 Interview with a prison employee on September 25, 2024.

143 Interview with a returnee coordinator on April 2, 2024.

144 Interview with a rehabilitation expert on May 26, 2023.

145 Interview with Claudia Dantschke, Head of Grüner Vogel e.V., on April 13, 2023, interview with a returnee coordinator on April 2, 2024 and expert interview on May 26, 2023.

146 Interview with a female returnee on November 28, 2025.

147 In Bavaria, for example, Straubing and Würzburg prisons have their own psychiatric wards for male and female offenders. However, the suicide of Valdete M. in May 2021, who was held in pre-trial detention in Bavaria for suspected terrorist financing and was transferred from the psychiatric ward in Würzburg back to Aichach prison, illustrates that there are still challenges in dealing with mental health, Röhmel 2023.

148 Pelzer & Moeller 2020, p.30.

149 Interview with a prison employee in Berlin on March 11, 2024.

150 Interview with employees of the probation service on April 29, 2024.

spoke of a veritable “black box” in relation to the returnees’ stay in Syria and Iraq.¹⁵¹

Distancing work also contributes to the processing of the crime. Although there were not always stable counseling relationships, many returnees were at least in contact with counseling centers.¹⁵² While there is no precise information on the breakdown between men and women, the federal government writes that as of the end of 2021, “at least a high double-digit number of returnees are undergoing deradicalization measures.”¹⁵³ The question of voluntariness plays a role here: the consensus in Germany is that cooperation, including regarding exit work, cannot really be enforced. It is therefore expected that extremist offenders will also carry out the treatment measures specified for them in the enforcement plan in order to improve their legal prognosis. Of course, inmates could refuse to cooperate and take legal action against the enforcement plan. One prison employee emphasized that “if [the inmate] is sitting in the detention room and doesn’t want to talk to us, then I can’t deduce much willingness to work with us towards the enforcement goal.”¹⁵⁴ While few denied the main points of their verdict, many did not acknowledge individual aspects.¹⁵⁵ In this context, one prison employee also reported a striking correlation with the respective roles in extremist groups: “The higher the position, the less willing they are to distance themselves, . . . work with us or get support from us, even if they need it.”¹⁵⁶ In any case, it could be helpful if distancing work was offered by civil society counseling centers instead of (only) by actors from the judiciary or security authorities.¹⁵⁷

For female returnees in particular, the traditional role of women in ISIS seems to make it more difficult for them to accept a conviction for terrorist membership. As one woman, according to one interviewee, put it, “I cooked, had children, sat in the women’s guest house all day and then married the next one.”¹⁵⁸ At the same time, female returnees were more often disillusioned by their experiences in ISIS territory than women who did not leave.¹⁵⁹ A lack of confrontation with their own experiences and any crimes committed by female returnees is seen as problematic, as “certain trigger moments may revive unprocessed traumas and have a negative impact on the reintegration process.”¹⁶⁰

According to many of those interviewed, one of the greatest challenges when working with extremist offenders, especially returnees in and after release from prison, is the (experienced) stigmatization. In 2016, for example, the suicide of a prisoner in pretrial detention for terrorist offenses led to the decree that all extremist prisoners had to be transferred (at least temporarily) to specially secured detention rooms with constant monitoring.¹⁶¹ A prison employee reported that one inmate who had actually shown positive developments turned away again as a result: “He said ‘No matter what I do, I’m still the enemy for the justice system or the state, even if I . . . show a willingness to change’. We had actually lost him from that point on.”¹⁶² In this context, several actors reported a fundamental dilemma of extremist offenders. As one interviewee put it, “We expect them to adapt to the system and if they do, then we say they are just adapting.”¹⁶³ Some offenders have also reportedly had the experience that security agencies had put thoughtless statements into a different context in which the offenders did not recognize themselves and therefore preferred not to speak out at all anymore.¹⁶⁴ In this context, it is also a challenge that—unlike doctors or pastoral workers—prison staff such as social workers, psychologists, and exit counselors do not have the right to refuse to testify and could therefore be summoned by the court to comment on their clients.¹⁶⁵ According to several interviewees, this could make it more difficult to establish or maintain a relationship of trust with the offenders.

151 Benz 2023, p.361.

152 Expert interview on January 22, 2024 and written information provided by a returnee coordinator on April 26, 2024.

153 Deutscher Bundestag (German Parliament) 2023c.

154 Interview with Amelie Schröder, Head of the Admissions Department of the Berlin Prison for Women on March 26, 2024.

155 Interview with a prison employee on September 25, 2023.

156 Ibidem.

157 Ibidem.

158 Expert interview on March 15, 2023.

159 Expert interview on May 26, 2023.

160 Benz 2023, p.363.

161 Monitor 2017.

162 Expert interview on September 25, 2023.

163 Interview with a prison employee in Berlin on March 11, 2024.

164 Interview with a probation officer in Lower Saxony on February 7, 2024.

165 See e.g. Koller 2021b.

In this context, it appears to be “difficult for some returnees to find contact with their religion without this being interpreted negatively.”¹⁶⁶ However, religion did still play an important emotional role for some female returnees.¹⁶⁷ For example, one female returnee reported that one of the social workers in prison gave her a Quran and a praying rug and that she didn’t have the impression that she was not allowed to practice her religion.¹⁶⁸ For her, it was important that she was able to say her prayers, since it gave her structure. One of the challenges mentioned is that Germany still “does not have comprehensive Muslim prison chaplaincy” in the prisons.¹⁶⁹

Even after release from prison, experienced stigmatization and labeling as “ISIS returnees” and “terrorists” was perceived as a challenge. In particular, returnees continue in some cases to remain in the focus of security agencies—e.g., they and their contacts are monitored, house searches are carried out and so-called Gefährderansprachen (police reaching out to a potentially dangerous person to warn him or her to refrain from disturbing public safety) take place. Those who actually want to distance themselves from the extremist scene are still confronted with security measures, “which often stand in the way of complete resocialization.”¹⁷⁰

Another challenge for returnees is the long period of pretrial detention. A prison employee reports that many extremist offenders were not allowed to have any contact outside the prison other than with their lawyer during their pretrial detention, partly due to the risk of concealment.¹⁷¹ Consequently, the contact with exit counseling can sometimes only be established months or even years later, once a legally binding sentence has been passed. With regard to returnees, one prison employee reports that due to the long period of pretrial detention, many measures, including those for resocialization, often have to be carried out within a short period of imprisonment, while at the same time security aspects play a major role. As one interview reported: “I repeatedly experience the balancing act between what is necessary to improve the legal prognosis . . . and at the same time it is difficult to recognize where the women actually stand [ideologically].”¹⁷²

6. Children of Returnees

The role of children varies greatly among returnees. 85 percent of female Islamist extremist offenders in Germany are mothers, and while female returnees in particular often have several children, the vast majority are imprisoned without children.¹⁷³ Being able to have contact with their children is essential for female returnees, but it is the youth welfare office that is responsible for arranging contact between the mother in prison and her child, and “the more spectacular the topic or the crime is treated in public, the more cautious the youth welfare offices are in their benevolent decisions.”¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, due to security concerns, it could take several months before prisons allowed children to visit their imprisoned mother during pretrial detention without a glass partition.¹⁷⁵ Joint accommodation also remains the absolute exception in Germany, partly due to a lack of suitable structures.¹⁷⁶ Finally, the contact restrictions due to the COVID 19 pandemic posed specific challenges to female returnees. For example, one female returnee reported that she was not able to see her daughter for nine months.¹⁷⁷ In general, the separation from their children after arriving in Germany is described by several actors as traumatic for the female returnees, especially as particularly close relationships had often developed during the families’ stay in the Kurdish camps.¹⁷⁸

166 Expert interview on May 26, 2023.

167 Interview with a prison employee on March 30, 2023.

168 Interview with a female returnee on November 28, 2025.

169 Röing 2021, p.28.

170 Interview with Amelie Schröder, Head of the Admissions Department of the Berlin Prison for Women on March 26, 2024.

171 Interview with a prison employee on September 25, 2023.

172 Interview with Amelie Schröder, Head of the Admissions Department of the Berlin Prison for Women on March 26, 2024.

173 Koller 2024a, p.76.

174 Interview with Kai Abraham, head of the prison for women in Berlin on March 26, 2024.

175 Interview with Claudia Dantschke on April 13, 2023.

176 Koller 2024a, p. 76.

177 Interview with a female returnee on November 28, 2025.

178 See e.g. interview with Claudia Dantschke on April 13, 2023 and another expert on May 26, 2023.

Several female returnees were also convicted of crimes committed against their children.¹⁷⁹ Many female returnees wished to nevertheless take on an active role as mothers, but often felt “reprimanded” and “unfairly treated” in this role, and this tension could have a negative impact on the distancing process.¹⁸⁰ In general, there is a risk that the female returnees—who are very often single mothers, lack solid professional training, and are traumatized—“fail because of the demands that our society places on a ‘good mother’ and also because of their own expectations.”¹⁸¹ Coming to terms with the past was made more difficult by the fact that the whereabouts of the children’s fathers or the husbands of the female returnees is often unknown.¹⁸²

Finally, several interviewees reported that children hardly played a role for male returnees, although this was often the case for male prisoners in general.¹⁸³ Male returnees usually had, instead, “a very individual preoccupation with their own role.”¹⁸⁴

7. Transition Management

Central to the rehabilitation of returnees is how the transition after release from prison can be organized. There is a risk, particularly in crisis situations, that extremist offenders who have already started a distancing process may, for example, turn to extremist contacts again and reoffend. Hence, one of the aims is to “prepare them for experiences of failure and to develop strategies for dealing with rejection.”¹⁸⁵ While several interviewees agree that progress has been made in this area over the past ten years and, for example, concepts for cooperation between internal and external actors in the justice system have been developed, the transition remains a challenge.¹⁸⁶ In Berlin, for example, the transition after release is now regulated by law for all prisoners—i.e., it is specified when which actors are to be involved.¹⁸⁷ In addition, there is a special concept for extremist offenders—regular conferences are held at which, for example, suitability for imprisonment, relaxations, or conditions for guidance supervision are discussed. The handover conference four weeks before release is attended by the probation service, public prosecutor’s office, LKA, and LfV, among others, and external providers of exit counseling can also be involved. This “integration into the ritualized case conferences” means that the probation service is familiar with the cases and, like the other participants, receives enforcement plans, statements on guidance supervision, and VERA-2R evaluations.¹⁸⁸ This exchange of information is also regulated by the Berlin Prison Data Protection Act. Sharing information is more difficult in other federal states. For example, the probation service in Lower Saxony has only been receiving at least the final results of the expert opinions or results of the VERA-2R risk assessment for about a year.¹⁸⁹ Another challenge in this context is that the time of release is not always known to all relevant stakeholders in advance. Even if, for example, the prison provides a statement in favor or against early release, the decision is ultimately made by the competent court.¹⁹⁰

Furthermore, security measures represent one of the greatest challenges in transition management for returnees. For example, an offender may have been in prison for several years but not been granted any exits, transferred to open prison, or granted a suspended sentence due to an unfavorable social prognosis.¹⁹¹ However, not having been out of prison once before release—not even accompanied—makes reintegration after release more difficult. For example, a stable housing situation and a permanent job are considered very important, but

179 After terrorist membership, violation of the duty of care and upbringing (§171 StGB) is the second most common offense for which female returnees were convicted in Germany, Koller 2025.

180 Interview with Amelie Schröder, Head of the Admissions Department of the Berlin Prison for Women on March 26, 2024.

181 Ibidem; the fathers of the children of female returnees are also often deceased, in prison abroad or their whereabouts are unknown.

182 Written information provided by a returnee coordinator on April 26, 2024.

183 Expert interviews on March 15, 2023, March 26 and January 22, 2024.

184 Interview with Kai Abraham, head of the prison for women in Berlin on March 26, 2024.

185 Pelzer & Moeller 2020, p.19.

186 See e.g. statements made by Borchert, B. (Head of the Berlin Juvenile Penal Institution) at the online panel discussion “Haftnotizen der Zivilgesellschaft. Einblicke in Angebote der Demokratieförderung und Extremismusprävention im Justizvollzug,” AG Strafvollzug und Bewährungshilfe on March 7, 2024.

187 Interview with Kai Abraham, head of the prison for women in Berlin on March 26, 2024.

188 Ibidem.

189 The entire report can also be requested; interviews with employees of the probation service on February 7, and April 29, 2024.

190 Interview with a prison employee on September 25, 2023.

191 Interview with a prison employee in Berlin on March 11, 2024; see also Pelzer & Moeller 2020, p. 24.

such preparations for release often cannot be made from within prison. This is also an important difference between women and men. Some female returnees were transferred to open prison or released after the completion of two-thirds of their respective sentences. For example, one female returnee reported that it was very helpful for her to have been granted leave before her final release.¹⁹² On the other hand, the prison management (very) rarely seemed to allow relaxation of measures for male returnees, even if this was supported by the ward services. As one interviewee put it, “If there’s one thing I’ve learned working for a public authority, it’s that you always want to be on the safe side,” especially when it comes to cases known in the media.¹⁹³

8. Probation Service and Reintegration

After release from prison, the probation service provides support for social reintegration. For them, cases involving extremist offenders and in particular returnees were “extremely time-consuming cases,” as not only are case conferences convened on a regular basis, but the high political relevance means that reports have to be submitted not only to the competent court but in some cases also to the ministry.¹⁹⁴ Due to the heightened sensitivity, the work is proving to be a “balancing act” between the effort to establish and maintain a relationship of trust with the clients on the one hand and the responsibility to pass on security-relevant information on the other.¹⁹⁵ It was considered helpful that probation officers can be released from their duty of confidentiality by their clients. Ultimately, however, more extensive time and practical resources were available for this specific target group than for regular released offenders—i.e., probation officers could hand over certain aspects to actors such as exit counseling and concentrate on their original tasks.¹⁹⁶ Since dealing with Islamist extremism has not yet received the same attention in probation services as other areas of criminal justice, there is still a need for structures and processes, especially for cooperation between probation services and civil society exit counseling.¹⁹⁷ After release from prison, the number of involved actors usually presented a “manageable field,” but in the case of extremist offenders and especially returnees, there were many more actors involved with different tasks, perspectives, and goals, such as various security agencies, counseling centers, returnee coordinators, and youth welfare offices.¹⁹⁸ This, as well as forming a common understanding, is why communication and agreements were so important.¹⁹⁹

Like transition management, several stakeholders also cited security measures as one of the biggest challenges for probation. For example, one interviewee reported that the probation service had to buy a pair of trousers for an extremist offender after his release, as there was no clothing store within the radius of the imposed house arrest.²⁰⁰ While there are still no empirical studies on “criminal law sanction practice” within guidance supervision and probation services when dealing with offenders from the phenomenon of Islamist extremism in Germany, involved actors report a “restrictive” implementation.²⁰¹ In this context, the issue of experienced stigmatization is also a challenge after release from prison. Many returnees (released from prison) were afraid of negative consequences as soon as their criminal history became known, such as at work.²⁰² For many, those convicted of terrorist offenses, similar to sex offenders, exerted a “deterrent fascination” that made social reintegration much more difficult.²⁰³ For this reason, some actors believed that it was not advisable to always fully inform the employer or children’s school about their returnees’ background. In at least one case, a male returnee had also had his name changed.²⁰⁴ Similarly, one female returnee reported that at least in the initial period after her release from prison, she decided to always share her story with one person

192 Interview with a female returnee on November 28, 2025.

193 Interview with a prison employee on September 25, 2023.

194 Interview with employees of the probation service on April 29, 2024.

195 Ibidem.

196 Interview with employees of the probation service on April 29, 2024.

197 Neitzert et al 2021; Pelzer & Moeller 2020, pp.17-19.

198 Interview with a probation officer in Lower Saxony on February 7, 2024.

199 Ibidem.

200 Interview with a prison employee in Berlin on March 11, 2024.

201 Pelzer & Moeller 2020, p.25.

202 Expert interview on January 22, 2024.

203 Interview with a probation officer in Lower Saxony on February 7, 2024.

204 Interview with employees of the probation service on April 29, 2024.

per institution “so that it’s not such a shock when it comes out.”²⁰⁵

At the same time, it was considered important to sensitize institutions to which released returnees are referred to. One interviewee reported of employers who prohibited praying in the common room or wearing a headscarf, which in each case led to the termination of the apprenticeship or loss of employment.²⁰⁶ In addition, many returnees felt “oppressed, stigmatized, pigeonholed by the authorities” and often could not understand why which measures, such as house searches or questioning, were being used.²⁰⁷ As one interviewee put it, “If I don’t convince people who are critical of the rule of law and just let them feel the restrictions, I don’t get them excited about the system.”²⁰⁸ The frustration and rejection resulting from such experiences are risk factors in social reintegration, while success factors include meeting basic needs (housing, food, financial benefits); a certain degree of self-determination; available new problem-solving strategies; and a new, non-extremist social environment.²⁰⁹ The social environment in particular can be decisive for reintegration. After a long stay abroad and a period of imprisonment, returning offenders were sometimes “completely socially isolated” and could therefore be tempted to reach out to former contacts after being released from prison.²¹⁰ In addition to the probation service, exit counselors from counseling centers, who in some cases have been in contact with returnees and their relatives for years, could be important points of contact.²¹¹

Regarding rehabilitation and reintegration, the (extended) family can play an “incredibly important role, in both positive and negative ways.”²¹² Family members can support returnees if, for example, a family takes custody of the children during the period of imprisonment (including the father’s family) and supports them with accommodation and work after their release. But the family can also put pressure on released extremist offenders if they continue to be active in the extremist environment or exert pressure on the returnee to immediately take on a certain role within the family again. Finally, in many cases, conflicts within the family were a factor in the radicalization process and departure. However, these conflicts are not always addressed or dealt with after the return and can therefore stand in the way of a new start. In this context, one actor reports that proper family therapy is only accepted in individual cases, but that support in the form of coaching or family help has proved very successful.²¹³ Finally, experience demonstrates that it is also very challenging for returnees to establish new social contacts beyond the family.²¹⁴

There is still little experience with returnees regarding the time after probation, partly because “this goodwill that they received institutionally because they were looked after as part of their probation service [no longer exists].”²¹⁵ In addition, one of the challenges is the very limited experience with released female extremist offenders and specifically with female returnees. “We don’t know, for example, how the scene [here] deals with the women, is she rejected, is she hyped because she was in Syria, because she was in prison . . . and how do the women manage to maintain what we were able to develop in prison.”²¹⁶ This was especially relevant as soon as extensive security measures and conditions are removed. One interviewee reported that after the end of guidance supervision—usually after five years—both the conditions and the support from the probation service cease completely from one week to the next, which is why exit counseling was an important point of contact that could provide long-term support.²¹⁷ Similarly, one female returnee reported that she was “a bit sad” that the regular meetings with her probation officer were ending before her probation period ended since these meetings had been a great support for her.²¹⁸

205 Interview with a female returnee on November 28, 2025.

206 Interview with a returnee coordinator on April 2, 2024.

207 Ibidem.

208 Interview with a prison employee in Berlin on March 11, 2024.

209 Interview with a returnee coordinator on April 2, 2024 and with a probation officer in Lower Saxony on February 7, 2024.

210 Interview with a prison employee in Berlin on March 11, 2024.

211 Interview with a returnee coordinator on April 2, 2024.

212 Ibidem.

213 Ibidem.

214 Written information provided by a returnee coordinator on April 26, 2024.

215 Interview with a probation officer in Lower Saxony on February 7, 2024.

216 Interview with Amelie Schröder, Head of the Admissions Department of the Berlin Prison for Women on March 26, 2024.

217 Interview with a probation officer in Lower Saxony on February 7, 2024.

218 Interview with a female returnee on November 28, 2025.

In addition, there are special hurdles for extremist offenders or returnees who do not hold German citizenship, such as obtaining a residence permit, recognition of foreign qualifications or work permits, and, in individual cases, language and cultural barriers.²¹⁹

9. Recidivism

Regarding recidivism of returnees, several interviewed stakeholders are cautiously optimistic. Although there were individual cases in which released returnees had reoffended, the vast majority of these constituted minor crimes.²²⁰ At the same time, many returnees were still in prison, under guidance supervision, or receiving support from the probation service. This made it all the more important to provide long-term accompaniment and support through exit counseling, which could also support returnees in crisis situations after these measures have ended. Finally, society's willingness to accept returnees and give them "a second chance" was also considered an important factor in stabilizing their professional and social reintegration and thus preventing reoffending.²²¹

10. Gender-related Factors and Differences

In principle, many interviewees emphasized how different the individual cases were and that the cases therefore required different support and services. Beyond this individual case analysis, however, some actors emphasized the particular challenges for female returnees. In addition to the aforementioned differences in terms of risk assessment, the role of children, and psychological needs, the pressure from the women's own family or social environment was mentioned in particular. Female travelers had often still been very young when they left Germany, had mostly lived with their parents, and had gathered little work and general life experience before departure.²²² By leaving the country and living in ISIS territory, the women and girls had often put themselves in a position where they were "fully dependent on a man" and hence spent a large part of their young adult years in an extreme situation as a housewife and mother. For female returnees, such a course of life meant that they were very quickly overwhelmed by administrative requirements alone, such as dealing with authorities or opening a bank account, as well as the requirements for carrying out official employment. On the other hand, returnee coordinators reported that more men than women were affected by difficulties in finding accommodation or employment after release from prison.²²³ Overall, the analysis of the conducted interviews confirms previous research findings, according to which (as in the area of right-wing extremism) there are "still few explicitly gender-reflective disengagement and deradicalization services or those that work primarily with women."²²⁴

219 Interview with a probation officer in Lower Saxony on February 7, 2024; according to the Federal Government's response, more than half of those who left for Syria and Iraq are German citizens. Although the remaining people do not hold German citizenship, they often grew up in Germany and have a permanent residence permit, for example. Deutscher Bundestag (German Parliament), 2024a.

220 Interview with a returnee coordinator on April 2, 2024.

221 Interview with probation officers on April 29, 2024.

222 Interview with a returnee coordinator on April 2, 2024 and with Kai Abraham, head of the prison for women in Berlin on March 26, 2024.

223 Written information provided by a returnee coordinator on April 26, 2024.

224 Baron et al 2023, p.332.

Conclusion

The rise of ISIS and the resulting departure of at least 1,150 men, women, and minors from Germany to Syria and Iraq, primarily to join terrorist organizations such as ISIS, had a lasting impact on the prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration of extremist offenders in Germany. The high number of travelers, returnees, and extremists operating from Germany led to an increase in the number of convicted offenders in the field of Islamist extremism and terrorism. In response, comprehensive adjustments have been made at federal and state level, especially in the past ten years, including development of concepts and regulations for dealing with extremism, further training of specialists, increase of cooperation with civil society and governmental exit counseling centers, and establishment of new positions such as returnee coordinators. The relatively high proportion of women and girls among those leaving and returning and the individual and complex case constellations are additional challenges. As of 2025, to deal with returnees and extremist offenders in general, comprehensive networks of official and civil society actors have developed which support the rehabilitation, disengagement, and deradicalization of returnees before, during, and after imprisonment. In particular, governmental and civil society exit counseling centers can complement each other and form a “strength of the German model.”²²⁵ At the same time, the profiles and experiences of returnees pose particular challenges for the actors involved, including military training and participation in combat operations (especially with men); experience in handling weapons of war and suicide belts (including by women); psychological and physical stress due to, among other things, the sometimes long-term stay in a war zone; and the simultaneous return of children who have been at least partially socialized according to ISIS ideology.

As the wave of departures and returns has now leveled off considerably and many prison sentences as well as probation and guidance supervision have expired or will expire in the coming months and years, this publication deals with the insights regarding the rehabilitation of returnees so far. To this end, 23 interviews were conducted between March 2023 and April 2024²²⁶ with various governmental and civil society actors within and outside the prison system in Bavaria, Berlin, Hamburg, Hesse, Lower Saxony, and North Rhine-Westphalia. Existing literature was also evaluated.

The key challenges in dealing with returnees that emerge from the conducted interviews’ analysis include:

- the assessment and management of security risks;
- false compliance;
- mental health problems (e.g., processing trauma),
- difficulties in processing the crime;
- the role of and how to deal with children of returnees;
- transition management and probation services in the context of a large number of different actors;
- mutual mistrust (especially between returnees and representatives of the judiciary and security agencies); and
- experienced stigmatization as “terrorists” or “(ISIS) returnees.”

Although only individual cases of recidivism among returnees have been reported so far, interviewees also emphasized that the success of social reintegration after release from prison could only be assessed in the long term and that there was still little experience in this area, especially regarding female returnees. While rehabilitation concepts and approaches do not differentiate between men and women, there are important gender-related differences. These include a lack of experience in assessing and dealing with the risks posed by female returnees; difficulties in coming to terms with the crimes committed by female returnees who refer to their roles as housewives and mothers with ISIS; processing trauma, including sexualized violence (in some cases experienced before departure); and managing contact with children during and after imprisonment or the role as single mothers of several children. In principle, this analysis confirms existing studies which determined that the involved actors “are professionally up to their task, but face a number of structural challenges.”²²⁷ Finally, there still seems to be a “dominance of the security orientation and the sanction perspective”—especially when dealing with returnees—which

225 Neitzert & Röing 2023, p.48.

226 One interview was conducted in 2025.

227 Röing 2021, p.2.

makes rehabilitation during and after imprisonment more difficult.²²⁸ Instead, a stronger focus on social reintegration would be desirable. The following recommendations for action were formulated based on these findings and existing research:

Policy Recommendations

1) Further expand interdepartmental cooperation and exchange of information and regulate this by law. In general, an interdepartmental or multi-agency approach has proven effective in dealing with extremist offenders, especially returnees, due to the complexity of the challenges and the large number of actors involved. Actors should jointly define their roles, areas of responsibility, and division of responsibilities at an early stage and set out in writing which actors will work together, how, and when.²²⁹ Legal regulations can help here. While Lower Saxony, for example, already has specific legal regulations for cooperation between the interior and justice departments, legislators in other federal states should also create corresponding legal regulations. In terms of the specific format, several stakeholders believe that the concept of case conferences has proven its worth for the exchange of information. In addition, smaller meetings with “personal continuity and clear roles,” as well as bilateral formats—for example, between exit counseling centers and security agencies— can also be helpful for the exchange of information.²³⁰ At the same time, data protection-compliant information exchange remains a challenge. Although the federal states generally have data protection laws—e.g., for the prison system—there seems to be “no clarity for many scenarios,” meaning that the exchange of information ultimately remains a matter of interpretation.²³¹ From the perspective of civil society actors in particular, the participation of intelligence services hinders a trusting exchange. In order for different actors to be able to share information “without revealing their professional secrets,” the departments and legislators involved should agree on specific guidelines and regulations.²³²

2) Promote trust between different stakeholders. In the view of some interviewees, there were already sufficient regulations in some areas, but their implementation depended very much on the individuals involved in the implementation.²³³ For this reason, formats were needed for personal, case-independent, mutual acquaintance in order to build trust, as well as regular contact in order to avoid long-term coordination problems.²³⁴ Formats that have already been assessed by the participants as helpful for building trust and exchange between governmental and civil society actors—such as the International Forum for Expert Exchange on Countering Islamist Extremism (InFoEx) at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) in cooperation with the BAMF (2018–2021), or the KN:IX connect—should be further developed accordingly and funded, for example via federal programs.²³⁵ Demonstrably, employees of civil society actors are sometimes unable to understand the structures and requirements of working in a public authority, which is why, for example, prisons, probation services, or youth welfare offices should offer work shadowing in order to generate mutual understanding of the respective processes.²³⁶ As building trust between prisons and external exit counseling services is a “time-consuming process,”²³⁷ roles such as ‘Prevention Officers’ have proven their worth, as they can act as a “bridge” in communication.²³⁸ This can reduce skepticism on the part of prison internal social services and security departments, among others. External exit counseling should be seen as a useful addition when dealing with extremist offenders, without calling into question the competence of prison staff.²³⁹ In fact, both sides would like to see more exchange, with the judiciary desiring more information on the methods of exit work and the counseling centers seeking more

228 Matt & Lisitzki 2021, p.24.

229 Pelzer & Moeller 2020, p.14.

230 Ibidem, p.23.

231 Benz 2023, p.369.

232 Interview with a probation officer in Lower Saxony on February 7, 2024.

233 Interview with probation officers on April 29, 2024.

234 Neitzert et al 2021, Röing 2021.

235 See German Council on Foreign Relations n.d.

236 Interview with probation officers on April 29, 2024.

237 Pelzer & Moeller 2020, p.14.

238 Neitzert et al 2021, p.24.

239 Statements made by Borchert, B. at the online panel discussion “Haftnotizen der Zivilgesellschaft. Einblicke in Angebote der Demokratieförderung und Extremismusprävention im Justizvollzug,” AG Strafvollzug und Bewährungshilfe on March 7, 2024.

information on security measures and case decisions.²⁴⁰ Such measures could, for example, facilitate access to exit counseling during pretrial detention. Fixed contact persons on both sides have also proven their worth in bilateral exchanges between security agencies and civil society organizations.²⁴¹ Furthermore, a clear recommendation is “that police agencies communicate the reason for their measures better to the clients themselves.”²⁴² For example, a trilateral exchange between the counseling center, police, and client has proven successful, in which the police could explain why and how specific measures such as house searches are carried out and at the same time establish personal contact.²⁴³ Finally, actors such as youth welfare offices should also be sensitized. One way to do so is through specific training provided by exit counselling centers, e.g., so that they could specifically introduce themselves to returnees as support and not unintentionally confirm prejudices like “They are only there to take my children away.”²⁴⁴

3) Secure long-term funding for civil society actors. Establishing trust-based cooperation between different governmental and civil society actors requires, among other things, planning security and the greatest possible continuity of personnel in civil society exit counseling. In addition, the social reintegration of returnees, especially after release from prison, and disengagement from a violence-oriented extremist ideology are individual, long-term, and non-linear processes. Actors such as probation services and youth welfare offices are often unable to provide long-term support beyond their mandate or a specific need, which is why in many cases exit counselors are still important reference points even years later. Ensuring long-term support should therefore be a key political concern, particularly in view of the possibility of reoffending, which can for example be triggered by a crisis situation. The promotion of civil society exit work should therefore enable long-term, professional counseling with staff continuity, such as through project durations of several years. This particularly applies to existing and established actors who have already been evaluated.

4) Strengthen interdepartmental cooperation in transition management and conceptualize a resocialization plan for probation services. Particularly in the months before and after release, the actors involved—especially the justice system, probation services, exit counseling, and security agencies—should coordinate closely.²⁴⁵ According to some representatives of the probation service, the routine transfer of data collected in prison, such as expert reports and the results of risk assessments on individual cases, to the probation service should also be intensified in order to prevent “work being done twice and three times.”²⁴⁶ This also includes clarity about the actors involved. For example, the person providing the exit counseling should be informed in advance of release or find out who the responsible probation officer is. At the same time, probation officers should have an overview of the relevant players, such as state security and exit counseling services.²⁴⁷ Since exit counseling centers can provide more intensive and long-term support to released returnees than the probation service, trust-based cooperation between these two actors is greatly important.²⁴⁸ Additionally, in preparation for release from prison, there should be a handover to other independent providers so that continuous support can be guaranteed beyond the probation service not only during but also after prison, e.g., regarding job searching, addiction problems, or family support. Apart from the coordination between individual actors, the current concept of transition management and probation services should also be reconsidered. Particularly after long prison sentences, more use should be made of the possibility of relaxation of measures prior to releases, such as to facilitate the search for housing and employment through outings.²⁴⁹ Given that necessary security measures make social reintegration more difficult in many cases, individual goals could be agreed upon in a resocialization plan that also postulates how “if [the goals] are achieved, security measures will be noticeably de-escalated.”²⁵⁰ Otherwise, ongoing monitoring and tight security measures in the context of progress and cooperation leads to misunderstanding and frustration, which impedes the released offender’s

240 Pelzer & Moeller 2020, p.15.

241 Ibidem, p.30.

242 Ibidem, p.31.

243 Interview with a returnee coordinator on April 2, 2024.

244 Ibidem.

245 Pelzer & Moeller 2020, p.28.

246 Interview with probation officers on April 29, 2024.

247 Neitzert et al 2021.

248 Expert interview on January 22, 2024.

249 Pelzer & Moeller 2020, p.19.

250 Ibidem, p.27.

social reintegration. It can also be helpful—including to identify false compliance—not only to create a common picture of the situation in case conferences or joint meetings, but also to take stock of the situation after the probation service has reached its halfway point and adjust goals accordingly. Long-term concepts should also be developed for the period after the end of probation and guidance supervision in order to be able to offer further support to a target group with particular challenges.²⁵¹

5) Promote education and training on the topic of extremism. Despite increased educational offerings about Islamist extremism, some interviewees believe that in some cases, prison staff continue to have difficulty distinguishing between constitutionally protected religious practice and extremism and, for example, underestimate religion as a fundamental protection factor.²⁵² There have also been too few training opportunities on specific issues such as dealing with returnees. Although existing training courses and multiplier training courses for the prison system and probation service are unable to meet the actual demand, each additional training course means a further investment of time for employees who have to be released from work to attend. For this reason, basic knowledge on the phenomena of Islamist extremism and terrorism should be supplemented with practical recommendations on how to deal with extremist offenders and continuous training on new developments, such as radicalization in social media.²⁵³ Further, for individual employees who work with returnees, for example, online training can be a flexible alternative that takes less time. The EU project EUTEx, for example, offers a training course on the topic of sustainable reintegration of returnees, which is aimed at both prison staff (especially psychological services and social workers) in probation services and civil society actors in the field of delinquency.²⁵⁴ Finally, several stakeholders argued that education and training should be extended to other phenomena, such as right-wing extremism.

6) Strengthen expertise on mental health in rehabilitation and exit work. Given the increased need among returnees with regard to mental health care, the justice system should strengthen low-threshold offers of appropriate approaches and specialists—especially with regard to trauma. The same applies to exit counseling centers, which should integrate basic mental health expertise into their work or ensure quick access to psychotherapeutic expertise via appropriate networks.²⁵⁵ In both cases, funding structures must be created for these efforts.

7) Give greater consideration to the role of gender in radicalization, rehabilitation, and disengagement processes. According to several interviewees, the needs of returnees were already addressed very individually. Gender, for example, was one of several topics that play a role in exit counseling.²⁵⁶ At the same time, many actors still lacked basic knowledge about the role of gender in radicalization and rehabilitation processes, as well as the practical consequences of these findings.²⁵⁷ Consequently, appropriate (further) training courses should be developed and implemented for those involved in the justice system, probation services, security agencies, exit counseling centers, and youth welfare offices, which promote an understanding of gender-sensitive practice, stereotypes and gender mainstreaming. The same applies to further development of risk assessment tools.²⁵⁸

8) Ensure long-term support for children of returnees and affected families. Although the youth welfare office supports adult returnees, returned minors, and their relatives during the first few months after their return, they are unable to provide long-term support for such cases.²⁵⁹ Exit counselling centers should be able to provide long-term support for the children of returnees, possibly with specialized projects such as Grenzgänger ProKids in North Rhine-Westphalia.²⁶⁰

251 Interview with a probation officer in Lower Saxony on February 7, 2024.

252 See e.g. interview with a prison employee on September 25, 2023.

253 Neitzert et al 2021.

254 EUTEx is an EU-funded research project which develops a European framework for a better reintegration of extremist and terrorist offenders. See “EUTEx Training,” 2022, <https://www.eutex.eu/training-and-tool>.

255 Röing 2021, p.5.

256 Koller 2024a, p.80.

257 Interview with a returnee coordinator on April 2, 2024.

258 Efforts are already underway to make VERA-2R more gender-specific. Custodial Institutions Agency n.d.

259 Interview with a returnee coordinator on April 2, 2024.

260 Grenzgänger: “Grenzgänger ProKids,” IFAK e.V., <https://www.grenzgaenger.nrw/grenzgaenger-prokids/>.

9) Evaluate approaches in dealing with returnees. In order to ensure evidence-based policy-making, all services or approaches in dealing with returnees—returnee coordinators, rehabilitation, disengagement, risk assessment, etc.—should generally integrate monitoring and evaluation components. State and federal programs should fund these components appropriately. Such an approach supports the objective identification of good practices and challenges and helps with further development in dealing with particularly challenging target groups.

10) Strengthen the external communication of German approaches. Although there is great interest in German approaches and experiences in dealing with returnees and, according to one interviewee, Germany is “so progressive . . . in international comparison,” official communication on this topic has been rather reserved so far.²⁶¹ Both international public relations and external communications by national actors should be strengthened. For example, evaluations of exit counseling centers repeatedly include the specific recommendation to expand their public relations work.²⁶² The same applies to governmental actors such as probation services, which should communicate both successes and challenges in order to generate more understanding for their work in German society. Since experienced stigmatization and discrimination are perceived as a particular challenge for released extremist offenders and especially returnees, awareness of the importance of rehabilitation measures in communities, municipalities, and local authorities should also be promoted through targeted communication measures, such as resources from the Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb). In order to promote social reintegration, it is also important to “avoid the increased impression that violent extremist offenders are given preferential treatment.”²⁶³

11) Promote research on the role of gender in radicalization and exit processes, rehabilitation in the prison system, and transition management and probation support for extremist offenders. On the one hand, more research should focus on the role of gender—including on differences and similarities between different forms of extremism—and large data sets should be compiled and evaluated in order to generate more reliable findings.²⁶⁴ In particular, there still appear to be gaps in research on the connection between psychopathy, trauma (especially PTSD and sexualized violence), and radicalization or the risk of recidivism among female extremist offenders. The role of gender in the criminal justice system has also not yet been sufficiently researched, including the extent to which gender-sensitive approaches can be integrated into practice, as often called for by researchers and practitioners. This also includes a scientific review of the evidence so far that many female extremist offenders behave inconspicuously in prison and show positive developments in their disengagement. To enable such research, national authorities and international organizations should improve access to gender-specific data (e.g., court decisions and national databases) for researchers. Finally, there appears to be insufficient empirical research on guidance supervision and probation services in dealing with offenders from the phenomenon of Islamist extremism. Due to the political attention given to the issue of recidivism, the Federal Ministry of Justice, for example, could provide appropriate research funding to evaluate existing data or collect new data over a longer period of time and evaluate it (also in an international comparison).²⁶⁵

12) Repatriate German citizens from Northeast Syria. The unresolved issue of German men, women and minors remaining in Kurdish-administered camps and prisons was not an explicit part of the interviews conducted for this publication. Nevertheless, there is broad consensus among the actors involved in the rehabilitation of returnees regarding the necessity of repatriation. All the actors interviewed for another study also emphasized the importance of repatriating German citizens.²⁶⁶ On the one hand, from a security policy perspective, only repatriation would enable an adequate risk assessment and management. On the other hand, their mental and physical health was increasingly deteriorating, making rehabilitation and disengagement more and more difficult.

²⁶¹ See e.g. interview with a returnee coordinator on April 2, 2024.

²⁶² See e.g. Reul 2023.

²⁶³ Ravagnani, L. 2021, p.17.

²⁶⁴ See also Mehra et al 2024, p.173.

²⁶⁵ See Renard 2020.

²⁶⁶ Röing 2021, p.36.

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List of Abbreviations

Bpb	Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (German Federal Agency for Civic Education)
BfV	Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution)
BKA	Bundeskriminalamt (Federal Criminal Police Office)
BMBFSFJ	Bundesministerium für Bildung, Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (German Federal Ministry for Education,

	Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth)
BMI	Bundesministerium für Inneres (German Federal Ministry of the Interior)
BMJ	Bundesministerium der Justiz (German Federal Ministry of Justice)
GBA	Generalbundesanwalt beim Bundesgerichtshof (German Federal Public Prosecutor at the Federal Court of Justice)
GenSTA	Generalstaatsanwaltschaft (German State Public Prosecutor's Office)
GTAZ	Gemeinsames Terrorismusabwehrzentrum (Joint Counter-Terrorism Center)
HKE	Hessisches Informations- und Kompetenzzentrum gegen Extremismus (Hessian Information and Competence Centre against Extremism)
ISIS	Islamic State in Syria and Iraq
JVA	Justizvollzugsanstalt (prison, correctional facility)
KrWaffKontrG	Kriegswaffenkontrollgesetz (War Weapons Control Act)
LKA	Landeskriminalamt (State Criminal Police Office)
LfV	Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz (State Office for the Protection of the Constitution)
NeDiS	Netzwerk für Deradikalisierung im Strafvollzug (Network for Deradicalisation in the Penitentiary)
NPP	Nationales Präventionsprogramm gegen islamistischen Extremismus (National Prevention Programme against Islamist Extremism)
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
StGB	Strafgesetzbuch (German Criminal Code)
StPO	Strafprozessordnung (German Code of Criminal Procedure)
StVollzG	Gesetz über den Vollzug der Freiheitsstrafe und der freiheitsentziehenden Maßregeln der Besserung und Sicherung (short: Strafvollzugsgesetz; German law on the execution of custodial sentences and measures of correction and security involving deprivation of liberty, short: Penitentiary Act)
VERA-2R	Violent Extremism Risk Assessment 2 Revised
VPN	Violence Prevention Network e.V.
VStGB	German Code of Crimes against International Law



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