

**CEP Research Report:
Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Released Islamist Extremists
in Germany**

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Executive Summary

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Over the last five years, convictions for offenses related to Islamist terrorism and thus, the numbers of incarcerated Islamist extremists within the prison system in Germany have increased sharply. In the beginning of 2018, the Federal Criminal Police Office (Bundeskriminalamt) identified about 150 imprisoned Islamist extremists as “dangerous”. Their rehabilitation and reintegration is a challenge not only for the juridical system but for society as a whole. While deradicalization programs within the penitentiary can provide the groundwork for it, the transition from imprisonment to an autonomous life after release is a highly vulnerable phase.

The released extremist has to find a job or apply for welfare, find a flat and (re-)build social relationships. During this course, he is inevitably confronted with obstacles and frustrations, which can lead to relapse into old patterns; e.g. reconnecting with the extremist scene. All the more important is that reintegration of (former) extremists is a common task for all actors; criminal justice, security authorities and civil society.

The present report provides an overview on practices and processes of rehabilitation and reintegration of Islamist extremist convicts in Germany. It identifies organizational and practical challenges in this process, as well as experiences with different approaches. As jurisdiction for prisons lies with the 16 German federal states, each of them follows its own approach to deal with this target group.

In some federal states, deradicalization programs are conducted by non-governmental organizations, while in others a public authority is in charge. Further, responsibilities and expertise are distributed in different ways between ministries of justice and the police.

The four German federal states Bayern, Berlin, Nordrhein-Westfalen and Niedersachsen, characterized by different approaches and stakeholder constellations, were selected for in-depth analysis. To this end, 17 interviews were conducted with practitioners in the field of deradicalization work in prison, with social workers and psychologists in the penitentiary and probation service, with representatives from departments of justice and criminal police. Further, publicly available data on deradicalization programs was collected and analyzed.

It is the task of the juridical system to establish the basis for deradicalization and positive reintegration of extremist convicts into society. **The study identifies six key challenges for the future treatment of former Islamic extremist prisoners.**

1) The process of deradicalization does not end with release from prison, but represents a long-term process of pro-social integration. Uncertainties about whether or to what extent a prisoner has deradicalized often results in maintaining a strict security regime within the prison (no relaxation of prison conditions or early release), as well as after release from prison. The latter involves control measures by the juridical system (“supervision of conduct”), as well as surveillance by the police. As these measures can also impede efforts of reintegration, one of the core challenges is to find a balance between necessary measures of security and measures to facilitate reintegration.

2) In Germany, responsibilities for deradicalization and reintegration of (released) extremist prisoners is divided between the penitentiary system, security authorities and civil society actors. Although interdisciplinary “case conferences” are being held within the prison and after release in each federal state, a common approach and long-term strategy for tertiary prevention is missing. Consideration should be given to setting up multidisciplinary prevention committees following a holistic prevention approach that aims to take joint decisions on case-related intervention measures involving all stakeholders, following the example of, for instance, the Netherlands or Denmark.

3) Within the penitentiary system, but especially after release, the range of offers and programs to support deradicalization and pro-social reintegration should be expanded. Interventions should be case-sensitive, responding to the specific needs of the (former) prisoners. This speaks for a parallel existence of deradicalization programs conducted by both, state agencies as well as NGOs. It would also be advisable to expand the classic deradicalization work by including psycho-social trainings, target group-specific psychotherapeutic interventions (e.g. traumatized returnees from war zones), as well as measures to support vocational qualification and labor market integration. Furthermore, it could be useful to establish or support programs that will operate beyond the period of probation or “supervision of conduct” in order to support long-time reintegration by activating civil society in the local municipalities, neighborhoods and Muslim communities.

4) During their imprisonment, prisoners get into contact with many different professional actors. For this reason, it is necessary to ensure that all occupational groups involved have a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of violent extremism. They should be able to recognize early signs of possible radicalization, but also avoid false positive assessments that may lead to stigmatization of prisoners showing interest for religious topics.

5) Policy makers should create regulatory frameworks that foster professionalization of deradicalization work. Program funding only designed for a limited period of time makes it difficult for the counsellors to build up relationships of trust with their clients but also with prison staff. Short-term funds also hinder the development and implementation of professional standards, the long-term commitment of skilled employees as well as academization of training

and knowledge production. Given this, a close exchange between counselling practice and academia would be desirable, as well as active participation of counselling practice in research.

6) Dealing with Islamist extremists in prison and after release is structured by the assessment of potential risks of recidivism, as well as assessment of the potential impact of interventions. Due to lacking empirical data and possibilities to conduct quasi-experimental studies, evidence base for risk assessment and intervention planning is largely missing. As it is impossible to provide exact forecasts, the ones responsible are afraid of misjudgments. This can lead to false positive assessments of recidivism risks, resulting in high security measures that impede pro-social integration. In order to improve forecasts and overcome fears of misjudgment, the different actors involved, such as police and NGOs, should agree on joint approach to not only share information but also to combine their expertise in order to come up with better and, if possible, jointly developed interdisciplinary prognoses. To this end, research efforts in the field of risk assessment should be increased. Additionally, guidelines must be developed on how different governmental and non-governmental actors can share information and expertise on a case in compliance with data protection regulations, which differ between federal states.