

The German Sauerland Cell Reconsidered

by Quirine Eijkman

Abstract

This Research Note examines the Sauerland terror plot, which is considered the most important homegrown jihadist threat to Germany. It provides an in-depth description of the backgrounds of key associates of the cell, their role in preparing the intended attacks and how the plot itself evolved between 2005 and 2007. The author aims to provide readers with a primary-sources based case study that can inform their own research on the Sauerland cell and European homegrown jihadism more generally. This piece also highlights the challenges researchers can face when attempting to obtain permission to use judicial documents in academic publications.

Keywords: *homegrown, jihadism, Sauerland cell, Germany*

Introduction

In 2007, German police arrested four men suspected of preparing one or more terrorist attacks in Germany. They have since become known as the ‘Sauerlandgruppe’ (Sauerland cell), a reference to the region in mid-western Germany where the four had been attempting to construct an explosive device in a holiday home. The plot had its origins in a training camp run by the al-Qaeda linked Islamic Jihad Union (IJU)[1] on the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan where the four conspirators had travelled in 2006. Initially, German nationals Fritz Gelowicz, Daniel Schneider and Attila Selek, together with Adem Yilmaz, a Turkish/German national who had grown up in Germany, had undergone paramilitary training with the aim of joining the jihad in Afghanistan. However, the IJU convinced them to return to Germany instead, where they began preparing their intended attacks by assembling explosive devices. It was during this period that they were discovered, as the United States’ National Security Agency (NSA) noticed veiled communications between the IJU and unknown individuals in Germany.[2] The NSA alerted its German counterparts, who promptly deployed a surveillance team code-named ‘operation Alberich’. Before three associates of the cell could use their 26 military detonators and 12 barrels of hydrogen peroxide—the same chemicals also used for the 2005 terrorist bombings in London—German law enforcement officials intervened. The fourth associate, Adem Selek, was arrested later in Turkey.[3]

This article provides an in-depth description of the backgrounds of the four key associates of the cell, their role in planning and preparing attacks, how the plot was conceived and how it evolved between 2005 and 2007. There exist various academic accounts of the Sauerland cell, some of which have a similar focus as the present Research Note.[4] Where this contribution differs, is in its attention to the group’s origin and evolution, made possible by the author’s access to significant primary source materials. As such it has a clearly different perspective than Stefan Malthaner’s recent study on the cell’s immediate social environment[5] or Guido Steinberg’s focus on the internationalisation of German Islamist terrorist groups.[6]

This Research Note also reflects some of the challenges that terrorism researchers face when attempting to access, and especially to publish on, primary sources-based material. The present has been able to study the Sauerland cell based on an the extended version of the German judicial verdict.[7] This source contains considerable details of the events and the suspects, basing itself in large part on information from German police files. Unfortunately, this extended version of the verdict is not in the public domain and permission to cite it as a source in this Note was not granted. Instead, the shorter and less detailed but publically available version of the judgment is relied upon as the most important primary source.[8] This material is

complemented with information contained in existing academic articles and media reports.[9] While the use of media sources raises questions of accuracy and reliability[10], the restrictions on using the full verdict necessitated looking for alternative sources. However, as the author was able to review the extended version of the judicial verdict, she was able to select those media reports that are most accurate and reliable.

As a summary of the most important aspects of the case against the Sauerland cell suspects, the abbreviated judicial verdict is a useful resource. However, some drawbacks of working with this publicly available version of the judgment must be acknowledged. First of all, it is focused on the four chief suspects, whereas in reality many more people were to a greater or lesser extent involved in the plot. Secondly, even though three of the key associates were caught in the act of mixing the ingredients for an explosive device, one can never be sure that they would have actually committed a terrorist attack. Last but not least, the activities of foreign or German intelligence and security services are hardly mentioned in the judgment, whereas several media reports suggest that there was cooperation with the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the National Security Agency (NSA) and the Turkish secret service.[11] In short, this particular source should not be utilised uncritically. Nevertheless, the abbreviated judicial verdict provides a solid foundation on which to base this analysis.

An Overview of the Criminal Case, 2007-2010

On 4 September 2007, three young men were arrested in Germany's Sauerland region by the Federal Criminal Police (*Bundeskriminalamt, BKA*) because they were suspected of preparing one or more terrorist attacks. A fourth arrest followed on 6 November 2007 in Turkey. The authorities, who with the involvement of more than 600 agents had kept tabs on the men for months, code-named the case 'operation Alberich'. However, this article will continue to refer to the group by the more commonly used designation Sauerland cell or group. Its plot was considered by the German National Prosecution Services (*Bundesstaatsanwaltschaft*) to be one of the most important homegrown jihadist terrorist plots.[12]

Two months after the criminal trial had begun at the Düsseldorf Higher Regional Court on 22 April 2009, the suspects decided to confess. Thereafter the defense strategy changed from challenging (among other issues) the state's surveillance practices, to cooperation with the federal prosecutor. The suspects' testimony led to an additional 1,100 pages being added to the 521 folders of evidence that had been collected by law enforcement officials during their 10-month long surveillance.[13] As the men's confessions matched the findings of the extensive criminal investigation, the court judged the information to be generally trustworthy. [14] Additionally, the testimony sheds further light on the period when the suspects stayed and trained in Pakistan and detailing how the terrorist plot evolved. After a nine month long trial, the suspects were convicted on 4 March 2010. They were sentenced to between five and 12 years imprisonment for, among other charges, membership of a foreign terrorist organisation and conspiracy to commit murder.[15]

The Sauerland Cell's Key Associates

The leader of the cell was Fritz Gelowicz (born in Munich, 1979). After his parents' divorce in 1992, Gelowicz lived with his father, an engineer.[16] His conversion to Islam began in the year he turned 16, in a period defined by his rebellious behaviour. Under the influence of the older brother of a Turkish friend, Gelowicz gravitated towards Islam. Although he adopted the Arab name Abdullah as part of his conversion in 1994 and was later circumcised, his religious views were initially moderate.[17]

These views gradually changed after the attacks of 9/11 and because of Gelowicz's growing interest in the

armed struggle in Chechnya. He dropped out of school and lived on the dole. His views started becoming more clearly radical in the summer of 2002, when he began attending radical sermons at a multicultural community centre '*The Multi-Kultur-Haus*' in Neu-Ulm, which at the time was one of the main Salafist centres in Germany.[18] Later in 2005 this centre was closed by the authorities because it was believed to have played an important role in sending youngsters on a path of violent jihad. For instance, the Centre clearly sympathised with the armed struggle of fellow Muslims in Chechnya and Iraq.[19] It was during this period that Gelowicz embraced a fundamentalist, orthodox interpretation of Islam.[20] Not much later, around 2004, Gelowicz also began to pursue his desire to join Islamist insurgents abroad. He was particularly inspired by the case of Thomas "Hamza" Fischer, a German convert who was raised close to Ulm and whom he had known personally. Fischer and others had gone to Chechnya to fight and die there between 2002 and 2003.[21] Finally, late 2003 was an important moment because it was around that time that Gelowicz met at Ulm's multicultural community centre his future Sauerland co-conspirator Atilla Selek.

Atilla Selek, a German national with Turkish parents, was born in Ulm in 1985. His parents were conservative Muslims, but for many years he practised his religion only superficially and with little regularity.[22] Like Gelowicz, Selek came to reorient himself on Islam through a friend. Selek also started attending the radical sermons that were held at the multicultural community centre in Ulm. There he became friends with Fritz, whom he came to see as his mentor.[23] Under Gelowicz's influence, Selek became more interested in Islam, started praying daily and attending the mosque regularly. His behaviour also changed: he became quieter and more withdrawn in his work as a car painter.[24] Selek developed a growing interest in violent jihad; he read the literature Gelowicz gave him and started downloading videos of beheadings. When Gelowicz suggested that they try to join Islamist militants as foreign fighters, Selek readily agreed. In September 2004, Selek gave up his job, telling his employer that, for religious reasons, he could no longer work alongside women. He too lived on government benefits from then on.[25]

The third associate of the Sauerland cell was Adem Yilmaz, who was born in Turkey in 1978 and holds both Turkish and German citizenship. He moved to Germany to join his father in 1986. In the summer of 2001, he met an older co-religionist and developed a more intense interest in Islam.[26] He followed media reports and debates with other Muslims on the internet and his religious convictions became stronger. He took an interest in publications by jihadist ideologues and in jihadist songs. In October 2002 he gave up his job as a ticket inspector for the German Railways, for 'religious reasons'. He lived on the dole, aside from one brief period, until his arrest in September 2007.[27] By the end of 2002, the American 'War on Terrorism' motivated him to join Islamist militants and help them in their struggle against all those who were using violence against Muslims.[28] Yilmaz decided to take part in the armed jihad in October 2003 and intended to go to Chechnya, but he initially took no action. He met Gelowicz in January 2005, while both were making their pilgrimage to Mecca. On the same trip he also encountered Selek, who was an old acquaintance of Yilmaz. During their Hajj, the relationship between the three men became closer and they decided to join the armed jihad in Chechnya or Iraq together.[29]

The fourth associate of the core Sauerland cell arrested in 2007 was Daniel Schneider, born in 1985. His parents got divorced when he was eleven. Furious rows with his mother led Schneider to move in with his father in November 2001. Initially he did well in school, but then dropped out of secondary school with one year to go. He had begun to challenge authority at school, was convicted of various crimes and experimented with alcohol and drugs. Starting at age thirteen, Daniel developed a strong interest in philosophical and religious subjects. By the time he was sixteen, however, he had become an atheist. He spent some time in the Amazon region, explaining that this enabled him to avoid contributing to the worldwide destruction of nature.[30]

Another change in his worldview took place at the end of June 2004, when he converted to Islam after having developed earlier an interest in the religion under the influence of an older Muslim friend.[31] He adopted the Islamic name Jihad and sometimes prayed uninterruptedly at the mosque for several days at a time. He also broke off his old friendships; all his new friends were Muslims. Influenced by media reports from conflict zones around the world, he became interested in violent jihad.[32] In January 2005 he was called up for German military service. He followed a three-month course in which he learned (among other things) how to handle explosives.[33] In October 2005, he met Selek while attending a mosque in Germany, and found him to be a kindred spirit. Two months later, he met Yilmaz through a mutual friend. Reports on the abuse of inmates by American wardens in the Iraqi prison Abu Ghraib prompted Daniel to take action. He decided to go abroad and to try to reach a jihadi training camp, with the aim of preparing himself for the armed struggle.[34] His stay in Egypt to learn Arabic, from February to the end of May 2006, consolidated these intentions.

Preparing for Armed Jihad Abroad

In the course of 2004 and 2005, these four core members of the Sauerland cell had developed a desire to take part in armed jihad. They were also eager to undergo thorough preparation in a training camp. Their initial attempts to reach such a camp were unsuccessful, but their efforts finally bore fruit at the beginning of April 2006. Through a contact they had previously met in Syria in August 2005, Gelowicz and Yilmaz were escorted to the Waziristan region on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. There they joined the IJU, an Uzbek terrorist organisation with links to Al Qaeda.[35] Almost immediately after their arrival, both men embarked on a course of paramilitary training. At the beginning of July 2006, Selek and Schneider also arrived in Waziristan for training. It was there that Gelowicz and Schneider met for the first time.[36]

It soon became clear to them that they were not being trained by the IJU to fight in Pakistan or Afghanistan. Instead, the purpose of the course was to equip the group with the knowledge and skills required to carry out acts of terrorism in Germany. Although that was not why they had gone to Pakistan, all of the men eventually accepted this assignment.[37] Selek was put in charge of liaison between the cell in Germany and the IJU leadership. The IJU leadership issued the following guidelines for their operations in Germany: kill a large number of Americans, include an Uzbek target on account of that country providing Germany with airfields from which German troops in Afghanistan could be resupplied, and choose a target that sends a clear, intimidating signal to the German population.[38]

Back Home: The Evolving Terror Plot

Selek returned to Germany in August 2006, Gelowicz and Yilmaz came back a month later while Schneider did not make the journey home until February 2007.[39] As a result, Schneider missed the start of operational preparations, which began in December 2006. Schneider's return had been delayed due to his detention in Iran.[40]

Although all four associates eventually made it back to Germany, the cell was essentially compromised from October 2006 onwards. At that point in time, the NSA had intercepted veiled communications between the IJU in Pakistan and at that point not yet identified individuals in Germany. This prompted the NSA to alert the German authorities.[41] This was also the period when Gelowicz was trying to implement his plans for committing a terrorist attack. In the weeks following his arrival, at the beginning of October 2006, he made as many as 216 visits to 68 phone shops in 12 cities. The goal was to conduct secure e-mail consultations with the IJU leadership in Pakistan and to search online for ways of purchasing large quantities of hydrogen

peroxide, which was to be used as main ingredient for an explosive device.[42] From December 2006 until the arrests in September 2007, these internet searches led to the purchase of 12 barrels of chemicals, which Gelowicz transported in a rented vehicle with false licence plates, most of the time under a false name and in disguise, to a rented storage site.[43] In December 2006 Gelowicz also divided up tasks within the cell. Yilmaz was put in charge of financial affairs, while Gelowicz and Selek were to bear joint responsibility for purchasing and storing the required precursor chemicals for bomb making.[44]

On 31 December 2006, a government surveillance unit witnessed a car with Selek, Gelowicz and two others driving back and forth several times past American barracks in Hanau. A few days later, one of the other passengers purchased a digital alarm clock, adhesive tape and batteries. The police and the security service concluded that the men had been snooping out a possible target and they expanded their surveillance operation. On 6 January 2007, the police searched the homes of Selek, Gelowicz and the latter's father, but did not find anything significant.[45] This made it abundantly clear to Gelowicz and Selek that they had attracted the German authorities' attention.[46]

On 20 April 2007, the American embassy in Germany issued an official warning, urging heightened vigilance. The warning was prompted by the interception of a coded message from Pakistan that 'the Kurds' were coming, although the authorities were not yet aware that 'Kurds' was a code word for detonators.[47] At the same time, German magazine *Spiegel Online* reported that 'the Kurds' should be regarded as belonging to the circles of the IJU and that those concerned must have undergone military training in Pakistan.[48] In June, the German Ministry of the Interior issued a public warning about young German men who had been trained in Pakistan and then returned to Germany, and it was reported in the media that the BKA was investigating an Islamist cell in the Rhine-Main region that was planning attacks on American targets.[49]

Despite the fact that the Sauerland cell had attracted considerable attention from the authorities and increasingly from the media too, Gelowicz did not see any reason to modify his plans or to temporarily suspend the preparations.[50] In fact, he was so confident of the cell's capabilities that he even gave a telephone interview to the magazine *Stern* on 13 July 2007 which clearly reveals he was aware of the authorities' interest in him and his colleagues. In the interview, Gelowicz complained that he and others had been baselessly labelled as *Gefährder*[51], i.e. elements posing a threat to the state, and were being harassed by the authorities because of their religion. He claimed that he posed no threat at all and asked to be left in peace.[52]

A week later, on 20 July 2007, while Gelowicz and Yilmaz went to purchase chemicals, they made several important operational arrangements. Yilmaz was to take over responsibility for communicating with the IJU and one more order was to be placed for hydrogen peroxide.[53] The German investigative and security services, which were by then well informed of the cell's communications and activities, went into action once the purchases had been made. They secretly replaced the barrels containing 35% strong hydrogen peroxide which the cell had bought with barrels containing the chemicals in a concentration of only 3%, too thin to serve as basis for an explosive device.[54]

At the beginning of August, Gelowicz acquired six detonators through a criminal contact while the IJU consignment of another twenty detonators finally also arrived at the end of the month.[55] On 3 September the men purchased the materials needed to make the explosives and the bombs in which they would be used.[56] In addition, Gelowicz went to an internet café where he printed out the bomb-building notes he had made in Waziristan. The three men agreed that they would choose a target once they had carried out a successful trial detonation.[57] In spite of their IJU handlers' order that an Uzbek target had to be included, the cell appears to have settled on the idea of attacking three American targets.[58]

On the way back from making their purchases in early September, the men happened to be stopped by German traffic police. One officer who went back to his car to check their personal details remarked, in a voice that carried to the three men, that they were known to the German federal police. After this check, the men were allowed to go on their way. It is striking that the men did not decide, given what they had just overheard, to stop or postpone their preparations for the attacks.[59] Thus, on the morning of 4 September, Gelowicz, Yilmaz and Schneider started boiling the hydrogen peroxide in order to raise the concentration to a level suitable for bomb-making.[60] Because the German police had swapped the chemicals, this did not lead to the expected results. The suspects thought that the problem must be due to rusty pans and decided to buy new ones. However, they did not have time to do so since all three were arrested by a special police squad that afternoon. This brought the Sauerland group's preparations for terrorist attacks to an abrupt end.[61]

Conclusion

This Research Note focused on the Sauerland cell, considered the most significant homegrown jihadist terrorist threat to Germany to date. A case, moreover, that reflects an interesting mixture of the local and the global; while the decision to prepare for attacks in Germany was made by the cell's contacts in the Waziristan-based IJU, the cell's members themselves were in many ways exemplary of the homegrown jihadist phenomenon.

The writing of this Note illustrates some of the difficulties that an author can face when trying to utilise state-owned primary sources for research on terrorism. In this case, the author was able to consult the extensive judicial verdict on the Sauerland cell but not allowed to cite from it. Instead, she had to rely on a considerably less detailed public version of the verdict as well as media reports and academic publications. While state agencies' privacy and national security concerns are valid, the more detailed and robust research on terrorism that access to such sources enables can also work to their benefit. It is therefore to be hoped that the future will see more opportunities to work with the rich primary sources on terrorism that state agencies frequently possess.

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Notes

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[2] Andrew Purvis, "U.S. Helped Nab German Suspects," *TIME Magazine* (14 September 2007).

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[5] Malthaner, "Contextualizing Radicalization".

[6] Steinberg, *German Jihad*.

[7] The CTC received written permission from the German Federal Prosecutor's Office to use the extended anonymous verdict on 31 July 2012 for a research project (Oberlandesgericht Düsseldorf. 6 Strafsenat, "Urteil in der Strafsache gegen Fritz Gelowicz u.a.," [Verdict in the Case against Fritz Gelowicz (et al.); Oberlandesgericht Düsseldorf, III-6 StS 11/08 u. III-6 StS 15/08, 2 StE 7/08-4 u. 2 Ste 9/08-4, Germany, 24 June 2010). In accordance with the terms of use, on 12 May 2014 they contacted the German Federal Prosecutor's Office for permission to publish an academic article on the basis of this verdict. Unfortunately, this was denied (phone call 14 May 2014).

[8] Oberlandesgericht Düsseldorf. 6 Strafsenat, "Mündliche Urteilsbegründung in der Strafsache gegen Fritz Gelowicz u.a.," [Oral Verdict in the Case against Fritz Gelowicz (et al.); Oberlandesgericht Düsseldorf, III-6 StS 11/08 u. III-6 StS 15/08, 2 StE 7/08-4 u. 2 Ste 9/08-4, Germany, 4 March 2010, 1-11.

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[13] Mündliche Urteilsbegründung in der Strafsache gegen Fritz Gelowicz u.a. 2010, 4; Musharbash and Rosenbach, "The Sauerland Cell in the Dock".

[14] Mündliche Urteilsbegründung in der Strafsache gegen Fritz Gelowicz u.a. 2010, 9-10.

[15] Düsseldorf Oberlandesgericht, "Sauerland-Verfahren": Gericht verhängt langjährige Freiheitsstrafen. Pressemitteilung Nr. 09/2010 Vom, 4 March 2010 / Mündliche Urteilsbegründung in der Strafsache gegen Fritz Gelowicz u.a. 2010.

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[18] Malthaner, „Contextualizing Radicalization," 9-11; Mündliche Urteilsbegründung in der Strafsache gegen Fritz Gelowicz u.a. 2010, 3-4; Musharbash, "The Sauerland Cell Testifies"; Rosenbach and Stark, "The Bomb Plot".

[19] Malthaner, „Contextualizing Radicalization," 9-11.

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[21] Malthaner, "Contextualizing Radicalization," 11; Steinberg, *German Jihad*, 63-66.

[22] Malthaner, "Contextualizing Radicalization," 10-11; Stark, "The Fourth Man".

[23] Steinberg, *German Jihad*, 61-62; Mündliche Urteilsbegründung in der Strafsache gegen Fritz Gelowicz u.a. 2010, 5.

[24] Steinberg, *German Jihad*, 61-62; Stark, "The Fourth Man".

- [25] Steinberg, *German Jihad*, 62.
- [26] Mündliche Urteilsbegründung in der Strafsache gegen Fritz Gelowicz u.a. 2010, 5.
- [27] Steinberg, *German Jihad*, 60-61.
- [28] Mündliche Urteilsbegründung in der Strafsache gegen Fritz Gelowicz u.a. 2010, 5; Musharbach, "The Sauerland Cell Testifies".
- [29] Malthaner, "Contextualizing Radicalization," 16; Nesser, *Jihad in Europe*, 477; Musharbach, "The Sauerland Cell Testifies".
- [30] Martin Knobbe, "Der 'Sauerland Bomber': Aus dem Leben Eines Terroristen [The Sauerlandbomber: The Life of a Terrorist]," *Stern.de* (22 April 2009).
- [31] Steinberg, *German Jihad*, 60; Mündliche Urteilsbegründung in der Strafsache Gegen Fritz Gelowicz u.a., 5.
- [32] Knobbe, "Der 'Sauerland Bomber'."
- [33] Steinberg, *German Jihad*, 89.
- [34] Knobbe, "Der 'Sauerland Bomber'."
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- [39] Malthaner, "Contextualizing Radicalization," 20; Steinberg, *German Jihad*, 71-72.
- [40] Malthaner, "Contextualizing Radicalization," 20; Knobbe, "Der 'Sauerland Bomber'"; "Terroralarm in Deutschland".
- [41] Steinberg, *German Jihad*, 89; Purvis, "U.S. Helped Nab German Suspects".
- [42] Mündliche Urteilsbegründung in der Strafsache gegen Fritz Gelowicz u.a., 6-7; Knobbe, "Der 'Sauerland Bomber'".
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- [54] Mündliche Urteilsbegründung in der Strafsache Gegen Fritz Gelowicz u.a., 2, 7.
- [55] Ibid., 7.
- [56] Ibid., 8.
- [57] Ibid., 7.

[58] Steinberg, *German Jihad*, 74; Mündliche Urteilsbegründung in der Strafsache Gegen Fritz Gelowicz u.a., 1, 6, 10.

[59] Mündliche Urteilsbegründung in der Strafsache Gegen Fritz Gelowicz u.a., 8

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