

## Spaces, Ties, and Agency: The Formation of Radical Networks

by Stefan Malthaner

### **Abstract:**

*The literature on radicalization as well as studies on participation in high-risk activism have emphasized the role of personal ties and radical networks in shaping pathways towards political violence. Yet, our knowledge about how these radical networks are formed remains limited. Drawing on an in-depth case study of the network around the so-called “Sauerland-Group” in Germany, this article examines patterns of network-formation, focusing on: (i) the role and function of different types of social ties in creating and sustaining radical networks; (ii) the importance of different spaces and events in initiating and reinforcing connections between activists; and (iii) the role of individual agency and pro-active connection-making in this process. In a more general sense, this article seeks to contribute to a better understanding of radicalization as a relational process, emphasizing the fact that individual trajectories are closely interlinked with radical networks as the dynamic setting of jihadist micro-mobilization. This network facilitates and shapes pathways into violent activism and at the same time is created and constantly re-shaped by militant activists.*

**Keywords:** Radicalization, Networks, Jihadism, Radical Milieus, Germany

### **Introduction**

That relationships and social networks matter is a rather well-established finding in research on radicalization. Drawing, in part, on earlier works in the field of social movement studies, authors like Marc Sageman and Quintan Wiktorowicz among numerous others have pointed out that participation in acts of political violence is also the result of pre-existing personal ties to militant activists, processes of socialization in radical movements, and small-group dynamics in clandestine cells.[1] Yet, despite these advances, our knowledge about *how these networks are formed* remains limited, which is partly due to a lack of adequate data, but also results from the fact that radicalization is often studied with a focus on individual characteristics and trajectories.[2] That network-formation processes are of particular relevance to the study of radicalization becomes clear if we look at the phenomenon of jihadist radicalization in the West, which often (if not always) starts as a “bottom-up”-process in which individuals radicalize within the loose context of a broader Salafist movement and actively seek to establish contacts with like-minded activists, with whom they form informal and largely autonomous radical networks, before they initiate ties with jihadist organizations abroad or, in some instances, carry out violent attacks on their own.[3] In other words, rather than representing a process of “being recruited” into an existing militant group, radicalization, in this case, often follows a rather complex, dynamic pattern in which the main social settings of radicalization – informal radical networks – emerge and evolve as part of the process.

Drawing on an in-depth case study of the network around the so-called “Sauerland-Group”, a group of four young men who were arrested in Germany in September 2007, this paper examines the formation of radical “grassroots”-networks as a setting of jihadist radicalization in Europe. Building on the recent literature at the intersection of social movement studies and research on political violence, it focuses on three elements in the process of network-formation: (i) the role and function of different types of social ties in creating and sustaining radical networks; (ii) the importance of different types of spaces, settings, and events in initiating and reinforcing connections and social relations between activists; and (iii) the role of individual agency and pro-active connection-making in this process. This implies conceiving of individuals not as passive objects of radicalizing influences exerted by a (static) social environment, but as entrepreneurs actively creating the ties and networks that then become the setting of their radicalization. In a more general sense, this article thus seeks to contribute to our understanding of radicalization as a relational process by emphasizing the fact that individual trajectories are closely and dynamically interlinked with emerging radical networks.

The limits of this research-design are obvious. As a single case study – even one that comprises more than 40 individuals and three separate local clusters – the mechanisms and patterns identified in the analysis are not generalizable. However, the article nevertheless seeks to identify potentially recurrent mechanisms and to offer a theoretical perspective that can be relevant to the study of political violence more generally, while being aware that specific processes in particular cases will differ with respect to the relative role of these mechanism as well as in their overall trajectory.

At the outset, a note on some of the central concepts used in the analysis is in order. The term “radicalization” is used here in the sense of *violent* radicalization, to refer to processes leading to acts of political violence. As a more thorough conceptual debate, which would need to address the complex relation between cognitive and behavioral aspects of radicalization (radicalization of beliefs vs. radicalization of actions) as well as the fact that radicalization is a fundamentally social process (of joining and disengaging),[4] is beyond the scope of this article, suffice it to say that “radicalization” will, in the following, denote to the composite processes by which, as Borum put it, “people come to adopt beliefs that not only justify violence but compel it, and how they progress – or not – from thinking to action”. [5] The term “radical networks” is used here in the sense of emergent patterns of informal social relationships between activists participating, or seeking to participate, in militant forms of action.[6] It is important to note that in research on terrorism, the term “network” has been used in various and quite different ways. In addition to the notion of networks as informal radical “grassroots-networks” adopted here, the term has also been used to describe the overall structure of particular terrorist groups, structured along a more horizontal, de-centralized pattern of semi-autonomous groups and individuals coordinated by central nodes (i.e. al Qaeda as a transnational network).[7]

### ***Social Ties and Radical Networks in Research on Radicalization***

As mentioned above, network-approaches have been popular in studies on participation in protest movements as well as in more recent research on radicalization. Numerous works refer to personal ties and informal radical networks in order to explain how and why individuals end up participating in acts of violence, pointing, in particular, to the role of friendship- and kinship relations in facilitating recruitment and to the dynamics of small groups that become “echo-chambers” for radical beliefs and exert peer-pressure on their members. [8] Yet, among these studies, only few undertake more serious efforts to contextualize radicalization within movements and milieus, and even fewer actually analyze the structure or the formation of radical networks, as most of them conceive of social ties primarily as a factor shaping individual pathways and the adoption of radical beliefs.[9] In the field of radicalization studies, Quintan Wiktorowicz was one of the first to focus on how individual trajectories are embedded in broader radical movements, emphasizing not only pre-existing personal ties that function as a social pathway for joining a militant movement, but also intense processes of socialization taking place within closed study groups where ideological commitment is reinforced by personal and emotional ties that render individuals ready to engage in militant action.[10] Even more influential, Marc Sageman has developed a perspective on jihadist radicalization in the West that takes into account its specific micro-mobilization settings. He argues that radicalization, in this case, typically takes place as a process driven by more or less autonomous cliques of like-minded friends in which strong bonds promote loyalty and group-cohesion. These small, tightly knit groups often form in the context of mosques, but then gradually withdraw from that environment and become the site of intensive interactions (echo chambers), in which radical perceptions and beliefs are reinforced.[11] Subsequent research has further elaborated upon particular places and settings of radicalization;[12] and introducing the concept of “radical milieu” Waldmann and Malthaner have drawn attention to the immediate, supportive environment of militant groups, which also forms the social context in which individual pathways of radicalization and recruitment are embedded.[13] Moreover, and a number of empirical case-studies provided valuable insights into the make-up of particular local jihadist networks,[14] without, however, more systematically examining the patterns in which these networks emerge.

In the field of social movement studies, research on participation in high-risk activism has from quite early on drawn attention to the fact that individual pathways are structurally embedded within socio-spatial settings

and networks emerging in the context of broader movements.[15] Donatella della Porta, in particular, has emphasized the crucial role of radical networks as micro-mobilization settings for militant activism.[16] As she points out, joining a militant or clandestine group is rarely an isolated, individual process, but is facilitated and shaped by informal cliques of comrade-friends formed within larger movements and smaller, radical milieus.[17] While small, dense cliques of activist-friends generate trust and strong ties that encourage high-risk activism, radical milieus also serve as relays, providing connections between militant groups and wider movements. Della Porta identifies a process of “mobilization of militant networks,” which she describes as “a mechanism of radicalization in the formation of specific milieus, in which radical practices are accompanied by cognitive radicalization as well as the development of strong affective ties in small groupings of friends-comrades”.[18] Yet, although della Porta, like few others, recognizes the importance of radical networks in processes of radicalization, she offers only limited insights into how these networks emerge and evolve.

### ***Analyzing the Formation of Radical Networks: Social Ties, Spaces, and the Role of Agency***

While, in research on mobilization and radicalization, the term “networks” is often used to designate relatively stable patterns of relationships that allow for collective action, it is important, as Diani and Mische argue, to highlight their dynamic character, which follows from the fact that networks comprise of social relationships formed and transformed by interactions: “since networks are constructed through interactions – and interactions always entail a degree of contingency and fluidity – then of course, networks change”.[19] Particularly in the case of radical “grassroots”-networks, one should be careful not to reify them as structures determining actions of the individuals involved, but conceive of networks as the outcome of patterned interactions, comprising ties that are situationally activated in often contingent interaction settings.[20] It is with this basic understanding in mind that an attempt is made here to develop a simple conceptual framework to analyze the formation and evolution of radical networks, specifying forms and functions of social ties and some of the conditions and mechanisms of their emergence.

#### *Forms of Ties*

A first, useful basic distinction, which is well established in the literature on micro-mobilization, is that between weak ties and strong ties.[21] Strong ties imply prolonged interaction, significant emotional investment, loyalty, and shared values. Weak ties, conversely, are characterized by lower levels of engagement and commitment and may consist in mere superficial contacts based on few encounters. Because these establish links between otherwise unconnected clusters, weak ties are considered crucial in enabling collaboration and the spread of ideas and information across a broader movement, whereas strong personal ties, which generate trust and loyalty, are important for recruiting new members into high-risk activism and underground groups.[22] In other words, weak and strong ties both fulfill crucial but different roles in sustaining political activism as well as in the formation and expansion of network-connections. Passy further specifies three main *functions* of social ties, namely socialization, structural-connection, and decision-shaping.[23] Social relationships shape more stable patterns of values, norms, and identities (socialization function) as well as more specific and short-term perceptions and expectations that influence decision-making. The structural-connection function of social ties, finally, corresponds to the role of personal relations in “structurally” linking potential recruits to other social activists.

#### *Formation of Ties*

With respect to the question of how social ties emerge, a first assumption that can be derived from these approaches, is that new social ties are often facilitated and created by pre-existing social ties. One gets to know new people via the friends and acquaintances one already has, which involves a simple mechanic of connection-making but also a social dynamic of bestowing familiarity and trust on new relations formed via mutual friends (who implicitly or explicitly “vouch” for new acquaintances). Thereby, it is important to take into account that beyond pre-existing social ties that create initial access to social movement activists, important connections are

also formed at later stages, based on newly formed comrade-friendships and acquaintances in a movement or in certain milieus, which inter-link different clusters of activists, connect non-militant activists to more radical cliques, or establish ties with terrorist organizations abroad.

Yet, new ties can also be formed in the absence of direct prior connections, by meeting people in “chance” encounters. These encounters are facilitated and to some extent “produced” by particular socio-spatial settings, shared membership in larger organizations or movements, or co-presence at events. In their earlier work on micro-mobilization, Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson have emphasized the role of different types of social settings in facilitating or constraining the formation of connections between movements and potential recruits. [24] Similarly, in a more recent article, Cross and Snow point out that *free spaces* created by grassroots activism, which are to some extent removed from state surveillance, provide spaces for militants to form ties with like-minded radical activists.[25] Thereby, beyond facilitating first encounters, particular social-spatial settings can also be conducive to the strengthening of relationships, providing safe-spaces for comrade-friendships to evolve.

Thus, an important element of the analytical framework developed here is the role of socio-spatial settings and events in facilitating the formation of social ties. Based on their relative openness and the types of relationships they allow to be formed, Lindekilde, Malthaner, and O'Connor have identified several types of spaces that are of relevance to processes of radicalization [26]: (a) *Neutral spaces* are settings of daily life which have no political or radical content but facilitate encounters and the formation of ties by creating structural proximity between otherwise unconnected individuals (workplace, gym, school, etc.). (b) *Open movement spaces* represent spaces – permanent or temporary (demonstrations, gatherings) – created by activities of the broader (non-militant) movement, including, for example, mosques or Islam-seminars. As these spaces are accessible for a wide range of activists and outsiders, and are characterized by a high turnover, they offer opportunities for a broad range of encounters and foster the formation of new ties between a broad range of hitherto unconnected activists. (c) *Local radical milieus* are spaces created by more radical parts of a movement in which a more or less stable group of people meets and interacts regularly, including settings such as, for example, smaller Islamic centers, “backstreet”-mosques, or associations around more or less openly radical preachers and activists. While still accessible for outsiders, they are not as open as the first category of spaces, and newcomers are noted and scrutinized and mechanisms of social control enforce a certain degree of conformity and limit defection. These characteristics also mean that they represent to some extent protected spaces that allow for dissident discourse to be voiced openly; but, at the same time, these are spaces that attract the authorities’ attention and participation entails that individuals may be identified as “radicals” and become the object of police surveillance or persecution. A last type, (d) *radical micro-settings*, are spaces created by smaller radical networks or groups, composed of sites such as private meeting places or shared apartments. Particularly in later stages in the process of radicalization, small radical groups tend to separate from larger milieus and meet in private places that facilitate much more intensive forms of (peer-to-peer) socialization and group deliberation, based on close and personal relationships, and are accessible to outsiders only if one is introduced by a member of that group. Thus, establishing new ties is limited to bringing in close personal friends, and the role of these settings is as much to reinforce established relationships as it is to create new ones. All of these settings are, of course, not only “real-world” physical spaces, but also can take the form of virtual (online) spaces, such as websites, online-forums, chat-rooms, and social-network-platforms, which, analogous to the categories described above, can vary in terms of the openness/restricted nature of access, and their connection-establishing function.

### Agency

One of the risks of conceiving of networks in processes of mobilization as simple “conduits” is to ignore the multivalence of social ties; that is, the fact that relationships can facilitate as well as inhibit participation.[27] Another, related tendency is to depict individuals as more or less passive objects of social dynamics, in which ties are formed automatically along a mechanistic logic and individuals’ preferences are shaped by socialization in cliques and networks that are seen as extant and stable. With respect to the processes in which networks are formed, this is misleading in two ways. Not only is there a great degree of selectivity and individual choice about which among a myriad of pre-existing ties and encounters becomes “activated” and significant for a

person's subsequent pathway.[28] There exists also a considerable amount of entrepreneurship and initiative on the part of (at least some) individuals who actively seek to connect certain activists or groups, create and sustain social relationships and thus establish and maintain radical networks. These represent the setting of their own micro-mobilization as well as the basis for their militant activism. While pre-existing ties and socio-spatial settings facilitate and foster connections and relationships, they are also “made” as a result of deliberate and goal-oriented actions of individual activists. As a result, particularly (but not only) in the case of jihadist radicalization in Europe, the distinction between individual pathways of radicalization on the one hand and the formation of radical networks as their relational setting on the other becomes blurred. As this article seeks to show, radical networks are built via connections actively formed between individuals in the process of radicalization, representing the micro-mobilization setting shaping individual pathways and, at the same time, the outcome of radicalization as a dynamic networking-process.

### ***The Formation of the “Sauerland-Group” and its Radical Network***

To illustrate and apply this analytical framework, this article draws on the case of the so-called “Sauerland-Group” and the network from which it emerged. The study is based on a combination of extensive use of documentary sources, including restricted court documents and police files, a collection of primary sources (newsletters of local Salafist groups, videos produced by members of the network, letters), and interviews with police-officers, local Muslim activists and religious leaders, as well as former members and family members of activists of one of the Salafist milieus connected to the case.[29] Successive stages of network formation, thereby, are illustrated by charts specifying the most relevant ties as well as milieus and spaces (for legend, see figure 1 below).

The name “Sauerland-Group” was coined by the press with reference to the area in Germany where the group was arrested in September 2007 while in the process of preparing explosive devices they were planning to use in attacks against US military and civilian targets in the country.[30] The three men who were arrested included two German converts to Islam, Fritz G. and Daniel S., and Adem Y., the latter a son of Turkish Muslim migrants. A fourth member, Attila S., had left the group shortly before. The four members of the group came from three different areas in Germany – Frankfurt, Ulm/Neu-Ulm, and Neunkirchen, a smaller town in the Saarland region – and had been members of local Salafist milieus and smaller friendship groups. Within these local milieus, small groups of like-minded friends developed, which then became connected to form a largely autonomous, informal jihadist network, which comprised more than 40 individuals. From that group, more than a dozen travelled abroad to join armed groups in Afghanistan.

#### *The Formation of Close Bonds in Local Milieus and Friendship Groups*

Social ties played a crucial role in initial phases of the trajectories of all four later members of the “Sauerland-Group”, triggering their interest in Islam and linking them to local Salafist[31] milieus or friendship groups. Yet, the types of connection and their later role in the process were quite different. In two cases (Adem Y. and Daniel S.) chance encounters in neutral spaces, rather than pre-existing ties, provided initial inspiration and contacts. Adem Y. started to take a renewed interest in Islam after meeting a colleague at work who was an observant Muslim and who told him about his religion in long conversations. This brought him to attend services at a Salafist mosque in the city – an open space of the Salafist movement –, where he met and became part of a circle of like-minded friends, while contact with his acquaintance from work broke off soon thereafter. Daniel S. met a young Salafist Muslim while playing basketball in a street-corner and, impressed by his calmness and self-confidence, became his friend and mentee. In contrast to Adem Y.'s acquaintance who never was part of a radical milieu, Daniel S.' Salafist mentor became a member of the emerging jihadist network and eventually travelled to Afghanistan, too. Together with two or three other young Muslims they formed a close group of “brothers” in Neunkirchen. They attended a local mosque, but with their increasing radicalization the group gradually isolated themselves within the (moderate) local Muslim community, making the group – even at this early stage – the primary setting of radicalization.[32] Fritz G. and Attila S. both found their way to Islam via pre-existing ties, namely childhood friends who had become observant (Salafist) Muslims. In both cases, these

friends invited them to their homes, taught them about Islam, and gradually introduced them to the milieu around the *Multi-Kultur-Haus* (“Multi-Culture-House”, MKH) in Neu-Ulm.[33] Within that environment, Attila S. and Fritz G. were not only exposed to a framework of interpretation that emphasized the alleged global persecution and suffering of Muslims and the glorification of jihad, but also formed relationships with other young activists, particularly a group around the preacher’s son that organized a religious study circle and produced a newsletter. For Attila S., Fritz G. became like an older brother and mentor and together with at least two other individuals they formed a close friendship group that took a more serious interest in violent jihad, together watching jihadist videos and making plans to join the jihad.[34] While, similar to Adem Y. and Daniel S., this small clique of jihadist friends gradually became the main locus of their activities. In the case of Fritz G. and Attila S., the group seemed much more embedded within the local milieu, where many held at least some sympathies for the *mudjahideen* in Afghanistan or Iraq.

In other words, radical identities and beliefs were formed in processes at the intersection of – and in interactions between – small cliques of like-minded friends, the larger milieus in which they had formed, and their broader social environment.

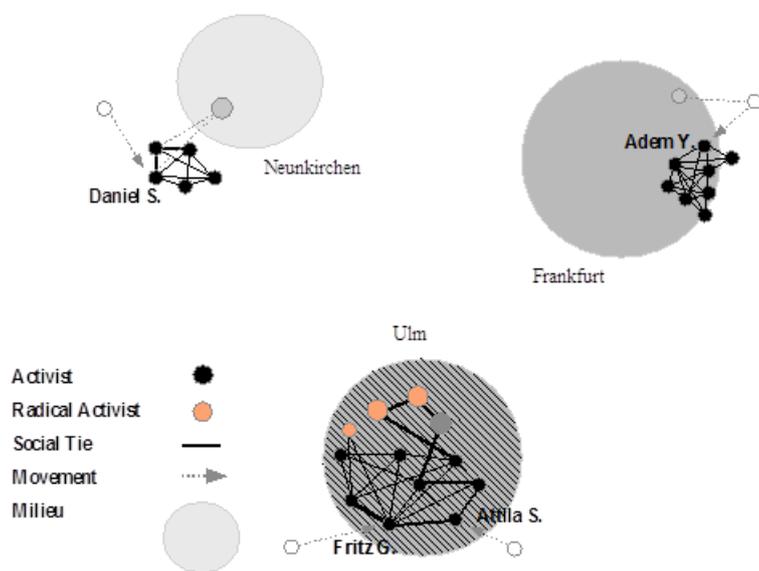


Figure 1: First Contact and the Formation of Friendship Groups in Local Settings

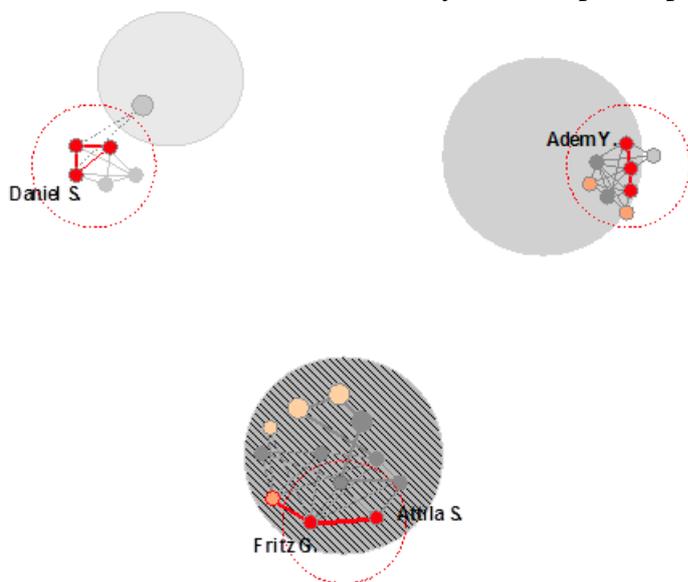
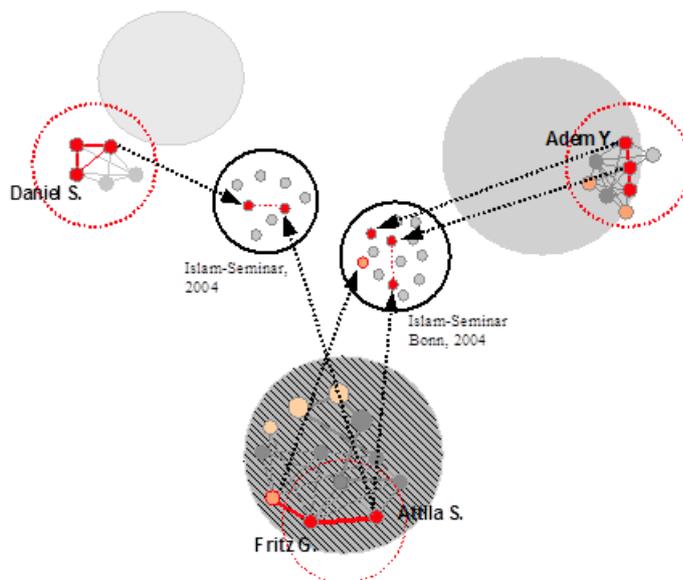


Figure 2: Local Jihadist Clusters

*Connecting Local Clusters: The Role of Open Movement Spaces and Virtual Spaces*

While local Salafist milieus and clusters of activist-friends were crucial in shaping initial stages of the various pathways of radicalization, the actual jihadist network from which the terrorist cell emerged was formed when these local clusters became connected and evolved into a trans-local radical network. In this development, weak ties that had been formed in open spaces of the broader Salafist movement in Germany and Europe, in particular so-called “Islam-seminars” organized by mainstream-Salafist organizations in different parts of the country, were important. Although armed jihad was not discussed in these meetings, they provided opportunities also for radically-inclined activists to meet.[35] In the case of the “Sauerland-Group”-network, a crucial juncture was a pilgrimage journey to Mekka in January 2005, where the contact between Attila S., Fritz G., Adem Y. and two other individuals was formed, facilitated by a previous encounter at an Islam seminar in Bonn.[36] The new-found group spent a great deal of time together during the *hajj* discussing the jihad, and agreed to stay in touch later on and to pursue their plans to join the armed struggle together. After several visits to Frankfurt, Fritz G., Adem Y., and Attila S. decided to travel to Damascus to learn Arabic in the summer of 2005 (in preparation for the jihad in Iraq, as they thought), where they were joined by several of Adem’s friends.[37] At the language school in Damascus, a chance encounter also helped to establish the connection to the cluster in Neunkirchen, when Attila S. met an acquaintance from an Islam-seminar in Bonn who was a member of the group around Daniel S.[38]



*Figure 3: Connecting Local Clusters - Connections Formed in Open Spaces of the Salafist Movement*

In other words, weak ties that were formed in open spaces of the broader Salafist movement became crucial in connecting the separate local clusters and in establishing the connections that gradually evolved into the close bonds of activist-friendship on which the radical network around the “Sauerland-Group” was built. Thereby, the formation of the core of the jihadist network also marked a step in individual pathways of radicalization, towards discursively preparing and eventually realizing the shift from sympathy for jihad to actually engaging in actions to travel abroad and to join the armed struggle. Forming the network and progressing from beliefs to actions, thereby, seemed to be inextricable part of one and the same dynamic.

*Consolidating the Network, Joining the Jihad: Connecting with Terrorist Organizations Abroad*

When the core-network had formed (by summer 2005 in Damascus), several activists quite pro-actively tried to find ways to participate in the armed struggle abroad. After some failed attempts, the connection through which the group eventually managed to go to Afghanistan was established, again, via a chance-encounter with

militants from Azerbaijan in the neighbourhood in Damascus where Adem Y., Fritz G., and the others resided. [39] They received military training by an Usbek group called the “Islamic Jihad Union” (IJU) in a training camp in Afghanistan, and it was the local IJU leader who suggested that they return to Germany to carry out terrorist attacks. Thus, while emerging from a jihadist network that had formed autonomously in Germany, the creation of the “Sauerland Group” as a terrorist cell was to some extent initiated and directed by an international jihadist organization.[40] Yet, back in Germany the group was, again, largely autonomous and – although the attack-plans were kept secret – relied on their network for assistance and support,[41] and remained connected to that network throughout the entire period up to their arrests. At the same time, they provided others within the network with contacts to the IJU and organized their trip to Waziristan. In other words, upon their return from Afghanistan, the network expanded and built an autonomous “jihad-infrastructure”, providing activists with connections and means to join the armed struggle in Afghanistan. Thereby, they “recruited” mainly via pre-existing friendship-ties and established spaces that served as radical micro-settings. Particularly Adem Y. established some kind of new sub-cluster around his previous friendship group in Frankfurt as well as via acquaintances from Islam-seminars.[42] From March 2007 on, he organized regular get-togethers at his house to talk about Islam, sometimes with barbecue in the garden, where Adem Y. took aside people who were willing to join the jihad for preparatory conversations to probe their commitment and to take care of practicalities.[43]

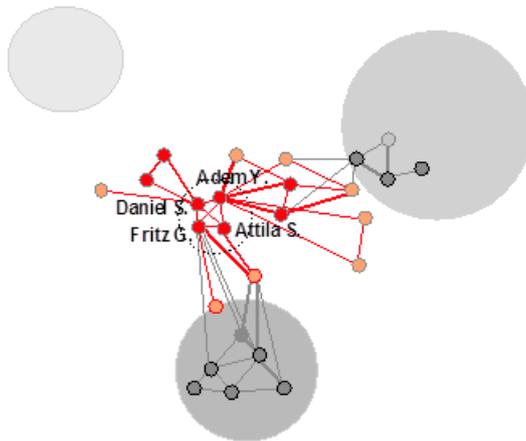


Figure 4: The Expanded Radical Network

#### *Dynamics of Strong Ties and Intensive Interactions in Micro-Settings: The Cell*

The terrorist cell represents a distinct micro-setting of radicalization that is characterized by strong ties and intense interactions among a small (and more or less confined) group of activists. Its function is mainly to reinforce violent radicalization, sustain commitment, prevent defection, and shape decisions. As mentioned above, the “Sauerland-Group” kept their plans secret from most members of the jihadist network and, even though embedded in the network, at the same time formed a very tight core, characterized by close, affective ties and intensive interaction. This configuration created small-group-dynamics of control and mutual reinforcement which were clearly instrumental in taking and sustaining their collective decision to carry out terrorist attacks; as discernible from Adem Y.’s testimony:

“You could note that Abdullah [Daniel S.] had his doubts and wavered a little. [...] I think, these were doubts about whether, from an Islamic point of view, everything [the attacks] was all right. [...] We then clarified this and explained to him [...] that these doubts were from his [inner] devil. We told him that he has to focus on his objective.”[44]

What this statement seems to suggest, is that the “shift from beliefs to action” is not a one-step event, but a continuing process of commitment to action, preparation, and actual violent act, that needs to be sustained in the face of doubts over the legitimacy of violence as well as in the face of technical or logistical set-backs. The terrorist cell, then, is the social configuration that is created in, and sustains, this process.

### ***Conclusions: The Formation of Radical Networks and Pathways of Radicalization***

Addressing a gap in the current literature on radicalization and jihadist micro-mobilization, this article examined the emergence of radical “grass-roots” networks from which militant groups emerge. It developed an analytical framework that focuses on three elements to explain processes of network formation: different forms and functions of social ties, the particular socio-spatial settings in which these ties are formed, and the role of individual agency in creating ties and forming radical networks. In line with Bosi, della Porta, and Fillieule,[45] it is argued that we need to pay attention to the intersection and interaction between the individual and the group/network level of analysis. Particularly (but not only) in the case of jihadist “grassroots”-networks it seems misleading to conceive of radical networks as pre-existing, static environments to which an individual is exposed. Rather, they constitute dynamically evolving relational settings, formed in processes in which, as the small case study makes clear, individuals often are active agents of connection-making, creating and shaping the networks as well as the spaces in which pathways of radicalization are embedded.

The case-study on the “Sauerland-Group”, while not claiming to be able to produce generalizable results, describes a number of rather typical processes and constellations. The jihadist network, thereby, emerged from connections between three local jihadist clusters (and a few isolated individuals), with pre-existing personal ties and new acquaintances creating initial connections to local milieus. These milieus, in turn, allowed for cliques of close activist-friends to form, which gradually separated from their social environment and became the site of intensive interactions in which radical perceptions and identities were created. Actively seeking to connect with like-minded activists beyond their local milieu, some of the young activists participated in events and visited open spaces created by the wider Salafist movement, where they formed ties that connected different local clusters of radical friends. Their activities created a distinct space, made up of mutual visits, meetings in private homes (and “garden barbecues”), shared apartments in Damascus, or common travels to certain mosques, which constituted a radical micro-mobilization setting that was further expanded via pre-existing friendship- and family-ties. The emerging radical network not only was the site of consolidating radical perspectives and identities, but also facilitated the shift to actually engaging in actions to join the armed struggle.

Obviously, the degree to which radical groups and networks are dynamic and fluent, and to which individuals are active agents (rather than passive fellow-runners) varies significantly. In some cases, individuals may, in fact, radicalize along a pattern in which they are “recruited into” an already established group and are socialized into pre-formed radical perspectives as more or less passive recipient of environmental influences. Yet, the point here is that this is not necessarily the case, and it is not only “leader-types” who have a pro-active role in establishing new contacts, but often also more marginal “follower-type” individuals. Moreover, while this approach seems particularly helpful to analyzing jihadist “grassroots”-networks in the West, it is equally relevant to understanding early phases of recruitment into established armed groups, which often include a significant amount of self-selection, pro-actively forming ties with like-minded activists, and the autonomous emergence of informal networks within broader radical milieus.

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## Notes

[1] Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).

[2] See Manni Crone, "Radicalization revisited: violence, politics and the skills of the body," *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 3 (2016), 587-604.

[3] Marc Sageman 2008, op. cit., 86-87.

[4] For an overview of the most relevant conceptual debates, see: Manni Crone 2016, op. cit.; Stefan Malthaner, "Radicalization: The Evolution of an Analytical Paradigm," *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 58, no. 3 (2017): 369-401; Peter Neumann, "The trouble with radicalization," *International Affairs*, 89, no. 4 (2013): 873-893; Alex P. Schmid, "Radicalization, De-Radicalization, Counter-Radicalization: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review," ICCT Research Paper, 2013; URL: <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013.pdf>.

[5] Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011), 8.

[6] On the concepts of networks, interactions, and relationships, see Mario Diani and Ann Mische, "Network Approaches and Social Movements," in: Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 306-325.

[7] See, for example: John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt (Eds.), *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2001); Eliane Tschaen Barbieri and Jytte Klausen, "Al-Qaeda's London Branch: Patterns of Domestic and Transnational Network Integration," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 35 (2001), 411-431; Shandon Harris-Hogan, "Australian Neo-Jihadist Terrorism: Mapping the Network and Cell Analysis using Wiretap Evidence," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 35 (2012), 298-314; Brian A. Jackson, "Groups, Networks, or Movements: A Command-and-Control-Driven Approach to Classifying Terrorist Organizations and Its Application to Al Qaeda," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 29 (2006), 241-262; Arie Perlinger and Ami Pedahzur, "Social Network Analysis in the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence," *PS*, January 2011; Steven T. Zech and Michael Gabbay, "Social Network Analysis in the Study of Terrorism and Insurgency: From Organization to Politics," *International Studies Review*, 18 (2016), 214-243.

[8] See, for example, Edwin Bakker, *Jihadi terrorists in Europe. their characteristics and the circumstances in which they joined the jihad: an exploratory study* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2006; URL: [www.clingendael.nl/publications/2006/20061200\\_cscsp\\_csp\\_bakker.pdf](http://www.clingendael.nl/publications/2006/20061200_cscsp_csp_bakker.pdf)); Leila Bokhari, Thomas Hegghammer, Brynjar Lia, Peter Nesser, Truls H. Toennesen, *Paths to Global Jihad: Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terror Networks*, Proceedings from a FFI Seminar (Oslo: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment; URL: [www.mil.no/multimedia/archive/00077/Paths\\_to\\_global\\_jiha\\_77735a.pdf,2006](http://www.mil.no/multimedia/archive/00077/Paths_to_global_jiha_77735a.pdf,2006)); Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 33, no. 9 (2010), 797-814; Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihadism in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Peter Neumann and Brooke Rogers, *Recruitment and Mobilisation for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe* (London: ICSR; URL: [http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1234516791ICSREURResearchReport\\_Proof1.pdf](http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1234516791ICSREURResearchReport_Proof1.pdf), 2007); Peter Nesser, *Jihad in Europe: Recruitment for Terrorist Cells in Europe*. Working paper (Oslo: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment; URL: [www.mil.no/multimedia/archive/00078/Recruitment-for-terr\\_78247a.pdf](http://www.mil.no/multimedia/archive/00078/Recruitment-for-terr_78247a.pdf), 2006) 2009); Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat" (New York: Police Department City of New York, 2007; URL: [www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/downloads/pdf/public\\_information/NYPD\\_Report-Radicalization\\_in\\_the\\_West.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/downloads/pdf/public_information/NYPD_Report-Radicalization_in_the_West.pdf)).

Works from the field of social movement studies that have influenced this literature include: David A. Snow, Louis A. Zurcher, and Sheldon Eklund-Olson, "Social Networks and Social Movements: A Microstructural Approach to Differential Recruitment," *American Sociological Review* 45, no. 5 (1980), 787-801; Doug McAdam, "Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 92, no. 1 (1986), 64-90; and Donatella Della Porta, 1995, op. cit. For an overview, see Stefan Malthaner, 2017, op. cit.

[9] As many studies reduce social ties to factors explaining the adoption of radical beliefs, they tend to remain, as Crone argues, within an "intellectualist" approach to radicalization. Manni Crone, 2016, op. cit., 597.

[10] Quintan Wiktorowicz, op. cit., 15, 20-25.

[11] Marc Sageman 2008, op. cit., 86/87. See also Sageman's work on earlier "generations" of jihadist terrorists: Marc Sageman, 2004, op. cit., 110, 120-121;

[12] Peter Neumann and Brooke Rogers, op. cit., 19-20; Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, op. cit., 20; Stefan Malthaner, "Contextualizing Radicalization: The Emergence of the 'Sauerland-Group' from Radical Networks and the Salafist Movement," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 7, no. 8 (2014), 638-653. Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann, op. cit.

- [13] Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann, "The Radical Milieu: Conceptualizing the Supportive Social Environment of Terrorist Groups," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 37, no. 12 (2014), 979-998.
- [14] Javier Jordan, Fernando M. Manas, and Nicola Horsburgh, "Strengths and Weaknesses of Grassroot Jihadist Networks: The Madrid Bombings," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2008), 17-39; Aidan Kirby, "The London Bombers as 'Self-Starters': A Case Study in Indigenous Radicalization and the Emergence of Autonomous Cliques," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol.30 (2007), 415-428; Bart Schuurman, Quirine Eijkman, and Edwin Bakker, "The Hofstadgroup Revisited: Questioning its Status as a 'Quintessential' Homegrown Jihadist Network," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 27, no. 5 (2014), 906-925.
- [15] Doug McAdam, op. cit., 77/8; David A. Snow, Louis A. Zurcher, and Sheldon Ekland-Olson, op. cit., 789-790.
- [16] Donatella Della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 166-170; Donatella della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 117, 143-144.
- [17] Donatella della Porta, 2013, op. cit., 167-168.
- [18] Donatella della Porta, 2013, op. cit., 117. See also: Lorenzo Bosi and Donatella della Porta, "Micro-mobilization into Armed Groups: Ideological, Instrumental and Solidaristic Paths," *Qualitative Sociology*, 35 (2012), 361-363.
- [19] Mario Diani and Ann Mische, op. cit, 309.
- [20] Mario Diani and Ann Mische, op. cit., 317.
- [21] Mark Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1973), 1360-1380; Doug McAdam, op. cit., 77/8; see also Florence Passy, "Socialization, connection, and the structure/agency gap: a specification of the impact of networks on participation in social movements," *Mobilization*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2001), 173-192; Jonathan Kennedy and Gabriel Weimann, "The Strength of Weak Terrorist Ties," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 23 (2011), 201-212.
- [22] Mark Granovetter, op. cit.; Doug McAdam, op. cit., 77/8; Donatella della Porta, 1995, op. cit., 167, 177-179; Donatella della Porta, 2013, op. cit., 117, 143-144.
- [23] Florence Passy, op. cit. 173-176.
- [24] David A. Snow, Louis A. Zurcher, and Sheldon Ekland-Olson, op. cit, 789-792.
- [25] Remy Cross and David A. Snow, "Radicalization within the Context of Social Movements: Processes and Types," *Journal of Strategic Security*, vol. 4, no. 4 (2011), 119. See also: Francesca Polletta, "Free Spaces' in Collective Action," *Theory and Society* 28 (1999), 1-38. Francesca Polletta and Kelsy Kretschmer, "Free Spaces," in D. A. Snow, D. della Porta, B. Klandermans, and D. McAdam (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Social and Political Movements* (Blackwell Publishing, 2013).
- [26] Lasse Lindekilde, Stefan Malthaner, and Frank O'Connor, "Relational Configurations of Lone Actor Radicalization," (forthcoming).
- [27] See Ann Mische, "Relational Sociology, Culture, and Agency," in: P. Carrington and J. Scott, *The Sage Handbook of Social Network Analysis* (London: Sage, 2001), 80-97; James A. Kitts, "Mobilizing in black boxes. Social networks and participation in social movement organizations," *Mobilization* 5, no. 2 (2000), 241-257.
- [28] Mario Diani and Ann Mische, op. cit., 315-316.
- [29] This approach allows, at least in some cases, for a triangulation of sources to contextualize and verify information, but also to cover a network of considerable size (more than 40 members in three sub-clusters) and temporal depth (8-10 years). In addition, to systematically trace relational processes, a detailed connection-matrix was compiled, specifying contacts between 17 core-members of the network, including the timing and socio-spatial setting of connection making, as well as the duration and quality of connections. After adding contextual information from the broader qualitative analysis, the results were illustrated in the form of network-diagrams that visualize connections between individuals as well as their embeddedness in broader milieus and socio-spatial contexts. To reference court documents, the following abbreviations were used: »File Fritz G.«, »File Adem Y.«, »File Attila S.« and »File Daniel S.« (Der Generalbundesanwalt beim Bundesgerichtshof, Ermittlungsverfahren Fritz M.G. und andere, 2 BJs 20/07-4, 2 StE 7/08-4, Sachakte III.1.8.11/8, Sachakte III.2.10/7, Sachakte III.3.8.3/5, Sachakte III.4.8.4/9).
- [30] The group had procured several hundred pounds of chemicals and had started to produce explosives which they intended to use against airports and Israeli and US targets in Germany. After having received a lead from a foreign intelligence agency, German police had put the group under surveillance for several weeks before arresting several members in September 2007. In March 2010, all four members of the group were found guilty and sentenced to prison terms between five and twelve years. For more information on the group, see Stefan Malthaner and Klaus Hummel, "Islamistischer Terrorismus und salafistische Milieus," in: Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann (Eds.), *Radikale Milieus: Das soziale Umfeld terroristischer Gruppen* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2012); Guido Steinberg, *German Jihad: On the Internationalization of Islamist Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University

Press, 2013); Martin Schäuble, *Dschihadisten: Feldforschung in den Milieus* (Berlin/Tübingen: 2011).

[31] Salafism is understood here as a religio-political movement that emerged from Wahhabism and other Islamic currents in the 1960s and 1970s, subsequently fragmenting into a number of diverse currents. See Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Anatomy of the Salafi Movement*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2009): 207–239. On the Salafist movement in Germany, see Stefan Malthaner and Klaus Hummel, *op. cit.*

[32] For details on this process and the role of Daniel S.'s friend and mentor see Martin Schäuble, *op. cit.*, 204–206.

[33] See also Guido Steinberg, *op. cit.*, 59–76.

[34] File Attila S., 18.

[35] See File Adem Y., 23/24. "Mainstream" here refers to a strand of Salafism in Europe that is political, with some purist elements, but not jihadist. See Stefan Malthaner and Klaus Hummel, *op. cit.*, 245–246.

[36] File Fritz G., 6–8, 316/317; File Attila S., 22/23; File Adem Y., 11/12.

[37] File File Adem Y.; 12, 23/24, File Fritz G., 8.

[38] See File Attila S., 48/49; File Fritz G., 15–17.

[39] File Fritz G., 25–50; File Attila S., 66; 75–85; File Adem Y., 87–130; File Daniel S., 9, 13–24.

[40] See File Fritz G., 36, 51–58; File Adem Y., 133–135; File Daniel S., 25.

[41] File Fritz G., 110, 124, 133/134; File Adem Y., 182–190, 238–242.

[42] See File Adem Y., 231.

[43] File Adem Y., 189–194, 231–267.

[44] File Adem Y., 317; author's translation.

[45] Lorenzo Bosi and Donatella della Porta, *op. cit.*; Olivier Fillieule, "Some Elements of an Interactionist Approach to Political Disengagement," *Social Movement Studies* 9, no. 1 (2010), 1–15.