

Book Review: Nina Käsehage. Die gegenwärtige Salafistische Szene in Deutschland. Prediger und Anhänger [*The Contemporary Salafist Milieu in Germany. Preachers and Followers*]. Berlin: Lit Verlag W. Hopf, 2018 (2nd ed.; 541 pp.) EUR 59,95. ISBN: 978-3-6431-4000-5.

Reviewed by Alex P. Schmid

This German-language doctoral dissertation by Nina Käsehage, from Göttingen University (2017), is the product of more than five years of field research into a fast-growing new Islamist religious movement in Germany (now counting more than 10,000 members). The thesis is partly based on participatory observation (involving more than one hundred interviews with Salafists), as well as the analysis of many of the messages and videos circulating among them on the Internet.

The author found that while the role of the Internet is significant in linking young German Salafists to militant Islamists abroad, the local centres of radicalisation are specific charismatic Salafist preachers. From her thesis, it appears that the Salafist milieu in Germany is, on the one hand, a closed parallel world, yet, on the other hand, it is internally quite heterogeneous.

The access the author managed to obtain to this community of 'true Muslims' (as they call themselves) resulted in a book that provides the reader with a unique window into the closed world of 'true believers' (as they also call themselves) in an open German society. The book is full of revealing quotes to illustrate the worldview of, on the one hand, the purist, political or jihadist preachers and, on the other hand, those followers attracted to each of these three streams of Salafism. The followers are mainly between 15 and 35 years old individuals in search of an identity and a new community to belong to. These Salafist preachers offer them religious solutions for their psychological and social problems, ranging from exorcism to suggestions of how to engage as foreign fighters in jihad.

While those following the purist preachers clearly tend to be violence averse, the line between the political Salafists and the jihadist Salafists is, when it comes to the approval of violence, more fuzzy. Indeed, hundreds of German Salafists have travelled to Syria in recent years, pulled by the establishment of a Caliphate; only a few have come back so far. As to push factors: many of those interviewed, especially women, had themselves experienced (sexual) violence in the families they grew up in Germany. Most females and males interviewed had experienced discrimination and humiliation in the outside world (e.g. on the job market) - something unfortunately further reinforced once they decided to wear characteristic Muslim clothes (jellaba/niqab).

This dissertation is an excellent example of 'German thoroughness': all observations are meticulously documented in 3,234 footnotes, often containing additional information beyond mere references - making this an outstanding academic exploration that is both critical and empathetic towards its subjects of observation. The volume, despite its highly nuanced theoretical assessments, concludes with twenty pages of very concrete and practical policy recommendations - such as involving some purist Salafist preachers and some disenchanted returnees from Syria in efforts to halt a further trajectory towards violence. Some of the author's recommendations have already found their way into German programs to prevent (further) radicalisation. Dr. Käsehage is a historian and scholar of religion at the University of Rostock, Germany.

About the Reviewer: Alex P. Schmid is Editor-in-Chief of 'Perspectives on Terrorism'.