

Dirk Baehr. *Der Weg in den Jihad. Radikalisierungsursachen von Jihadisten in Deutschland* [*The Road to Jihad. Causes of Radicalisation of Jihadists in Germany*]. Wiesbaden: Springer, 2019. 410 pp. ISBN 978-3-6582-7221-0 for Softcover version costing EUR 56,53/ ISBN 978-3-658-27222-7 for e-Book version costing EUR 42,99; <https://doi/10.1007/978-3-658-27222-7>

Reviewed by Alex P. Schmid

Few topics in the field of terrorism research have seen a faster growth than radicalisation- and counter-radicalisation studies. There has been considerable government funding, based on the correct notion that preventing radicalisation is much cheaper and more cost-effective than countering terrorism which stands at the end of a radicalisation trajectory. Yet individual pathways of radicalisation have been manifold, almost as much so as individual trajectories into ordinary and organised crime. It has been said that all history is biography. This also applies to many of those who become jihadists. Generalisations are difficult to make and preventing radicalisation is therefore anything but easy. Dirk Baehr, the author of the doctoral dissertation (University of Cologne) reviewed here, looked at the life stories of eight young men and one woman, the majority of them belonging to the so-called Berlin group who radicalised between 2006 and 2010. They were convicted to prison sentences between 2010 and 2016 by German courts for involvement in or support for jihadist terrorist groups. A careful study of court documents (and selected interviews) was the main source of information for the author but he matched or compared what he found there with findings from other sources and other cases in and outside Germany. The result is a well-researched and well-written study that sketches radicalisation processes in Germany between 2006 and 2013, with a special focus on the role of the Internet.

In the first two chapters, the author exposes all the simplistic explanations that can be found among German politicians and media as well as some researchers whose preoccupation with immigration and integration issues, the debate about the place of Islam in German society, or narrow security concerns stand in the way of a broader and more objective assessment of the factors involved in radicalisation. Dirk Baehr shows that the nature of the public terrorism discourse, shaped by the authorities, the media and some 'experts', often involuntarily plays into the hands of Salafist recruiters. The author challenges some of the widespread notions (e.g., that those Germans who radicalised and became jihadists were already strongly religious before they joined a jihadist group or were poorly integrated into German society). Nevertheless, he acknowledges that "The Salafist environment can be seen as a kind of incubator for the jihadist movements" (p.111). The author's discussion of alleged and empirically proven radicalisation factors in German and in other Western diasporas is of exceptional quality and clears the ground for his own in-depth investigation into the radicalisation of members of the so-called the Berlin Group as well as a few others.

Dr. Baehr's central research questions were: "How are jihadists in Germany getting radicalised" and "What are the main causes for the radicalisation processes?" (p.321). He identified complex, multi-dimensional factors but concentrated on exploring these six:

1. Moral indignation related to strongly emotionalised key events transmitted by media;
2. Psychological dispositions towards a negative development of personality and receptiveness for extremist movements as a result of deficient and/or conflictual socialisation within the family;
3. Perceptions of relative deprivation and a resulting feeling of insufficient (personal) recognition;
4. (Personal) crises about meaning (of one's life), identity crises;
5. Recruitment by a charismatic leadership figure into (terroristic) groups and the group dynamics promoting radicalisation;
6. Attraction of Internet propaganda and the development of virtual communities resulting as a consequence (pp.323-324).

Some of these factors (e.g., family problems) turned out to be stronger predictors of radicalisation than others (e.g., relative deprivation); the terrorist group became a family substitute for several of those described in this study. For the majority of them, the Internet played a very important role in the radicalisation process. The author develops a six-phase model for online radicalisation, breaking it down into (i) a search- and exploration phase, (ii) an indignation phase; (iii) an interaction [by Internet] phase, (iv) a confirmation and persuasion phase, (v) a joining and networking phase, and, finally (vi), a supporter phase. (p.336)

At the end of his exploration, the author concludes that “The path towards the jihad can be viewed as a dynamic ongoing process passing through several phases, which is influenced by situational, individual-psychological, social, group-dynamic and ideological factors conveyed by the Internet that interact with one another to influence the individual” (p.339).

In the view of this reviewer, this dissertation is a painstaking and nuanced analysis of a complex reality that can serve as an example of radicalisation research at its best as its findings can be applied to examining the processes of involvement with jihadism in other cases.

Dirk Baehr is a Berlin-based political scientist with a research focus on Salafism, terrorism and radicalisation.

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