

**CSS** STUDIE

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# Jihadist Radicalization in Switzerland

Zurich, November 2013

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Availability: This report can be accessed online at [www.css.ethz.ch](http://www.css.ethz.ch)

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# Executive summary

Even though over the last twenty years some of its citizens have been killed or kidnapped by various jihadist groups abroad, internally Switzerland has not witnessed jihadist activities on a significant scale. Unlike most Western European countries, in fact, no successful terrorist attack of jihadist inspiration has ever been perpetrated on its territory and there is no publicly available information indicating that concrete plans for an attack in Switzerland were ever made. Less than a dozen individuals have been tried for terrorism-related crimes, all of them involving non-violent activities of material support and propaganda. The number of Swiss residents who have traveled abroad to join jihadist groups is also estimated to be lower than in most other European countries.

Yet Swiss authorities are not complacent and argue that “Switzerland is not an island.” Counterterrorism officials have consistently claimed that there is ample evidence suggesting that some of the same radicalization trends that have long characterized other Western European countries also exist in Switzerland, albeit on a smaller scale.

This report seeks to assess the size and dynamics of jihadist radicalization in the country. Its main findings are as follows:

- While it is impossible to provide anything even close to an exact number, it can be argued that radicalization of jihadist inspiration involves a negligible cross-section of the Swiss Muslim community. There are probably only a couple of dozens of individuals in Switzerland who are actively involved in jihadist activities. Similarly, it can be argued that the number of those fully embracing jihadist ideology is somewhere in the hundreds, and of those with varying degrees sympathizing with it is somewhere in the lower thousands.
- Basing the analysis on the admittedly limited number of Swiss-based individuals who are known to have embraced jihadist ideology, it is evident that jihadist enthusiasts, as elsewhere in Europe, do not have a common profile. In the 1990s and early 2000s most of them were first generation immigrants who had arrived in Switzerland already radicalized. An example is the case of Moez Garsallaoui and Malika el Aroud, the Fribourg-based administrators of prominent jihadist forums who had contacts with the upper echelons of al Qaeda, or members of various cells providing support to North African-based al Qaeda affiliates. Following a pattern common throughout Europe, over the last few years an increasing number of jihadist sympathizers have had homegrown characteristics: born (or at least raised) in Switzerland, they radicalized independently in the country and operated largely outside of the framework of established groups. Occasionally some Swiss-based radicalized individuals manage to link up with al Qaeda-affiliated groups outside of

Europe and train or fight with them.

- Militants are not born in a vacuum. Rather, radicalization takes place “at the intersection of an enabling environment and a personal trajectory.” This report identifies militant Salafism as the ideological milieu from which jihadists, in Switzerland as elsewhere, can come from. An automatic identification of Salafism with terrorism is a gross analytical mistake. Moreover, even among those who interact with the most radical fringes of the Salafist movement, only a marginal fraction will make the leap into violent radicalism. But militant Salafism is the larger sea in which the fish swim.
- The report analyzes various factors that, often operating concurrently, contribute to radicalization:
  1. The internet: the report finds evidence of a small, loose-knit community of Swiss-based jihad enthusiasts who interact among themselves and with like-minded individuals abroad on jihadist forums and on-line social networks.
  2. Mosques: the overwhelming majority of Swiss mosques reject extremism, but small groups of jihad enthusiasts congregate at the margins of some of Switzerland’s most conservative mosques or in private prayer rooms.
  3. Gateway organizations: there are a handful of organizations in Switzerland which do not advocate violence themselves, but spread ideas that may lead others to do so.
  4. Links abroad: Swiss militants regularly interact with like-minded individuals from countries where the Salafist scene is more developed. It is common for Swiss residents to travel abroad to participate in seminars and for foreign speakers to come to Switzerland. This interaction is particularly strong with the Salafist scenes in Germany and in the Balkans.
- Patterns of linkage are very difficult to assess, but there are indications pointing to the presence of “gatekeepers” operating on Swiss territory that channel aspiring jihadists in the direction of established groups operating in Africa, the Middle East or South Asia.
- As in any other European country, radicalization of jihadist inspiration seems to affect only a statistically marginal segment of the Swiss Muslim population. But radicalization in Switzerland appears to be a limited phenomenon also when compared to other European countries. Four factors can explain this difference:
  1. Lack of an “infecting cluster”: Switzerland never hosted an openly jihadist mosque or high profile jihadists, elements that in other countries have been crucial in spreading jihadist ideology.
  2. Good degree of social, economic and cultural integration of most Muslims living in Switzerland, rendering them more resilient to extremist narratives.
  3. Demographic characteristics of the Swiss Muslim population: some 80% to 90% of Swiss Muslims trace

their origins to the Balkans or Turkey, where the vast majority of Muslims traditionally espouses forms of Islam that are tolerant and apolitical.

4. Switzerland's foreign policy, whose largely neutral stance does not provide a source of grievances.
- While these concurrently operating factors can potentially explain the low levels of jihadist radicalization in Switzerland, none of them is a guarantee. Each, in fact, presents weaknesses and exceptions. Many of the dynamics present throughout Europe are visible also in Switzerland, albeit on a much smaller scale. There are loosely knit milieus in Switzerland, both in the virtual and physical world, that sympathize with jihadist ideology. And occasionally individuals who belong to these milieus do make the leap from words to action.

## 1 Introduction

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001 virtually all Western European countries have considered terrorism of jihadist inspiration the most significant threat to their domestic security. Even though the last large successful attack (the July 7, 2005 London bombings) took place eight years ago, dozens of plots have been thwarted throughout Europe ever since. Moreover, a handful of small scale attacks have been carried out, albeit with mixed results, in France, Italy, Germany, Denmark and Sweden by militants acting more or less independently. Dozens of European militants have also been involved in several terrorist attacks outside the continent, from Australia to the United States, from Pakistan to Morocco. Scores have also joined jihadist groups fighting in conflicts throughout the world, such as Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, Somalia, and, most recently, Mali and Syria.

The phenomenon has not manifested itself with the same intensity throughout Europe. Great Britain is unquestionably the country that has seen the largest share of jihadist activities, both in terms of attacks and number of militants operating on its territory. But all large European countries have been targeted by jihadists and have arrested more than one hundred suspected terrorists each since 2001. Smaller countries have been affected with varying degrees of intensity. While Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark, for example, have seen a relatively high level of jihadist activities, Ireland, Greece and Portugal have been only marginally touched by the phenomenon.

Switzerland seems to belong to this latter group of European countries. Over the last two decades Swiss citizens have occasionally been victims of terrorism of jihadist inspiration abroad. Several Swiss nationals and permanent residents have been killed in attacks in Egypt (1997),

Pakistan (2002), Indonesia and Saudi Arabia (2003), and Morocco (2011). Swiss citizens have also been the victims of kidnappings at the hand of jihadist militants in Algeria (2003), Pakistan (2011), Mali (2009 and 2012), the Philippines and Yemen (2012). Nevertheless, internally, Switzerland has decidedly not witnessed jihadist activities on a large scale. No successful terrorist attack of jihadist inspiration has ever been perpetrated on its territory and there is no publicly available information indicating that concrete plans for an attack in Switzerland were ever made.<sup>1</sup> Less than a dozen individuals have been tried for terrorism-related crimes, all of them involving non-directly violent activities of material support and propaganda.

Yet Swiss authorities are not complacent and argue that "Switzerland is not an island."<sup>2</sup> Counterterrorism officials have consistently claimed that there is ample evidence suggesting that some of the same dynamics of radicalization that have long taken place in other Western European countries do exist also in Switzerland, albeit on a smaller scale.<sup>3</sup> In 2010, for example, director of Federal Police Jean-Luc Vez stated that in Switzerland there were a "few dozen" people that need to be "closely monitored" as potential violent jihadists.<sup>4</sup> In 2011 Minister of Defense Ueli Maurer warned about the small yet growing number of Swiss residents who visit training camps run by jihadist organizations throughout the world and the possibility they could launch attacks upon their return to Switzerland.<sup>5</sup> In 2012 Vez also stated that the threat of attacks similar to those carried out by Mohammed Merah, the French militant who killed French servicemen and members of the local Jewish community in the Toulouse area in the spring of 2012, in Switzerland is real.<sup>6</sup>

This study seeks to assess the situation of Sunni jihadism in Switzerland.<sup>7</sup> First, it will outline the historical evolution of both Islamism and jihadism in the country from the 1960s until the current days. Second, it will seek to describe the characteristics of the Swiss jihadist scene. In doing so it will also look at milieus that, while not openly or directly supporting it, could arguably provide a fertile ideological environment for violence of jihadist inspiration. Finally, it will assess the size of the phenomenon.

1 Potentially the only exception could be the plans discussed by a cluster of Swiss-based North African militants to attack Israeli airline El Al aircrafts at Zurich airport in 2005. The militants did reportedly conduct surveillance of the airport, but it is debatable whether their very preliminary activities could really be qualified as a plot. Interviews with Swiss officials, Bern and Zurich, May 2013.

2 Christiane Imsand, "La Suisse n'Est pas une île," *Le Nouvelliste*, June 22, 2012.

3 Ibid.

4 "Police Head Wants Jihadists Better Monitored," *SwissInfo*, June 27, 2010.

5 Valerie Graffenried, "L'Emergence de Djihadistes Suisses Inquiète les Autorités Fédérales," *Le Temps*, May 11, 2011.

6 Samuel Jaberg, "Un Aller sans Retour pour la Guerre Sainte," *Swissinfo*, July 4, 2012.

7 The report focuses on Sunni Islamism and does not analyze the presence of Shia militant networks in Switzerland.

## 1.1 Scope of the study

Before delving into the substance of the study, it is necessary to provide three important clarifications. The first one has to do with the scope of the study. This report is not meant to be a study on Islam or the Muslim community in Switzerland.<sup>8</sup> Rather, it seeks to describe a phenomenon that, in Switzerland as in any other country, affects a statistically insignificant percentage of the Muslim population. In 2005 the Federal Council estimated that “Islamists inclined to violence” are a tiny minority of the approximately 340.000 Muslims living in Switzerland.<sup>9</sup> Reports by various Swiss security agencies confirm this assessment. A 2008 report for the Sicherheitsausschuss des Bundesrates indicated that the Service for Analysis and Prevention (DAP, Switzerland’s old domestic intelligence agency) estimated that no more than one percent of Muslims living in Switzerland could be considered Islamist (that meant, according to the DAP, “practicing a rigorist interpretation of Islam”). According to the same estimation, less than two dozen individuals could be considered “potential jihadists.”<sup>10</sup>

Providing an even remotely accurate quantification of the number of “radicals” is a daunting challenge. The inherent arbitrariness of the definition of the term “radical” and the objective impossibility of reading people’s minds are just two of the factors making the effort almost futile. Yet, despite these inevitable assessment limitations, it is more than fair to confidently state that the overwhelming majority of Swiss Muslims are not involved in any form of violent Islamism nor have any sympathy for it.

This study aims at describing dynamics of radicalization of jihadist inspiration that affect a negligible cross-section of the Swiss Muslim community. While it is completely impossible for this author to provide anything even close to an exact number, it can be argued that the individuals actively involved in jihadist activities in Switzerland are probably, as authorities state, a couple

of dozens. Similarly, it can be argued that the number of those fully embracing jihadist ideology is somewhere in the hundreds, and of those in various ways and with varying degrees sympathizing with it is somewhere in the lower thousands. In Switzerland as elsewhere, jihadism is a fringe phenomenon, very debated given its nature but, in essence, a small numbers game.

## 1.2 Terminology

A second necessary premise is related to terminology. In this introduction and throughout the report the terms radicalization, Islamism, Salafism and jihadism are featured prominently. Each needs to be clarified and defined. It should nevertheless be stated that for none of these terms there is a universally accepted definition. Each is the source of endless debate among scholars and, given the important policy consequence of their definition, policymakers. What follow are therefore only working definitions adopted by this author.

The term radicalization (and the related terms radical and radicalism) has become extremely fashionable in the counter-terrorism community over the last few years. Yet its many critics argue that the concept is inherently arbitrary, lacking a common definition and often simply used to negatively connote ideas one side does not like.<sup>11</sup> It has also been noted that the concept of radicalism changes with time and space. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century Suffragette movement, for example, was in those days commonly labeled as “radical” for advocating giving women the right to vote – a concept that only 50 years later seemed almost pointless to debate. Similarly, ideas and values that are considered radical in one culture might be fairly mainstream in another.

Many of these criticisms are unquestionably correct. Nonetheless, despite its many limitations, the term radicalization is still useful to describe dynamics related to the field of political violence. Arguably one of the most complete definitions is that coined by Charles E. Allen, as it encapsulates many elements used by most scholars. According to Allen, radicalization is “the process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect societal change.”<sup>12</sup> Scholars often distinguish between cognitive and violent radicalization. Cognitive radicalization is the process through which an individual adopts ideas that are severely at odds with those of the mainstream, refutes the legitimacy of the existing social order, and seeks to replace it with a new structure based

8 For three recent studies on the broader issue of Islam in Switzerland, see, for example: Birgit Allenbach and Martin Sökefeld, *Muslimen in der Schweiz* (Seismo, 2010); Matteo Gianni, *Muslimen in der Schweiz*, report for the Eidgenössische Kommission für Migrationsfragen, 2010. See also Rapport du Conseil fédéral sur la situation des musulmans en Suisse, eu égard en particulier à leurs relations plurielles avec les autorités étatiques, en réponse aux postulats 09.4027 Amacker-Amann du 30 novembre 2009, 09.4037 Leuenberger du 2 décembre 2009 et 10.318 Malama du 1<sup>er</sup> mars 2010. Available at <http://www.ejpd.admin.ch/content/dam/data/pressemitteilung/2013/2013-05-08/ber-f.pdf>, accessed May 15, 2013.

9 Federal Council response on the subject “Violence islamiste et agissements terroristes. Degré de la menace?” February 23, 2005. Available at [http://www.parlament.ch/fr/suche/pages/geschaefte.aspx?gesch\\_id=20043633](http://www.parlament.ch/fr/suche/pages/geschaefte.aspx?gesch_id=20043633) (accessed on March 11, 2013).

10 *Imams Islamistes: Etat des Lieux et Moyens de Contrer le Phénomène*, report PRIOS, January 29, 2008; Rapport du Conseil fédéral sur la situation des musulmans en Suisse, eu égard en particulier à leurs relations plurielles avec les autorités étatiques, en réponse aux postulats 09.4027 Amacker-Amann du 30 novembre 2009, 09.4037 Leuenberger du 2 décembre 2009 et 10.318 Malama du 1<sup>er</sup> mars 2010. Available at <http://www.ejpd.admin.ch/content/dam/data/pressemitteilung/2013/2013-05-08/ber-f.pdf>, accessed May 15, 2013.

11 See, for example, Mark Sedgwick, “The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, No. 4 (2010): 479–494.

12 Charles E. Allen, “Threat of Islamic Radicalization to the Homeland,” testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, March 14, 2007, p. 4.

on a belief system that is completely different. Violent radicalization, as per Alen's definition, occurs when an individual takes the additional step of employing violence to further the views derived from cognitive radicalism.<sup>13</sup>

But even the adoption of a definition does not solve several of the issues related to radicalization. Who defines, for example, what an "extremist belief system" is? Similarly contested is the analysis of the factors causing radicalization. Few issues have proven more divisive and controversial among experts, both within and outside government, than trying to identify the reasons that drive people to embrace radical views and then to act upon them in violent ways. As a consequence, and absent reliable supporting evidence, theories about radicalization abound. Some focus on structural factors such as political tensions, marginalization and cultural cleavages, sometimes referred to as the root causes of radicalization. Others emphasize personal factors, such as the shock of a life-changing event or the influence of a mentor. Finally, several theories have been formulated to specifically explain the radicalization of European Muslims; these range from a search for identity to anger over discrimination and relative economic deprivation.<sup>14</sup> Most experts tend nonetheless to agree that radicalization is a highly complex and individualized process, often shaped by a poorly understood interaction of structural and personal factors. There is no one path to radicalism and no common profile, but each case should be analyzed individually.

It should also be clearly stated that radicalization exists in relation with several ideologies. This report will focus exclusively on the issue of radicalization of jihadist inspiration. But it goes without saying that the author is fully aware that in Switzerland, as in all European countries, radicalization exists in relation with right wing, left wing, ethno-nationalist/separatist, animal rights and various forms of single-issue extremism.

The next term that needs to be clarified is Islamism. Borrowing Peter Mandaville's definition, Islamism can be defined as "forms of political theory and practice that have as their goal the establishment of an Islamic political order in the sense of a state whose governmental principles, institutions and legal system derive

directly from the shari'ah."<sup>15</sup> But it must be said that Islamism is a highly diverse movement. While all embracing some core ideas, groups that can be described as Islamist differ significantly from one another over many issues, from theological to strictly political, from tactical to strategic.

Keeping in mind the unavoidable oversimplification of this categorization, one way of differentiating Islamists is according to their modus operandi. This yields three subcategories: violent rejectionists, non-violent rejectionists and participationists. The three categories can be graphically visualized as a pyramid. At the top of the pyramid are violent rejectionists, often referred to as jihadists – individuals and networks that, often linked to or inspired by al Qaeda, reject participation in the democratic system and use violence as the primary method to advance their goals. At the intermediate level of the pyramid are non-violent rejectionists, individuals and groups that openly reject the legitimacy of any system of government not based on Islamic law, but do not, at least publicly and openly, advocate the use of violence to further their goals. Finally, at the bottom of the pyramid are participationists, individuals and groups that adhere to that strand of Islamism that advocates interaction with society at large, both at the micro-level through grassroots activism, and at the macro-level through participation in public life and the democratic process. The Muslim Brotherhood, despite the diversity of its many incarnations worldwide, can be put in this category. When not addressed separately non-violent rejectionists and participationists will be referred to as "non-violent Islamists," although the author is fully aware of the inherent flaws of this term.

Of course the lines between these artificial and oversimplified categories are blurry and it is at times difficult to position groups or individuals in one of them. Similarly, it is not uncommon for groups and individuals to move up and down the pyramid over time. Since the Arab Spring, for example, several Islamist groups throughout the Arab world that for years had vehemently rejected any participation in politics began forming parties and running in elections. It should also be noted that Islamist groups change their positions, aims and tactics according to the environment in which they operate. It therefore must be taken into consideration that the characteristics, agendas, dimensions and challenges of Islamist movements in Europe are significantly different from those of their counterparts in Muslim-majority areas.

A term that will be used throughout this report and that therefore requires a clarification is Salafism. In its original manifestation, which took shape in 19<sup>th</sup> century, Salafism was a political-religious movement advocating a return to the allegedly uncorrupted form

13 For further analysis of the difference between cognitive and behavioral radicalization, see, for example, *The Radical Dawā in Transition: The Rise of Islamic Neoradicalism in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: AIVD, 2007); see also Froukje Demant, Marieke Sloodman, Frank Buijs, and Jean Tillie, *Decline and Disengagement: An Analysis of Processes of Deradicalisation*, IMES Report Series, Amsterdam, 2008, 12–14.

14 For an excellent overview of the literature on radicalization among European Muslims, see Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, No. 9 (2010): 797–814. See also Michael King and Donald M. Taylor, "The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, No. 4 (2011): 602–622; and Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 4, No. 4 (2011): 7–36.

15 Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 57.

of Islam embraced by the early followers of the prophet Mohammed as a solution to the many challenges facing the global Muslim community (*ummah*). Over the last thirty years the term Salafism has come to indicate also a contemporary ideological movement that, while also advocating a return to its early days as the best way forward for the *ummah*, has rejected the modernism of 19<sup>th</sup> century Salafism and is rather characterized by a deep conservatism, literalism and, in some cases, intransigence and intolerance.

It must be noted that contemporary Salafism is an extremely diverse movement encompassing countless currents and trends. With inevitable oversimplification scholars commonly divide Salafists in quietist, political and jihadist.<sup>16</sup> Quietist Salafists are those who believe that a strict and literal interpretation of core Islamic texts should shape every aspect of a Muslim's life but that such efforts should be limited to the private sphere, as they do not seek to be involved in politics. Political Salafists, on the other hand, argue that Islam is inherently political and that an involvement in public affairs is a natural part of their strict adherence to Islamic teachings. Jihadist Salafists, finally, adopt some of the most extreme forms of Salafism. Jihadist Salafism, or, more commonly, jihadism, is, in fact, the ideological sub-current of Islamism that advocates the use of violence to pursue its goals.<sup>17</sup>

While useful, this tripartite division is hardly exhaustive of the complex differences and dynamics within Salafism worldwide.<sup>18</sup> Over the last few decades Salafism has appealed to a growing audience not just in Muslim-majority areas but also among European Muslim communities. The reasons for this phenomenon are many, starting with Salafism's ideological appeal of simplicity, authenticity, meaning and moral superiority. Dutch scholar Roel Meijer fittingly argues that "in a contentious age, Salafism transforms the humiliated, the downtrodden, disgruntled young people, the discriminated migrant, or the politically repressed into a chosen sect (*al-firqa al-najiya*) that immediately gains privileged access to the Truth."<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, French scholar Mohamed-Ali Adraoui perfectly describes the appeal of Salafism on some French

and, by extension, European Muslims who find themselves in those conditions. "Muslims looking for existential answers are attracted by the 'absolute Islam' that Salafism provides," argues Adraoui. "This has led to a revolution in their lives. Instead of being passive 'followers,' they have become active 'models' for others. Where before the migrant lived on the fringe of society (mentally rather than effectively), as a Salafi he now stands at the centre of the world and embodies a sacred history. Morally and symbolically the migrant has climbed up the social ladder and is able to look down on the rest of society."<sup>20</sup>

It must be noted that the term Salafism has often been used as a de facto synonym of extremism and terrorism, particularly in Western debates on the subject. This approach is problematic. There is no doubt that Salafism, even in its more moderate and mainstream strands, adopts ideas and positions that are extremely conservative, controversial and at times severely at odds with the modern interpretation of, for example, women rights and religious freedom. And it is unquestionable that cross-sections of the Salafist movement not only endorse violence but directly engage in it. Yet Salafism remains a large intellectual movement that cannot be reduced to nor identified with extremism and violence. The vast majority of Salafists live in both Muslim-majority and non-Muslim majority societies without engaging in violent actions.

### 1.3 Methodology

Finally, it is necessary to briefly explain the study's methodology and sources. Documental sources are fundamentally important in any study on the subject. Both the NDB (Nachrichtendienst des Bundes, Switzerland's intelligence agency) and the Federal Office of Police (henceforth Fedpol) publish relatively detailed annual reports that outline their analyses of jihadism in Switzerland. The author also obtained some other government reports on the subject and records from terrorism trials held at the Federal Criminal Tribunal in Bellinzona. These documents, together with extensive interviews with several officials, were useful to assess many facts and the government's view on the subject.

Unfortunately literature on the subject is virtually non-existent. There are no books and only a handful of academic articles that tangentially treat the subject of Islamism (and, to an even lesser degree, radicalization, Salafism and jihadism) in Switzerland. Several Swiss newspapers have occasionally dealt with the subject, at times producing excellent reporting on specific cases.

16 See Samir Amghar, *Le Salafisme d'Aujourd'hui: Mouvements Sectaires en Occident* (Paris: Michalon, 2011).

17 It should be noted that the term jihadism is highly controversial. The term jihad means "struggle" in Arabic and takes different meanings according to the context. Scholars traditionally distinguish between the "greater jihad" (an inner struggle of self-improvement to please God) and the "lesser jihad" (armed struggle to please God, from which the somewhat simplistic translation of jihad as "holy war"). Over the last few decades the term has commonly been used both in the Muslim world and in the West to indicate the ideology and the movements that advocate violence to pursue Islamist goals. See, among many, David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

18 For more see Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

19 Roel Meijer, "Introduction," in Roel Meijer, ed., *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 13.

20 Mohamed-Ali Adraoui, "Salafism in France: Ideology, Practices and Contradictions," in Roel Meijer, ed., *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 367.



Similarly the Geneva Centre for Training and Analysis of Terrorism has published a few reports providing in depth analysis of a few Swiss-linked cases. But, overall, the subject is largely unexplored and this study represents the first attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon in Switzerland.

In order to do so the author compensated the paucity of literature with extensive original work. Some 60 interviews were conducted in Switzerland over the span on 12 months (from July 2012 to June 2013). The interviewees range from government officials (at the federal, cantonal and city level) to academics, from Muslim community leaders to members of the Swiss Salafist community. A handful of interviews with experts and government officials were conducted abroad (in Germany, Italy, Spain and Great Britain). Some interviewees are quoted by name, some only by their positions, others are not cited to respect their anonymity.<sup>21</sup>

The author also researched the online presence of Swiss Salafists. The websites, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts of several individuals arguably belonging to the country's informal Salafist community provided important insights into the thinking and activities of that milieu. It goes without saying that information coming from these sources, while unquestionably important, should be taken with a grain of salt, given the impossibility of verifying in many cases the true identity of online users.

In essence, the author has sought to conduct an objective, 360 degree analysis of the phenomenon of radicalization of jihadist inspiration in Switzerland. The limits of this work are many. Identifying radicalized individuals, describing their radicalization process and the activities of the physical and virtual networks they belong to is an extremely difficult task. In other European countries a handful of studies have sought to do so, analyzing case studies of individuals or small clusters.<sup>22</sup> But doing so at the national level, even in a relatively small country like Switzerland, is virtually impossible.

This is not, in any case, the aim of this study, which does not seek to be a complete survey of all jihadist activities in Switzerland. Rather, all this study can do is identify some case studies, observe dynamics and highlight general trends. It can then provide some analysis, assessing the current situation and outlining potential developments. In doing so it takes into consideration similarities and differences with other Western European countries, which can provide a useful frame of reference. But this study does not claim to portray all radicalization dynamics in Switzerland. Nor does it claim to be infallible in its analysis of those it does portray. It is, in essence, only an

overview, a general framework supported by a few examples and, hopefully, a base for further studies and debate.

## 2 Historical evolution of Islamism and jihadism in Switzerland

As stated, this report does not seek to describe the phenomenon of Islam in Switzerland. Rather, it aims at analyzing dynamics related to Islamism and radicalization of jihadist inspiration, phenomena that do not affect large cross sections of the Swiss Muslim population. Yet, in order to better understand the latter phenomena in their full context, it is necessary to briefly outline the history and nature of Islam and Muslims in the country.

The presence of a sizeable Muslim population on Swiss territory is a relatively recent phenomenon and one very much related to migration. It began in the 1960s, when economic migrants – mostly poorly educated men from rural areas of the former Yugoslavia – arrived in Switzerland to work in low-skilled jobs. While most of them were not deeply religious, Islam provided for them a sense of cultural identity and most of the organizations they established upon arrival in the country were based on a mix of religion and national origin.<sup>23</sup>

The number of Muslims living in the country, estimated at approximately 16,000 in 1970, grew significantly throughout the 1970s, as family reunifications allowed the first generation of migrants to bring their families to Switzerland. With the arrival of women and children, interactions between Muslims and Swiss society began to take place not only in factories but also in schools, hospitals, and housing projects, with public administrations and local institutions. As Muslims transitioned from being temporary laborers to permanent residents and, in some cases, citizens, Islam became more visible and stable.

The number of Muslims living in Switzerland grew steadily throughout the 1980s and 1990s. This growth was due partially to the birth of the children of the immigrants of the previous decades and partially to the arrival of thousands of asylum seekers from various parts of the world. A particularly large number of refugees came from various areas of the Balkans, where several conflicts plagued the region throughout the 1990s.

As a result of these flows the national census of 2000 counted 310,807 Muslims living in Switzerland, roughly 4.3% of the total population. Authorities

<sup>21</sup> All interviewees were extensively informed about the scope and aims of the study before their interviews.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Quintan Wiktorowitz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), which provided an excellent extended case study of Al-Muhajiroun in Great Britain.

<sup>23</sup> Joceline Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the United States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

estimate that today that number is between 340,000 and 400,000, about 5% of the population.<sup>24</sup> This presence is not evenly divided throughout the country, as more heavily industrialized cantons have a larger presence – a natural consequence of immigration patterns. Moreover, more Muslims live in the German-speaking part of the country than in the French-speaking part (both in absolute terms and percentage-wise).

The Swiss Muslim community is characterized by a high level of diversity, making it therefore more appropriate to speak of Muslim “communities.” About 60% of Swiss Muslims trace their origins to an array of South Eastern European countries (Bosnia, Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo). Some 20% have their roots in Turkey.<sup>25</sup> Muslims from the Middle East, South Asia, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa make up little more than 10% of the total Muslim population. In what represents a unique case in Europe, it can be argued that, considering Eastern Europeans, Turks and converts, some 80 to 90 percent of Swiss Muslims trace their origin to Europe. It will later be argued that this fact might have implications on the degree of radicalization in Switzerland.

Most studies, referencing several socio-economic studies, describe the vast majority of Muslims living in Switzerland as well integrated.<sup>26</sup> It is also important to note that, despite common perceptions, most Swiss Muslims relate to their faith in ways quite similar to members of the country’s other religions. A 2005 study for the Federal Commission for Foreigners tellingly showed that only 10–15% of Swiss Muslims practice their faith actively and only 11% attend religious services on a weekly basis – numbers similar to Christians.<sup>27</sup> Levels of religiosity vary from community to community, with Arabs reporting significantly higher levels than other groups.

There are some 350 Islamic organizations controlling mosques – only a handful of which are purpose-built – and several informal prayer rooms throughout the country.<sup>28</sup> Most mosques and Islamic centers seek to function not just as places of worship but also as centers

of social interaction. Most Islamic organizations are small and operate at the local level, but in most large and mid-size cities and in several cantons there are umbrella organizations seeking to bring together all or most of the area’s entities.<sup>29</sup>

A handful of organizations, like the League of Muslims of Switzerland (Ligue des Musulmans de Suisse, LMS) and the Islamic Central Council of Switzerland (Islamischer Zentralrat Schweiz, IZRS), and umbrella organizations, like the COIS (Coordination des organisations islamiques de Suisse) and FOIS (Fédération des organisations islamiques de Suisse), seek to represent the Swiss Muslim community at the national level. Their claim is generally accepted neither by Swiss authorities nor by the majority of Swiss Muslims. In Switzerland, as in most Western European countries, the Muslim community’s extreme fragmentation leads to a lack of unified leadership that can legitimately claim to represent the majority of the country’s Muslims.

## 2.1 The pioneers: the Brothers find refuge in Switzerland

The first traces of Islamist presence in the country date back to the early 1960s, when a handful of members of the Muslim Brotherhood settled in Switzerland to escape the harsh persecutions of the regime of Egyptian president Gamal Nasser. Most prominent among them was Said Ramadan, arguably one of the Brotherhood’s most iconic and influential figures of the last fifty years.<sup>30</sup> The personal secretary and son-in-law of Brotherhood founder Hassan al Banna, Ramadan left Egypt in the early 1950s and, after traveling to various Muslim majority countries and obtaining a doctorate in law at the University of Cologne, settled in Geneva, where in 1961 he founded the local Islamic Center.

Quiet, well connected and visited by wealthy Gulf Arabs during their summer vacations, the Swiss lake city was the perfect place for Ramadan to settle. The Center, which soon became one of the main headquarters of the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe, was the first of a score that Ramadan established throughout Europe with the financial support of Saudi Arabia. Ramadan, in fact, had been one of the driving forces behind the establishment of the Muslim World League, the Saudi government-funded transnational body created with the aim of spreading the Saudi interpretation of Islam worldwide. Ramadan soon became one of the Saudis’ main point men in the West, using Geneva as a convenient base from which he

24 *Dialogue avec la Population Musulmane 2010*, report by the Federal Department of Justice and Police (DFJP), Bern, May 2011, p. 29. Available at: <http://www.bfm.admin.ch/content/dam/data/migration/berichte/ber-muslimdialog-2010-f.pdf> (accessed February 23, 2013).

25 *Dialogue avec la Population Musulmane 2010*, report by the Federal Department of Justice and Police (DFJP), Bern, May 2011, p. 29. Available at: <http://www.bfm.admin.ch/content/dam/data/migration/berichte/ber-muslimdialog-2010-f.pdf> (accessed February 23, 2013).

26 Marco Giugni, Matteo Gianni and Noemi Michel, *Entre Demandes de Reconnaissance et Politique d’Accommodation: Les Orientations Culturelles, Sociales et Politiques des Musulmans en Suisse*, report by the University of Geneva, December 2010, pp. 5–6.

27 *Vie Musulmane en Suisse: Profils Identitaires, Demandes et Perceptions des Musulmans en Suisse*, study by the Groupe de Recherche sur l’Islam en Suisse for the Commission Fédérale des Etrangers, 2005.

28 *Rapport du Conseil fédéral sur la situation des musulmans en Suisse, eu égard en particulier à leurs relations plurielles avec les autorités étatiques*, en réponse aux postulats 09.4027 Amacker-Amann du 30 novembre 2009, 09.4037 Leuenberger du 2 décembre 2009 et 10.318 Malama du 1er mars 2010. Available at <http://www.ejpd.admin.ch/content/dam/data/pressemitteilung/2013/2013-05-08/ber-f.pdf>, accessed May 15, 2013.

29 Stéphane Lathion, “Muslims in Switzerland: Is Citizenship Really Incompatible with Muslim Identity?” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 28, No. 1 (2008): 53–66, here p. 55.

30 For the life of Said Ramadan, see Ian Johnson, *A Mosque in Munich: Nazis, the CIA, and the Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010).

could coordinate the activities of the scattered groups of refugee Brothers and sympathetic students who had settled in various European and North American cities.<sup>31</sup>

Said Ramadan died in 1995, but the networks he established have flourished throughout the West and in Switzerland. His son Hani, who replaced him at the helm of the Islamic Center of Geneva, has been at the center of various controversies because of his views on women and Islamic law.<sup>32</sup> Hani's younger brother Tariq was also active in various Islamic activities in the French-speaking part of Switzerland in the 1990s and early 2000s, but has since left the country and is today's one of the world's most influential and well known intellectuals. He has also been at the center of several high-profile controversies due to his religious and political views.

The Egyptian Brothers were the first Islamists to benefit from Swiss asylum policies and continue their activities from the freedom and security of Switzerland. But their example was followed throughout the 1990s by dozens of members, in some cases of quite senior standing, of Islamist groups from several North African countries. Several members of the Tunisian al Nahda, for example, received asylum in Switzerland and in April 2006 the group even held its European congress in canton Obwalden.<sup>33</sup> A few members of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, like its former chairman and long-time Zurich resident Suleiman Abdulqader, and of the Moroccan al Adwal Ihsane (Justice and Charity) also settled in Switzerland during the 1990s.

Several Algerian Islamists found refuge, whether legally or illegally, in Switzerland during or immediately after the civil war that plagued the North African country throughout the 1990s. Most of them settled in Geneva, Sion and other French speaking parts of the country. Most prominent among them were Ahmed Zaoui and Mourad Dhina. The former was one of the founders of the Islamic Salvation Front's (Front Islamique du Salut, FIS) Coordination Council. Having entered the country illegally Zaoui was deported to Burkina Faso in 1998 for having compromised Switzerland's internal and external security.<sup>34</sup> Dhina was elected head of FIS' Executive Office from October 2002 to October 2004 and the group held many activities on Swiss territory during his tenure, including a secret meeting held in an Alpine chalet in canton Vaud in July 2004.<sup>35</sup> Immediately after his election the Federal Council

issued an order forbidding Dhina from organizing propaganda campaigns aimed at inciting violence from Swiss territory.

The presence of the Ramadan family and activists from several Muslim Brotherhood-influenced groups from the Maghreb and, to a lesser degree, various Middle Eastern countries has long made Geneva and surrounding areas an important hub for the global network of the Muslim Brotherhood. An important factor in this development is the steady influx of wealthy tourists from the Arab Gulf to the lake city, particularly in the summer. Various sources suggest that it is not uncommon for affluent Saudis, Kuwaitis, Emiratis and Qataris visiting the region to donate large amounts to local Islamist activists.<sup>36</sup> In some cases these donations come in a more structured and official way from Gulf governments. Despite having broken with the Ramadan family more than twenty years ago, Saudi Arabia has been particularly involved in funding conservative Islamic activities in the Geneva area, including the Fondation Culturelle Islamique de Genève in Petit-Saconnex, Switzerland's largest purpose-built mosque.<sup>37</sup>

Brotherhood activists who settled in Switzerland found an ideal refuge from which they could carry out their political activities in a free and protected environment. Despite their relatively small numbers, Brotherhood activists engaged in a variety of endeavors aimed at supporting the cause of their groups in their countries of origin and, more generally, various Islamist causes. From Switzerland they publish magazines, run websites and small television stations, organize conferences and political protests, fundraise, and liaise with other groups throughout the world.

Similar dynamics have been observed, albeit on a larger scale, in other European countries (such as Great Britain, Germany or Sweden) that have provided refuge to Brotherhood activists. Opinions on the results of this policy differ significantly. Some argue that providing asylum to individuals who were at risk of being arbitrarily killed, tortured or indefinitely detained by authoritarian regimes was a morally imperative decision. They also argue that the charges of involvement in violent activities leveraged by Arab regimes against Brotherhood members were often unfounded and that, once they had obtained asylum in Europe, they never engaged in any violent act against their adoptive countries.

Moreover, argue supporters of the policy, their sojourn in the West has positively influenced the way the Brothers think about issues such as democracy, freedoms and human rights. The fact that many influential leaders of various North African participationist groups have

31 Lorenzo Vidino, *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

32 In the early 2000s Hani Ramadan was part of a long legal battle against the canton of Geneva, which deemed him unsuited to teach in its school system; see Philippe Bach, "Le Conseil d'Etat refuse de réintégrer Hani Ramadan," *Le Courrier*, April 7, 2004.

33 DAP annual report, 2004, p. 33; DAP annual report, 2006, p. 31.

34 Response of the Federal Council to a question posed by Didier Berberat (Frais d'hébergement de Ahmed Zaoui au Burkina Faso), September 2, 1999. Available at [http://www.parlament.ch/f/suche/pages/geschaefte.aspx?gesch\\_id=19991122](http://www.parlament.ch/f/suche/pages/geschaefte.aspx?gesch_id=19991122) (accessed September 13, 2013).

35 DAP annual report, 2002, p. 38; DAP annual report, 2004, p. 33.

36 Interview with Arab Gulf political activists, Dubai, March 2013.

37 Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi, *L'Émergence d'Acteurs Associatifs Musulmans dans la Sphère Publique en Suisse*; the Fondation's website is <http://www.mosque.ch> (accessed March 8, 2013).

lived for years in a liberal democracy means, according to some, that they inevitably absorbed some of its principles. This alleged (and arguably originally unforeseen) side-effect of the policy to give Brothers asylum is considered particularly positive in light of the Arab Spring, as many Western-based Brothers have returned to their countries of origin to occupy important positions in various post-revolutionary governments. It could also be argued that the contacts established with these leaders during their sojourns in Switzerland have provided Bern with good ties to important players in the post-Arab Spring North Africa and Middle East.

There are also several arguably negative aspects of the policy to give Brothers asylum. In Switzerland as in other European countries the policy often generated tensions with various Arab regimes and with Israel. These governments have often accused Brotherhood networks operating in Europe of financing terrorist activities with funds they collect among European Muslim communities, often through their extensive network of charities. Similar accusations have been waged against various Swiss-based organizations operated by Brotherhood networks.

Swiss authorities have not pursued these charges on a legal level. It is of course very difficult to establish that money collected in Switzerland is sent to a certain Islamist organization in the Middle East, as funds are generally transferred through informal networks. And even if it is indeed proven that money was sent to a certain Islamist organization in the Middle East, it is even more challenging to demonstrate that that specific amount was used for a specific terrorist attack of which the donor had knowledge. The Swiss legislation's extremely high evidentiary burden of proof and a certain political reluctance to clamp down have allowed Swiss-based Brotherhood networks to raise funds without much interference.

In several European countries Brotherhood networks have also been criticized by some for creating "the mood music to which suicide bombers dance."<sup>38</sup> While not advocating attacks against the West---rather, publicly condemning them--- Brotherhood networks, argue critics, provide a narrative that might induce some to carry them out. Their mainstreaming of the message that the West is at war against Islam and their endorsement of the use of violence in places where "Muslims are under attack" can provide, if de-contextualized, the moral justification for attacks against the West and the foundation for the narrative peddled by violent rejectionists. It has therefore been argued by some that the European Brothers have, although somewhat unwittingly, significantly contributed to the phenomenon of violent jihadist

radicalization in Europe.<sup>39</sup> It should be noted that several scholars and practitioners object to this analysis.<sup>40</sup>

This extremely controversial debate applies only to some degree to Switzerland. Brotherhood activists and networks operating in Europe have generally taken one of two roads. Some have remained focused on their countries of origin, concentrating all their efforts on providing various forms of support to their groups' efforts in the Arab world. Others, while never abandoning their original cause, concentrated more on spreading their religious and political worldview among the growing Muslim population of the European country in which they settled.<sup>41</sup> In Switzerland the former trend seems to have prevailed.

Some Swiss-based activists connected in more or less direct ways to the global network of the Muslim Brotherhood have created organizations that, like the Union des Organisations Islamiques de France (UOIF) or the Islamische Gemeinschaft in Deutschland (IGD), seek to spread the Brotherhood religious and political worldview and agenda to the local Muslim population. The activities of the Ligue de Musulmans de Suisse and of Yussuf Ibram, the Geneva-based imam with deep connections to the informal trans-European network of the Brotherhood, can be considered efforts of Brotherhood-inspired activists concentrated on the Swiss Muslim population.<sup>42</sup>

But, for the most part, Swiss-based Brotherhood activists have shown little interest in "Islamizing" Swiss Muslims, rather focusing their energy on supporting their original causes in the Arab world. This dynamic could be explained by an ethnic gap, as Arab Brotherhood activists might have found it difficult to spread their views within the largely Balkanic and Turkish Swiss Muslim population. And it could also be argued that, unlike other European countries, Switzerland never pressurized Brotherhood activists to give up their original cause.<sup>43</sup> Whatever the reason, Swiss Brotherhood networks have never been very influential within Swiss Islam, particularly in the German-speaking part of the country.

## 2.2 First jihadist presences

As in most of Western Europe, the first, embryonic presence of jihadist networks in Switzerland was detected

39 Shiraz Maher and Martyn Frampton, *Choosing Our Friends Wisely: Criteria for Engagement with Muslim Groups* (London: Policy Exchange, 2009).

40 Robert Lambert, *Countering Al-Qaeda in London: Police and Muslims in Partnership* (London: Hurst, 2011)

41 This phenomenon is analyzed in Brigitte Maréchal, *The Muslim Brothers in Europe: Roots and Discourse* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Alison Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood: The Burden of Tradition* (London: Saqi Books, 2010); and Lorenzo Vidino, *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

42 Samir Amghar, "Europe Puts Islamists to the Test: The Muslim Brotherhood (France, Belgium and Switzerland)," *Mediterranean Politics* 13, No. 1 (2008): 63–77; Yussuf Ibram is a member of the European Council for Fatwa and Research.

43 Interview with Swiss government official, Bern, February 2013.

38 Quilliam Foundation, "Pulling Together to Defeat Terror," April 2008.

between the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. Seeking to avoid repression in their native countries, veterans of the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union and members of various militant organizations from the Middle East and North Africa sought, and in most cases received, political asylum in several European countries. Europe's freedoms, the presence of large diaspora communities, and a lack of attention from local authorities made Europe an ideal logistical base from which militants could continue their activities.<sup>44</sup> Such organizations as the Egyptian Gamaa Islamiya and the Algerian Armed Islamic Group created sophisticated propaganda, fund-raising, and recruitment networks that provided crucial support to their own efforts in North Africa.

While some of these groups and networks remained concentrated exclusively on their original struggle in their home countries, by the mid-1990s several of them fell, albeit with varying degrees of intensity, into the orbit of al Qaeda. The group founded by Osama bin Laden and other Arab veterans of the Afghan jihad was at the time seeking to form a platform for jihadist groups worldwide. In Europe al Qaeda established only a small direct presence and, for the most part, co-opted already existing networks, particularly the Algerian ones.

It is noteworthy that, during this first phase, most networks showed no violent intent toward their new host countries, which they viewed only as temporary and extremely convenient bases of operations. Although it was apparent from their sermons and propaganda that European-based jihadists strongly disapproved of Europe's liberal moral standards, secularized societies, foreign policies, and perceived anti-Muslim biases, they tended to target only the regimes of their countries of origin. European countries were spared the militants' furor, provided they did not interfere with the militants' struggles in North Africa and the Middle East.

In fact, the only violent acts against a European country carried out during this phase were the series of attacks that bloodied France in 1994 and 1995, a campaign orchestrated by Algerian militants to punish the French government for its support of the Algerian regime during the North African country's civil war.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Europe was used as a launching pad for attacks in the Muslim world and in the United States, as the deep European links of the failed 2000 Millennium bombing of the Los Angeles International Airport in 2000 and the attacks of September 11, 2001 showed.

These dynamics could be observed, albeit with limited intensity, also in Switzerland. Throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s Swiss authorities saw jihadism as an external threat, as various networks and groups

used the country as a quintessential logistical base.<sup>46</sup> Mostly, but not exclusively, North African networks used Swiss territory to raise funds, spread their propaganda and provide other support activities to organizations operating outside of Europe. The laissez-faire attitude of Swiss authorities (an approach, it should be noted, not dissimilar to that of most European countries at the time) and convenient geographical position at the heart of Europe made the country an ideal permanent or temporary location for jihadist militants exactly as it was for Brotherhood activists.

In some instances jihadist militants were arrested by Swiss authorities. In 1998, for example, an Algerian militant, Omar Bouallouche, was arrested for illegal possession of weapons and sentenced to five years for armed robbery. In 2002 he was extradited to France, where he was sentenced to six years for membership in a terrorist organization. Bouallouche, nicknamed Omar Le Suisse, was believed to have belonged to a North African network providing logistical support to the GIA and planning an attack against the 1998 football World Cup in France.<sup>47</sup> But, for the most part, the small Swiss-based jihadist networks acted without much interference until 2001.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 changed the approach of Swiss authorities towards jihadist networks. While still correctly assessing that Switzerland was not a likely target for attacks and did not have a large jihadist presence, authorities began to more closely monitor jihadist activities in the country and, in some cases, to take actions against them.<sup>48</sup> Complying with United Nations resolutions and, in some cases, American pressure, authorities froze sizeable assets of various individuals accused of supporting al Qaeda and the Taliban. And, in some cases, Swiss authorities also opened criminal cases against suspected jihadists living in Switzerland.

The first such case was the so-called "affaire Saoud." After the May 12, 2003 bombings in Riyadh perpetrated by al Qaeda, Swiss authorities received information from their Saudi counterparts that one of the militants involved in the attacks had 36 Swiss mobile phone numbers registered on his mobile phone.<sup>49</sup> Swiss authorities developed the lead and traced some of the numbers to Abdul Hamid el Fayed, a middle-aged Yemeni living with his large family in Biel. Further investigative efforts led authorities to uncover what they suspected of being a large people smuggling network headed by el Fayed with the complicity of various individuals based out of Switzerland.

44 Lorenzo Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe: The New Battleground of International Jihad* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2005).

45 Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

46 DAP annual report, 2002, p. 38.

47 "Omar le Suisse Tient Tête au Tribunal," *Le Parisien*, September 29, 2001; DAP annual report, 2001, p. 37.

48 DAP annual report, 2002, p. 38.

49 Summary of legal proceedings, Dossier SK.2006.15, Federal Criminal Tribunal, Bellinzona.

In January 2004 Swiss authorities raided several residences throughout the country, seizing a large amount of counterfeited documents, materials used to forge documents, computers and mobile phones. El Fayed, four fellow Yemenis, one Somali and one Iraqi were subsequently arrested. Authorities claimed that the men were part of a sophisticated network that, through contacts at the Swiss embassy in Sana'a, provided fake documents to mostly Somali illegal immigrants who, once landed in Switzerland, would ask for political asylum.<sup>50</sup> Authorities also believed that some of the people the network had smuggled into Switzerland were terrorists.<sup>51</sup> Intelligence in fact showed that El Fayed had been in contact with a senior al Qaeda operative who had been involved in the Riyadh attacks and the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen. Authorities believed that the al Qaeda operative had asked El Fayed to provide him with false documents to leave Qatar and enter Switzerland.

The case received massive coverage in the Swiss media, as it allegedly represented the first publicly known instance of al Qaeda presence on Swiss territory.<sup>52</sup> Yet, despite these charges, the legal case against the seven men largely fell apart in court. The Federal Criminal Tribunal of Bellinzona considered that the legal requirements to qualify the seven accused as a criminal organization did not exist. Moreover, it argued that the prosecution could prove neither that El Fayed had actually given the false documents to the al Qaeda operative nor that he knew that the al Qaeda man was involved in terrorist activities. While some of the charges related to document forging and illegal immigration stuck, all terrorism-related accusations were dismissed.<sup>53</sup>

In the following months Swiss authorities confronted other cases where, despite the difficulty to conclusively prove it in court, strong evidence indicated that ordinary criminal activities supported terrorism. All these cases involved logistical support provided to North African networks and in particular to the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat, GSPC). One of the most controversial among them is the case of Mohammed Achraf, an Algerian national Spanish authorities accused of being the ringleader of a network of militants planning an attack against the Audiencia Nacional, Spain's central counter-terrorism court.

Spanish authorities uncovered the plot in October 2004, arresting eight individuals on their territory. They located Achraf in Switzerland, where in April 2003 he had asked political asylum using the pseudonym Kamel Saadi

and claiming to be Palestinian. Authorities suspected that, while in Switzerland, Achraf had sought to raise funds for the operation, acquire the necessary explosives and establish contact with a Palestinian IT expert living in Germany.<sup>54</sup> Achraf was arrested at Zurich airport in August 2004 but Swiss authorities, unable to provide solid evidence of his terrorism activities, charged him only with petty theft.<sup>55</sup> He was extradited to Spain in April 2005 and there sentenced to fourteen years.<sup>56</sup>

One of Achraf's contacts in Switzerland, Algerian national Bassam Rifai, was at the center of a similar case in 2006. Rifai had attracted the attention of Swiss authorities because he had visited on several occasions Achraf during his stay in prison and was therefore deemed a person of interest.<sup>57</sup> The ensuing investigation revealed that Rifai was the leader of a Zurich-based North African gang that perpetrated bank robberies and thefts throughout Switzerland. Rifai's gang was suspected of being part of a trans-European network of petty criminals with bases in Spain, France and Italy that provided financial support to the GSPC.<sup>58</sup> The gang's financial minds, Zurich residents Zouhir B. and Ilyas A.N., sent funds, computers, mobile phones and other items they stole to the group in North Africa. Rifai was in constant contact with GSPC's leadership in Algeria, who would communicate to its Swiss contacts its operations and needs. In May 2005, for example, Rifai received a text message from Algeria saying: "My brother, the news is that more than 30 tyrants have been killed. Allah is great. For the moment we need financial support and above all computers."<sup>59</sup>

The case was very important for authorities throughout Europe, who had long suspected that criminal gangs funded the GSPC but had never possessed solid evidence. The constant and careless line of communication between Rifai and the GSPC leadership abundantly proved this dynamic.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, the high evidentiary requirement of the Swiss legislation on terrorism financing led authorities to abandon their intention to pursue terrorism-related charges against Rifai and his gang and instead opted for deporting them.<sup>61</sup> Similar decisions were made in relations to substantially identical cases of other North African militants arrested in Switzerland for

50 Summary of legal proceedings, Dossier SK.2006.15, Federal Criminal Tribunal, Bellinzona.

51 DAP annual report, 2006, p. 31–2.

52 See, for example, the documentary *Al Qaida en Suisse*, RTS, June 4, 2004.

53 Summary of legal proceedings, Dossier SK.2006.15, Federal Criminal Tribunal, Bellinzona.

54 DAP annual report, 2004, page 32.

55 DAP annual report, 2005, page 31.

56 DAP annual report, 2008, page 17.

57 Interview with Swiss officials, Bern, May 2013.

58 DAP annual report 2006, pp. 30–1.

59 Sebastian Rotella, "Theft, Fraud in Europe Fund Terrorist Group, Police Say," *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 2007.

60 Sylvain Besson, "Cellule Terroriste en Suisse: Le Parcours d'un Délinquant Devenu Islamiste Radical," *Le Temps*, July 3, 2006.

61 DAP annual report, 2007, page 16; "Swiss Deport Last Suspect Held in Plot to Blow up Israeli Airliner," *Associated Press*, July 16, 2007.

providing logistical support to the GSPC in the following years.<sup>62</sup>

But, unlike the other cases, the Rifai case is noteworthy because, for the first time, Swiss authorities detected the possibility that an attack was being planned in Switzerland. In late 2005, in fact, authorities monitored various conversations in which Rifai spoke with a Libyan associate, Badr E.J., about the idea of using a rocket propelled grenade to shoot down an aircraft of Israeli airline El Al.<sup>63</sup> Rifai repeatedly asked Basel-based Badr E.J. his religiously-based opinion on the legitimacy of carrying out an attack in Switzerland.<sup>64</sup> Following Badr E.J.'s approval, Rifai reportedly conducted surveillance of the Zurich airport, where El Al has a presence, and discussed the possibility of shooting down a plane with a rocket propelled grenade.<sup>65</sup> Authorities monitored the conversations and swooped in once they realized that a Swiss paper had uncovered the story and was about to publish it. Having had to intervene at a relatively early stage, Swiss authorities could not charge Rifai and his accomplices with terrorism-related charges. Rather, most of them were charged with minor criminal offenses and deported.<sup>66</sup>

The first successful prosecution of Swiss-based jihadist militants came in June 2007, when the Federal Criminal Tribunal convicted Moez Garsallaoui and Malika el Aroud for providing support to a criminal organization. The case began in August 2004, when Swiss authorities received information from their Pakistani counterparts that the claim of responsibility for a failed terrorist attack against Pakistani Minister of Economy Shaukat Aziz had been made by the al Qaeda-linked al Islambouli Brigades on a Swiss-based website.<sup>67</sup>

The investigation on the website led authorities to Garsallaoui, a Tunisian living in canton Fribourg. Born in Tunisia in 1968, Garsallaoui was reportedly a member of the Islamist group Hizb ut Tahrir in his native country. Due to the persecution he faced at the hands of the Tunisian government for his militancy, in 1995 he fled to Italy, where he lived illegally for two years. In March 1997 he sought political asylum in Switzerland, where he was given a permit. He settled in Guin, a small town near Fribourg and worked in construction and then as a computer technician.<sup>68</sup> In 2003 he suffered an accident and, unable to go back to work, began to live off of social secu-

arity. It was at this time that Garsallaoui met Malika el Aroud on an internet chat room.

Nine years his senior, el Aroud was born in Morocco but had grown up in Belgium. A committed radical herself, el Aroud was well known in jihadist circles for being the widow of Abdessatar Dahmane, the al Qaeda militant who had killed Afghan Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Shah Massoud a few hours before the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Shortly after meeting online, Garsallaoui and el Aroud married religiously at a mosque in Brussels and moved into his Guin apartment.<sup>69</sup> Once in Switzerland the couple began to operate several websites disseminating jihadist propaganda in forms of videos, messages, news and instructions on how to fabricate explosives. Many of the websites hosted a forum where thousands of active members interacted.

After receiving the tip from Pakistan Swiss authorities began to closely monitor the couple's activities. Their original website, Minbar-Sos, was hosted on a Swiss provider and was shut down by Swiss authorities in September 2004. But the technology-savvy couple soon established almost identical sites on providers in Canada, the Netherlands, France and then Switzerland again, playing a seemingly never-ending game of cat and mouse. Authorities ended the game in February 2005, when they arrested the couple and seized large amounts of computer-related material in their Guin apartment.

In 2007 the Federal Criminal Tribunal qualified Garsallaoui and El Aroud's activities as support to a criminal organization. The court accepted the prosecution's argument that the couple aided a galaxy of jihadist organizations by disseminating their propaganda and administering an internet forum used by jihadists. Garsallaoui was also found guilty of distributing instructions to fabricate explosive materials and public instigation to commit a crime or violence for posting a message that incited kidnappers to kill two French journalists they held hostage in Iraq. He was sentenced to two years in jail while el Aroud, accused solely of having "advised, inspired and helped" her husband "in developing the activities destined to support such organizations" received only six months.<sup>70</sup>

After the trial the couple soon resurfaced in Belgium, where they continued operating websites. By 2008 Minbar-Sos, el Aroud's forum, had some 1400 subscribers and many more occasional visitors.<sup>71</sup> In Brussels the couple also began recruiting young local Muslims to travel to Pakistan until Belgian authorities stepped in. In the subsequent trial a Belgian court sentenced both el Aroud and Garsallaoui to eight years for recruiting for al Qaeda,

62 See, for example, DAP annual report, 2006, page 31, and "Suspected Terrorist Arrested in Switzerland," *SwissInfo*, October 2, 2006; on the 2007 case, see DAP annual report, 2007, pp. 15–6.

63 Sebastian Rotella, "Theft, Fraud in Europe Fund Terrorist Group, Police Say," *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 2007.

64 Interview with Swiss officials, Bern, May 2013.

65 Interview with Swiss official, Bern, February 2013.

66 Interview with Swiss officials, Bern, May 2013; while Rifai was deported to Tunisia, Badr E.J. reportedly still lives in Switzerland.

67 Summary of legal proceedings, Dossier SK.2007.4, Federal Criminal Tribunal, Bellinzona.

68 "Fin de parcours pour Garsallaoui, ex-réfugié en Suisse tué par un drone," *Le Temps*, October 18, 2012.

69 Summary of legal proceedings, Dossier SK.2007.4, Federal Criminal Tribunal, Bellinzona.

70 Ibid.

71 "The 2008 Belgium Cell and FATA's Terrorist Pipeline," *CTC Sentinel*, April 15, 2009.

although the latter only in absentia as he had managed to flee the country before Belgian authorities could swoop in.<sup>72</sup>

Garsallaoui continued his activities from the tribal areas of Pakistan. In 2008 he published an open letter inviting Swiss people, government and security forces to convert to Islam, and threatening revenge against them.<sup>73</sup> He also became involved in Jund al Khilafah and other jihadist groups operating in the Pakistani tribal areas, providing training in various weapons, bomb making, document forging and use of the internet. Thanks to his skills Garsallaoui became one of the top trainers and handlers for recruits coming from the West and particularly from the French-speaking world.<sup>74</sup> According to various French media reports, Mohammed Merah had been one of his recruits.<sup>75</sup> Garsallaoui was killed by a U.S. drone strike in October 2012.<sup>76</sup>

El Aroud, on the other hand, is currently serving her sentence in a Belgian prison. In the meanwhile, she has become an icon in jihadist circles. Several websites, in many cases run by women, glorify her actions and her 2004 book, *Soldiers of Light*, is circulated widely among militants and sympathizers. The fact that she is the widow of two men who died while fighting jihad only increases the iconic status she has obtained through her unrelenting and unapologetic stances. It is fair to state that Garsallaoui and el Aroud are the two most visible and connected jihadist figures to be known to have ever operated out of Switzerland.

## 2.3 The current phase

All the Swiss-based networks so far described possess characteristics that are common to the vast majority of jihadist networks operating in Europe in the 1990s and early 2000s. Two features are particularly remarkable. First, all of their members were first generation immigrants who, for what it can be ascertained, came to Switzerland already radicalized. Second, all of them were connected, albeit with varying degrees of intensity, to established groups operating outside of Europe.

Dynamics began to change around the mid-2000s, when in several European countries authorities began to observe the surge of so-called “homegrown”

clusters. Unlike their predecessors, these clusters were composed mainly of individuals who were either born or had grown up in European countries and had therefore radicalized in Europe. Moreover, these clusters, at least at their onset, seldom possessed ties to al Qaeda and affiliated groups operating outside of Europe. They were, rather, spontaneously formed clusters of like-minded individuals that decided to translate their independently acquired jihadist zeal into activities that could range from joining groups outside of Europe for training, fighting in foreign countries (predominantly, at the time, Iraq) or carrying out attacks in Europe (both independently or with the supervision of established groups).

The presence of homegrown clusters has characterized European jihadism for most of the last ten years, but it would be incorrect to assume that groups with the characteristics of those of the first phase have disappeared. From an operational perspective, therefore, the current panorama of jihadist networks in Europe is an extremely diverse one and can be visualized as a continuum. At one end of the spectrum, we see compartmentalized cells contained in a well-structured network and subjected to a hierarchical structure, as was the model of jihadist groups operating in Europe in the 1990s and early 2000s.

This typology of networks is still very much present in Switzerland. North African clusters linked to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the successor of the GSPC, are arguably the most common example of “traditional” jihadist network operating on Swiss territory. In 2009, 2010 and 2011 Swiss authorities, often in cooperation with agencies in other European countries, dismantled three separate networks that, with very similar *modus operandi*, provided logistical support to AQIM.<sup>77</sup> In every case the Swiss-based cluster was inserted in a structure with branches operating throughout Europe.

A similarly structured group operating in Switzerland is the Iraqi-Kurdish al Qaeda affiliate Ansar al Islam. Swiss authorities detected the presence of Ansar al Islam on their territory in 2004, as they learned of Swiss ties of a German-based Ansar al Islam cell planning to assassinate then Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, and in 2006, when German authorities arrested a Kurdish resident of Basel suspected of having transferred funds to Ansar al Islam.<sup>78</sup> Two Kurdish brothers living in the Basel area as political refugees were also arrested in 2008 and accused of providing logistical support to the organization. The two, who operated various websites and chat rooms for the group, are at the moment of writing being tried by the Federal Criminal Tribunal.<sup>79</sup>

72 Judgment of October 20, 2011, dossier number SK.2011.2, Federal Criminal Tribunal, Bellinzona.

73 DAP annual report, 2008, p. 18.

74 Jacques Follorou, “Moez Garsallaoui, le contact des djihadistes français au Pakistan,” *Le Monde*, October 19, 2012; Daniel Glaus and Titus Plattner, “Terroriste par Amour de la Veuve Noire,” *Le Matin Dimanche*, October 21, 2012.

75 “Le mentor présumé de Merah serait mort au Pakistan,” *Le Monde*, October 17, 2012; Eric de Lavarène and Eric Pelletier, “Mohamed Merah, apprenti tueur au Pakistan,” *L’Express*, January 9, 2013.

76 Sylvain Besson, “Fin de Parcours pour Garsallaoui, ex-Réfugié en Suisse Tue par un Drone,” *Le Temps*, October 18, 2012.

77 Fedpol annual report, 2009, page 34; “Des Islamistes Arrêtés en Suisse et en Italie,” RTS, June 28, 2010; “Des Terroristes en Contact avec la Suisse Arrêtés,” *20 Minutes*, September 27, 2011.

78 DAP annual report, 2005, page 31; DAP annual report, 2006, p. 31.

79 Fedpol annual report, 2010, p. 34; “Swiss Charge Two Brothers with Terror Propaganda,” *Associated Press*, October 1, 2012; “Terroristi alla Sbarra a Bellinzona,” *Corriere del Ticino*, October 1, 2012.



A group possessing similar operational characteristics yet more difficult to position ideologically is the Turkish Hizbollah. Another Sunni Kurdish militant group (unlike its Lebanese namesake), Hizbollah has used violence in order to achieve its goal of establishing a theocratic order in Turkey, yet it does not seem to endorse a global jihadist agenda. After Turkish authorities clamped down on the group in the early 2000s many of its members sought refuge among the large Kurdish diaspora of Western Europe. Authorities believe that one of the group's top leaders is long-time St. Gallen resident Ali Demir. The group has also a presence in Basel, where Demir's brother Mehmet runs an Islamic bookstore and the group reportedly congregates at the Said-i-Nursi mosque in Kleinhüningen.<sup>80</sup> Turkish Hizbollah uses Switzerland as a quintessential sanctuary where it can raise funds, disseminate propaganda and meet. While the NDB reportedly monitors it, there are no indications that the group is planning attacks in Switzerland.<sup>81</sup>

AQIM support clusters, Ansar al Islam cells and Turkish Hizbollah networks are manifestations, albeit of a varied kind, of the "traditional" form of Europe jihadism. At the other extreme of the spectrum, we find homegrown groups: small clusters of mostly European-born radicals with no ties to external groups that act with absolute operational independence. Between these two extremes is a whole spectrum of realities, positioned according to the level of autonomy of the group. The most common model seems to be that of the July 7, 2005, London bombers: a small group of young men, most of whom were born and raised in Europe, who know each other either from the mosque or from the neighborhood and become radicalized in Europe.<sup>82</sup> Some of these locally groomed jihadist "wannabes" travel abroad to gain from various al Qaeda-affiliated groups the necessary expertise that will allow the group to jump from an amateurish cluster of friends to a full-fledged terrorist cell.

There are several indications that homegrown networks and individuals, whether completely independent or somewhat affiliated with established organizations, do exist also in Switzerland, albeit on a very small scale. In 2007 the DAP stated in its annual report that, following a trend seen throughout Europe, homegrown clusters had been detected also in Switzerland.<sup>83</sup> Yet there have until now been no arrests on Swiss territory of individuals that can be defined as homegrown. Nonetheless, there have been a few cases that, while not having their ending in court, have clearly showed the presence of homegrown radicalization in Switzerland. Some of the

most evident examples pertain to individuals who have left Switzerland to fight abroad.

## 2.4 Swiss traveling for jihad

The first case of Swiss jihadist who fought abroad to publicly surface is that of a young Tunisian man known by his *nom de guerre* Abu Saad al Tunisi. Al Tunisi reportedly arrived in Switzerland with his family around 2000 and settled in Nidau, a lakeside suburb of Biel.<sup>84</sup> His family is reportedly deeply religious and al Tunisi, who was a teenager when he arrived in Biel, attended the local Er-rahman mosque.<sup>85</sup> Al Tunisi struggled to integrate in Switzerland. Nobody reportedly noticed evident signs of radicalization, but according to authorities the young man spent hours online reading jihadist propaganda.

Unbeknownst to his family in August 2005 al Tunisi traveled to Syria with the intention of joining the insurgency that at the time was raging in neighboring Iraq. Having apparently failed to make a connection with insurgent networks and cross the border, he returned to Biel, where authorities interrogated him. In September his second attempt was successful, and once in Iraq al Tunisi reportedly joined a brigade headed by al Qaeda leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi. In 2006 news surfaced that al Tunisi had been killed during a confrontation with American forces.<sup>86</sup>

Al Tunisi's death reportedly had a strong impact on his sister, who still lived in Biel. Using the pseudonym *Swissgirl99* and others, the girl became extremely active in the online jihadist world.<sup>87</sup> She began to post pictures and videos about her brother on Dailymotion, Youtube and several jihadist forums, glorifying him for his fighting skills and honorable death.<sup>88</sup> In August 2010 the al Qaeda-linked al Shumookh al Islam website released a video glorifying al Tunisi and allegedly interviewing his mother, who praised Allah "who facilitated for my son to transfer from hunting birds and fish to hunting the Shiite dogs and American pigs."<sup>89</sup> There are concrete reasons to

80 Martin Stoll, "Geheimdienst observiert Basler Moschee," *Sonntagszeitung*, September 2, 2012.

81 Ibid.

82 House of Commons, *Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005*, May 11, 2006, p. 13–21.

83 DAP annual report, 2007, p. 17.

84 Sylvain Besson, "Les Enfants Perdus d'Al-Qaida en Suisse," *Le Temps*, September 6, 2011.

85 Daniel Glaus, Sebastian Ramspeck, Gabi Schwegler and Martin Stoll, "Der Heilige Krieger aus dem Berner Seeland," *Sonntagszeitung*, June 19, 2011.

86 Samuel Jaber, "Un aller sans Retour pour la Guerre Sainte," *Swissinfo*, July 4, 2012.

87 D. Glaus, S. Ramspeck, G. Schwegler und M. Stoll, "Der Heilige Krieger aus dem Berner Seeland," *Sonntagszeitung*, June 19, 2011.

88 *In my Brother's Name: A European Path to Radicalization*, report by the Geneva Centre for Training and Analysis of Terrorism, December 5, 2010. Available at: <http://www.gctat.org/fr/analyses-rapports-et-notes/29-ranoc/149-in-my-brothers-name-a-swiss-path-to-radicalization.html> (accessed December 12, 2012).

89 Video available through Flashpoint Intelligence. Available at: [https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_saadtunisimotherint-vuo81o.pdf](https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_saadtunisimotherint-vuo81o.pdf) (accessed January 2, 2013).

believe that the interview is false and was fabricated by al Tunisi's sister.<sup>90</sup>

Another case of Swiss resident allegedly traveling for jihad is that of Majd N.<sup>91</sup> Majd moved to Switzerland from Jordan when he was eight, after his father, a suspected Islamist of Palestinian origin, received political asylum. After a short stay in the town of Moutier, Majd's family, like Abu Saad al Tunisi's, settled in Nidau and then moved to Biel. Majd reportedly suffered occasional racist taunts but seemed to integrate well, learning good French, obtaining good grades in school and even dating a Swiss girl. People who knew him described him as opinionated on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but not a fanatic. Like al Tunisi he attended the Errahman mosque and fasted during Ramadan but reportedly nobody noticed any visible sign of radicalism. But, also like al Tunisi, Majd did frequently visit jihadi websites and his online activities attracted Fedpol's attention.

In February 2011, to the surprise of family members and school authorities, Majd disappeared. Aged 19, the resident of Biel, as it turned out, took a train to Milan and from there a flight to Nairobi via Amsterdam. Once in the Kenyan capital he made his way to Eastleigh, a neighborhood locally known as Little Mogadishu for the high percentage of Somali residents. There, according to authorities, Majd met a representative of al Shabaab, the Somali-based al Qaeda affiliate. After the meeting Majd was reportedly allowed to join the group, which is traditionally wary of infiltration. He soon crossed the border into Somalia where he allegedly received military training and fought alongside the group.

In May 2012 Majd crossed back to Kenya but was arrested once back in Nairobi, officially for immigration violations. In reality Kenyan authorities suspected Majd of being part of a cluster of European militants who had joined al Shabaab. In particular they believe Majd was closely linked to Emrah Erdogan, a former resident of Wuppertal, Germany, with strong al Qaeda connections. Erdogan, whom the German government considers one of its "most wanted terrorists," had lived in Waziristan before moving to Somalia and his brother had been killed by a US drone strike there.<sup>92</sup> Erdogan, who reportedly had

crossed into Kenya with Majd, was arrested in Tanzania in June 2012 and accused of participating in the bombing of a shopping center in Nairobi.<sup>93</sup>

Incarcerated, Majd denied all these charges which, to be sure, Kenyan authorities have not formally filed against him. Yet, once informed of his arrest and ascertained certain facts, Swiss authorities revoked his residency permit and issued an order forbidding him to enter the country on national security grounds. A Fedpol statement claimed that Majd had spent time in Somalia with al Shabaab and that "it appeared that he maintained contacts with Islamist elements in Switzerland."<sup>94</sup>

The cases of both Abu Saad al Tunisi and Majd N. possess quintessential homegrown characteristics, as both individuals radicalized in Switzerland and reportedly developed ties to militant groups only after radicalizing (how will be analyzed later). Another case with apparent homegrown characteristics is that of a Swiss convert to Islam who was mentioned in Fedpol's 2010 annual report as a "Swiss citizen, an Islamist with international connections" who traveled to Pakistan in 2009 under "unclear circumstances."<sup>95</sup>

The man, identified in the media with the pseudonym Yassin, was born to a Catholic family in Freiburg and was part of the local hip hop scene in his teenage years. Upon enrolling in law school, Yassin began frequenting Turkish friends, who once took him to a mosque. Shortly after Yassin converted and adopted a progressively more radical interpretation of Islam. In interviews with both the *Tages Anzeiger's Magazin* and the *Sonntagszeitung*, Yassin has made no secret of his sympathies for the Taliban and his extreme views on Islam. Understandably, his positions and ties to known radicals have long attracted the attention of Swiss authorities.<sup>96</sup>

Yassin further attracted the authorities' attention in 2009, when he was arrested in Pakistan. Yassin, in fact, traveled to the South Asian country's tribal areas to, in his words, "take a vacation." Yassin told *Sonntagszeitung* reporters that the Taliban had been "extremely friendly" to him and that he spent time with them. He was later arrested by Pakistani authorities and detained under hard conditions for three weeks until his release. Swiss authorities are not in possession of any evidence proving that Yassin engaged in any violent activity while with the Taliban.<sup>97</sup> It is nonetheless a suspicion that, also given Yassin's open support for the group, is not unfounded.

90 Sylvain Besson, "Les Enfants Perdus d'Al-Qaida en Suisse," *Le Temps*, September 6, 2011.

91 Daniel Glaus and Marie Maurisse, "La Descente aux Enfers de Majd N., le Biennois Apprenti Terroriste," *Le Matin Dimanche*, November 18, 2012; Daniel Glaus and Marie Maurisse, "Le Dangereux Voyage de Majd pour Devenir Combattant Islamiste," *Le Matin Dimanche*, November 25, 2012; *Quand Al Qaida Recrute en Suisse*, RTS, November 8, 2012; Samuel Jaberg, "Un aller sans Retour pour la Guerre Sainte," *Swissinfo*, July 4, 2012; "Un Gymnaste de Biemme Inculpé pour Liens avec les Shebab," *Le Temps*, March 25, 2004; "Abu Sa'ad al-Urduni or the Improbable Matches - Episode II," report by the Geneva Centre for Training and Analysis of Terrorism, December 5, 2011. Available at: <http://www.gctat.org/fr/analyses-rapports-et-notes/29-ranoc/216-abz-saad-al-urduni-or-the-improbable-matches-episode-ii.html> (accessed December 29, 2012).

92 Florian Flade, "Emrah E., der Terror-Insider aus Wuppertal," *Die Welt*, June 30, 2011; Florian Flade, "Neue Märtyrerschule für deutsche Dschihad-Touristen," *Die Welt*, March 21, 2012.

93 "Tanzania arrests man over recent Nairobi attack," *BBC*, June 13, 2012.

94 Samuel Jaberg, "Un aller sans Retour pour la Guerre Sainte," *Swissinfo*, July 4, 2012.

95 Fedpol annual report, 2010, p. 35.

96 Martin Beglinger, "Zwei Fäuste für Allah: Der Taliban von Zürich," October 16, 2004; interviews with Swiss officials, Zurich, May 2013.

97 Interview with Swiss officials, Bern, April 2013.

## Trips to jihad fields

European jihadists traveling outside of the continent to link up with al Qaeda and affiliated movements is a relatively common phenomenon. In some cases European wannabe jihadists seek to join jihadist groups engaged in conflicts, as it has been the case over the last few years in Iraq, Somalia or, more recently Syria and Mali. In some other cases the trip is aimed at receiving training in various terrorism-related skills. The path taken is shaped partially by the European jihadists' decisions and partially by contingent factors, as it is not uncommon for individuals leaving Europe for training to go into combat and viceversa. It is also quite common to engage in both activities during the same trip. After their stint some European jihadists return home, in some cases with the intention of carrying out attacks on the Continent. Some others stay in the area or travel to another area of conflict.<sup>98</sup>

Intelligence agencies from large European countries estimate that hundreds, if not a few thousand, individuals living on their territory have been on these "jihad trips." It is of course very challenging for authorities to exactly keep tabs on the phenomenon. Hundreds of thousands of individuals leave Europe by air or land every day and it is very difficult to follow their steps once they do so. Information sharing is very important, as authorities in one country might obtain information that residents of other countries attended a certain terrorist training camp. The phenomenon is extremely worrisome, as authorities fear that returnees of "jihad trips" might carry out attacks upon returning, but intelligence gathering on them is highly challenging.

Swiss authorities have consistently reported that the phenomenon does affect also Switzerland, al-

beit on a very small scale. The cases of Moez Garsallaoui, Abu Saad al Tunisi, Majd N., and Yassin are, according to officials, not isolated. In 2006 Fedpol reported that some Swiss residents, particularly from the Geneva area, had left to fight in Iraq.<sup>99</sup> In 2010 the NDB's annual report spoke of various cases of Swiss residents traveling to training camps in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen.<sup>100</sup> In 2011 Defence Minister Ueli Maurer publicly warned about an increase in the number of Swiss residents going to training camps. Maurer also indicated that for the first time Swiss authorities had detected an informal network recruiting inside Switzerland.<sup>101</sup> The trend continued in 2013, as the NDB claimed of knowing about several former Swiss residents who had traveled to Somalia, Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>102</sup> Similarly in September 2012 the head of Fedpol's counter-terrorism branch, Jacques Repond, claimed that his unit was picking up various signs indicating a desire among various Swiss jihadist wannabes to travel abroad for training or combat.<sup>103</sup>

Most European countries are currently extremely concerned about the situation in Syria. The centrality of the conflict in the global jihadist movement's propaganda and the relative ease in entering the country have made the Syrian civil war the primary destination for jihadists from all over the world, including Europe. It is estimated that hundreds of European volunteers have reached the country, and several of them have died there. At the time of writing there is no publicly available information pointing to the presence of any Swiss-based militant in Syria. Yet the possibility that some might have done or will seek to do so should not be discounted.<sup>104</sup>

98 For more on traveling abroad patterns, see Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 107, No. 1 (2013): 1–15.

99 DAP annual report, 2006, p. 31.

100 DAP annual report, 2010, p. 33.

101 Joël Widmer and Pascal Tischhauser, "Die Rekrutierungen von Jihadisten haben zugenommen," *Sonntagszeitung*, May 8, 2011.

102 NDB annual report, 2013, p. 24; Samuel Jaberg, "Un aller sans Retour pour la Guerre Sainte," *SwissInfo*, July 4, 2012.

103 Valerie de Graffenried, "Nous Traquons les Djihadistes sur Internet," *Le Temps*, September 22, 2012.

104 Daniel Glaus, Marie Maurisse and Peter Steinbach, "Mein Bruder! Reise!" *Sonntagszeitung*, October 6, 2013.

### 3 Radicalization and linkage

Several questions flow almost spontaneously from the analyses of the most recent cases of homegrown jihadism in Switzerland. How do seemingly assimilated young men living unremarkable lives in Switzerland embrace jihadist ideology? And how do they go from their tranquil life as students, workers or professionals to fighting in remote places they had never been to alongside some of the world's most well known terrorist organizations? In other words, what are the psychological and operational processes that lead young Swiss citizens or long-time residents to join jihadist groups?

To answer these questions and understand the recent dynamics of jihadism in Switzerland, as in the rest of Europe, it is necessary to clarify the difference between three separate, albeit interconnected, phenomena: radicalization, recruitment, and linkage.<sup>105</sup> As seen, scholars and policymakers have not found a consensus on the definition of what radicalization is.

But from an operational perspective, it is nevertheless possible to observe that, in the case of the vast majority of European Muslims who join jihadist networks, radicalization is a bottom-up process. Studies by Marc Sageman and other scholars have convincingly demonstrated that the image of a terrorist recruiter "lurking in mosques, ready to subvert naïve and passive worshippers" does not correspond to the reality on the ground throughout Western Europe.<sup>106</sup> A top-down process in which a specifically-tasked member of a jihadist group seeks out a potential recruit, introduces him to jihadist ideology, grooms him, and eventually inserts him into the group is a highly uncommon phenomenon.

A similar pattern was more common in some of the North African networks of the 1990s, where individuals were often introduced by relatives or friends to mid-ranking members of jihadist groups who oversaw the entire radicalization process from the beginning.<sup>107</sup> There are reports that members of al Shabaab, the Somali al Qaeda affiliate, approach non-radicalized individuals in Europe with the idea of grooming them and eventually enlisting them in the group.<sup>108</sup> But, for the most part, the absorption of jihadist ideology by European Muslims is an independent process. In some cases it takes place individually, as subjects undergo the whole radicalization

process on the internet, without interacting with other individuals. That is the case, for example, of Roshonara Choudhry, the King's College London student who stabbed British MP Stephen Timms for his support of the war in Iraq. Choudhry, who had no connections to any militant network, became radicalized by herself by obsessively watching speeches of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula leader Anwar al Awlaki on Youtube over months. Heeding the cleric's call for individual jihad she eventually decided to act. Cases similar to Choudhry, albeit not always with a violent ending, have been monitored throughout Europe and Swiss authorities claim to have detected cases of independent radicalization also in Switzerland.<sup>109</sup>

In most cases, though, radicalization takes place in small groups. Individuals are often introduced to jihadist ideology by relatives, friends or even casual acquaintances. A soul-searching that is inevitably conducted at the individual level is a key part of any radicalization process, but often decisions related to and phases of the radicalization process are influenced by an individual's interaction with his pre-existing social networks. "Fellow travelers" on the radicalization path can be relatives and life-long friends or new acquaintances. But several studies have shown that, in most cases, radicalization takes place by interacting with like-minded individuals.<sup>110</sup>

In several cases, radical preachers, veterans of various conflicts and webmasters of jihadist websites act as radicalizing agents, further exposing already sympathetic individuals to jihadist ideology. Although it is not uncommon for these radicalizing agents to possess various connections to various jihadist groups, rarely do they act as formal agents on a radicalizing drive. By the same token, there is no question that websites and other forms of propaganda created by jihadist groups serve the purpose of radicalizing European Muslims. However, these efforts are directed to the masses, and there are few indications of direct, face-to-face involvement of jihadist groups operating outside of Europe in the radicalization of individuals. Jihadist radicalization in Europe is largely, in substance, a bottom-up process<sup>111</sup>.

A different yet related phenomenon is recruitment. Recruitment is the process through which a terrorist group inserts an already radicalized individual into its ranks.<sup>112</sup> In the case of many militant organizations operating primarily outside of Europe, from Hamas to the Lib-

105 Lorenzo Vidino, *Radicalization, Linkage, and Diversity. Current Trends in Terrorism in Europe*, report published by the RAND Corporation, 2011.

106 Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p. 122.

107 Petter Nesser, "Joining Jihadi Terrorist Cells in Europe: Exploring Motivational Aspects of Recruitment and Radicalization," in Magnus Ranstorp, ed., *Understanding Violent Radicalisation: Terrorist and Jihadist Movements in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 89.

108 Interviews with various European intelligence officials (The Hague and Brussels, December 2009; Paris, February 2010; and London, April 2010).

109 Valerie de Graffenried, "Nous Traquons les Djihadistes sur Internet," *Le Temps*, September 22, 2012.

110 See, for example, Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

111 Lorenzo Vidino, *Radicalization, Linkage, and Diversity. Current Trends in Terrorism in Europe*, report published by the RAND Corporation, 2011.

112 Scott Gerwehr and Sara Daly, "Al-Qaida: Terrorist Selection and Recruitment," in David Kamien, ed., *The McGraw-Hill Homeland Security Handbook: The Definitive Guide for Law Enforcement, EMT, and all other Security Professionals*, USA: McGraw-Hill, 2006, pp. 73–87.

eration Tigers of Tamil Eelam, it is fair to speak of a top-down effort, where members of the group act as enlistment officers.<sup>113</sup> Al Qaeda-affiliated groups act in a similar manner in various parts of the world.<sup>114</sup> But, in Europe, the dynamics are quite different. Although some exceptions do exist (Europe-based al Shabaab support networks, as it will be seen later, reportedly conduct what can be more properly considered recruitment efforts), there is little evidence of a concerted effort by jihadist groups to recruit European Muslims. Contrary to public perceptions, there are few indications of a consistent top-down effort by al Qaeda affiliated groups operating outside of Europe to attract and recruit new militants on the Old Continent by deploying recruiters to spot new talent on the ground.

What is instead a significantly more common occurrence is the linkage between the already radicalized individual or cluster in Europe and various jihadist groups operating outside of Europe. And, in the vast majority of cases, this linkage is initiated by the individual or cluster rather than by the jihadist group. If any form of loosely defined recruitment exists, it is because the “applicant” reached out to the “employer,” and not the other way around.<sup>115</sup> Limiting its assessment to the Netherlands but incidentally describing a trend seen throughout Europe, in 2010, the AIVD (Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, the Netherlands’ domestic intelligence agency) stated that “contacts between active jihadist networks or individuals here and long-established transnational networks elsewhere” are established in various ways. But, added the Dutch intelligence agency, “the initiative for first contact usually seems to come from the Dutch side; there appears to exist no planned recruitment strategy on the part of the transnational networks concerned.”<sup>116</sup> Aside from limited exceptions, recruitment in Western Europe exists not as a traditional, top-down phenomenon but rather only in the sense of a bottom-up process that is better defined as linkage.

Having clarified these important concepts, it is now useful to observe their related dynamics in the Swiss context. Two issues should therefore be examined. First, it is necessary to analyze radicalization dynamics. Keeping in mind that radicalization is a highly complex and individualized phenomenon, is it nevertheless possible to observe common trends? How have (the admittedly few) Swiss jihadists and jihadist wannabes first encountered

and then absorbed jihadist ideology? Is there an ideological milieu in Switzerland that produces them? If so, what are its characteristics?

After having examined radicalization dynamics it will be necessary to assess the existence of linkage dynamics in Switzerland. How does a young, in some cases teen-aged, Swiss resident manage to join infiltration-wary terrorists groups operating in parts of the world where he has no personal connections? Does he travel there independently in the hope of being accepted? Or are there elements, in Switzerland or in other places, providing a linkage between him and the terrorist group? The next two sections will attempt to provide answers to these difficult questions.

### 3.1 Potential radicalizing agents

In 2008 the European Commission’s Expert Group on Violent Radicalization argued that radicalization takes place “at the intersection of an enabling environment and a personal trajectory.”<sup>117</sup> An individual’s personal profile and history is crucial in understanding why he reacted in the way he did to outside stimuli, influences, pushes and pulls on the radicalization path. Understanding his (or her) psychological processes is extremely difficult but of fundamental importance. At the same time, argues the Expert Group, the immediate environment in which the individual lives is equally important when trying to understand the radicalization process. It is therefore necessary to identify the places, whether in the physical or virtual world, where individuals are first introduced to jihadist ideology and where they can subsequently develop and nurture their devotion to it.

The relationship between radical ideology and violent actions is extremely contested among scholars and policymakers. Striking a balance between the extremes in this polarized debate, it is fair to state, first of all, that ideology is just one of the factors, together with personal circumstances, that drive individuals to radicalize and eventually commit acts of violence. Second, not all individuals who embrace radical ideas eventually commit acts of violence in their furtherance. To the contrary, most cognitive radicals will never make the leap into violence. But it is equally fair to state that most violent radicals at some point were simply cognitive radicals. For these reasons, in order to understand violent radicalization it is important to understand the milieu that produces it.

In the specific case of this report it is therefore necessary to analyze the ideological milieu that produces an Abu Saad al Tunisi or a Majd N.. That milieu has to be identified in some of the most extreme fringes of the

113 Todd C. Helmus, “Why and How Some People Become Terrorists,” in Paul K. Davis and Kim Cragin, eds., *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-849-OSD, 2009), p. 77.

114 For an excellent analysis of al Qaeda-affiliated networks’ recruitment in Saudi Arabia, for example, see Thomas Hegghammer, “The Recruiter’s Dilemma: Signalling and Rebel Recruitment Tactics,” *Journal of Peace Research* 50, No. 1 (2012): 1–16.

115 Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Violent Jihad in the Netherlands: Current Trends in the Islamist Terrorist Threat*, March 2006, p. 6.

116 Ibid.

117 *Radicalisation Processes Leading to Acts of Terrorism*, report prepared by the European Commission’s Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation, May 15, 2008.

Salafist movement. As said, the automatic identification of Salafism with terrorism is a gross analytical mistake. The movement is characterized by various strands and only a minority of Salafists, in Switzerland and elsewhere, advocate the use of violence in the West. Moreover, even among those who interact with the most radical fringes of the Salafist movement, only a marginal fraction will make the leap into violent radicalism. Many individuals who are part of this loosely-knit milieu do cheer the actions of certain jihadist groups. But most do so from the sidelines and, for personal or ideological reasons, will never become actively involved in them. In substance, only a statistically insignificant minority of what already is a numerically small milieu will engage in violence. But in order to understand why that is, it is important to understand the bigger sea in which the fish swim. In the words of a German official, “not every Salafist is a terrorist, but every terrorist is a Salafist.”<sup>118</sup>

Even though this report aims at analyzing exclusively security aspects, it should be mentioned that all forms of Salafism, even its more moderate and non-violent one, are problematic from a social point of view.<sup>119</sup> Their positions on integration, women’s rights, freedom of religion, homosexuality, anti-Semitism, and several other aspects often clash with the views and values embraced by the vast majority of European citizens and enshrined in all European countries’ constitutions. Even when, as in the majority of cases, it does not lead to violence, the growth of Salafism among European Muslim communities represents a challenge that European societies find themselves facing with increasing frequency and intensity.

### 3.2 The Internet

The importance of the internet in the radicalization process of most contemporary European jihadists cannot be overstated. As for many other ideologies, it is on the internet that many jihadists first discovered jihadist ideology, deepened their interest in it and interacted with like-minded individuals. Jihadist groups have long discovered the enormous potential of the internet and had established a strong online presence already in the 1990s. Today there are countless websites disseminating jihadist propaganda and allowing jihadist sympathizers to interact among themselves. Some of these websites are run directly by jihadist groups or individuals affiliated with

them, but over the last few years there has been a remarkable growth in websites run by unaffiliated individuals. The boom of online social media has exponentially increased the ability of individuals to access and disseminate jihadist propaganda online through interactive platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Paltalk.

While in the 1990s most jihadist websites were in Arabic or, to a lesser degree, other non-European languages, over the last ten years there has been a remarkable increase in the number of websites in English and, albeit to a lesser degree, other European languages such as French, German and Dutch. Throughout Europe there are individuals, whose degree of proximity to “real” terrorist networks ranges from close to nil, who post online statements from jihadist groups, news about various conflicts, texts from prominent Salafist/jihadist clerics and commentaries on related issues. Initially limited to websites and blogs, this material is now posted also on more interactive platforms. Interactions on the many forums, Paltalk chat-rooms and Facebook that support their ideology pages allow wannabe jihadists to feel part of a global community, largely increasing their belief and commitment in the cause.

This phenomenon is present also in Switzerland. Swiss security officials have consistently argued that, over the last few years, they have witnessed an increase in quantity and quality of online jihadist activities within Switzerland.<sup>120</sup> The author of this report sought to independently identify and observe the online activities of seemingly Swiss-based individuals frequenting Salafist virtual circles and, in many cases, supporting jihadist views.

It found that several Swiss-based individuals regularly access top tier jihadi forums like Shumukh, Ansar al-Mujahideen Arabic, Ansar al-Mujahideen English and several French or German-based online platforms closely linked to jihadist ideology. It also identified a few seemingly Swiss-based individuals supporting jihadist views on Facebook and other online social networks. It is therefore possible to say that the presence of a small, loosely-knit community of Swiss-based individuals supporting some of the most militant interpretations of Salafism is easily visible online. The term community should not be interpreted to mean that there is a cohesive and well-established group of Swiss-based online activists. Rather, it is fair to say that there are Swiss-based individuals that, with varying degrees of frequency, frequent a small number of websites or interact among themselves through online social networks. They represent a community only in the broad sense of the term.

A first important characteristic of this community is the remarkable linguistic cleavage that splits it. Some

<sup>118</sup> Anna Reimann, “Zu Besuch bei Salafisten: Sie hauen jetzt sofort ab!” *Der Spiegel*, May 9, 2012.

<sup>119</sup> These fears have been expressed by the Swiss government in various circumstances. In the abovementioned PRIOS report “Islamist Imams” it is argued that “applied to our society, this [Salafist ideology] means that Muslims should not integrate in the non-Muslim majority of Swiss society, that they are not to abide by the Swiss legal order, that they are not allowed to participate to its democratic life, that they should follow only Islamic law.” Page 6.

<sup>120</sup> Valerie de Graffenried, “Nous Traquons les Djihadistes sur Internet,” *Le Temps*, September 22, 2012.

Swiss-based jihad enthusiasts are active on various online forums in their language of origin: Arabic, Bosnian, Albanian or Somali. Some participate to English-language forums. But many, being born or at least raised in Switzerland, seem to be active online on various platforms in their everyday language. And here it is possible to observe the presence of two completely separate online scenes, one in German and one in French (the author has not been able to find a presence of Swiss-based jihad enthusiasts active in Italian). A member of the German speaking Swiss online community is more likely to interact with like-minded individuals from Germany and Austria rather than those from the French-speaking parts of the country. Similarly, online users from the French-speaking parts of Switzerland seem to interact with the large Francophone online community worldwide much more frequently than with fellow Swiss from the German speaking part.

Despite this separation, the French and German speaking Swiss online scenes present very similar characteristics. Both find a reference in websites and forums outside of Switzerland, where Salafist and jihadist scenes in the two languages are significantly more developed. Over the last few years, in fact, there has been a surge of jihadist-sympathizing websites, videos, forums and various online platforms in the two languages. It is fair to say that French and German are, after English, the two Western languages in which there is the widest availability of Salafist and jihadist material on the internet.<sup>121</sup> There are countless highly professionally-designed sites in both languages that provide information, videos, forums and other ways to communicate and interact. Therefore even those Swiss-based individuals that are not fluent in Arabic or other non-European languages can these days easily access Salafist and jihadist material in their mother tongue.

The activities, views and interactions of Swiss-based jihad enthusiasts are even more visible on Facebook. On the world's most popular social media platform it is possible to observe how hundreds of seemingly Swiss-based individuals who sympathize with some of the most extreme forms of Salafism interact among themselves. The loose and informal Swiss jihadist sympathizing online community acts in ways similar to most online communities. Members "friend" each other and post on each other's wall. They advertise local events and news of interest, they set up meetings and discussion groups, they interact among themselves in ways that range from egging each other on to having furious spats.

Some individuals are regular posters and, judging from the information they provide in their profile, the tone of their posts, and the "Facebook friends" they have, militant Islamism seems to be their main interest. Others who occasionally express a "like" for some militant video or post a short endorsement of some jihadist-related individual or activity appear to have a less "stereotypical" profile. They are Muslims (but in some cases that is not clear) but most of their interests (clubbing, hip hop, dating) are not those commonly associated with militant Islamism.

One of the most common forms of interactions is debate on current affairs. Members of Facebook groups or groups of friends comment on issues that range from Swiss politics to various conflicts in Muslim-majority countries, adding information in the forms of links or videos and providing commentary. A common pattern occurs when a Swiss-based individual posts on his Facebook page, for example, a video or a news story about an attack perpetrated by a jihadist group. Most commonly several seemingly Swiss-based individuals express their appreciation by clicking "Like" on the thumbnail adjacent to the post. Occasionally posters write a comment expressing more or less direct support for the action.

Most members of the community post jihadist links and occasionally click "Like" but do not openly endorse jihadist groups, possibly aware of the implications of doing so in a public venue. Others are less cautious, openly expressing their support for various jihadist groups' views and actions. Posts expressing strong anti-Semitic views, and wishing harm on or threatening specific individuals are also not uncommon. Some individuals even post pictures of themselves in military fatigue and holding automatic weapons. In many cases individuals post pictures of themselves holding weapons during their mandatory service in the Swiss army, but the pictures can take a different tone when they are accompanied by endorsements of or expressions of sympathy towards al Qaeda and affiliated groups.

These endorsements for jihadist groups and their actions can be seen in different ways. On one level, one should refrain from taking alarmistic positions. Several studies have demonstrated that people adopt online positions and statements that are significantly more extreme of what they would in real life. There are countless online forums for right wing militants, anarchists, animal rights activists and other ideologies brimming with individuals threatening bellicose actions. Yet most people who invoke extreme violence online are unlikely to engage in any kind of similar activity in real life. Most "jihadist cyber-warriors" are exactly like all other cyber-warriors: virtual extremists who will never translate their keyboard fantasies into action. Many individuals who frequent the Swiss online community of jihad sympathizers – a community whose average age appears to be extremely low-- will eventually

121 For an analysis of the francophone online scene, see Benjamin Ducol, "Uncovering the French-Speaking Jihadisphere: An Exploratory Analysis," *Media, War & Conflict* 5, No. 1 (2012): 51–70. For the German language scene, see Dirk Baehr, *Der Deutsche Salafismus* (Grin Verlag, 2011) and Asiem El Difraoui, *Jihad.de*, report for the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin, February 2012.

grow out of their juvenile enthusiasm. Many others will retain certain views but will never act upon them in any violent way.

Yet, experience has shown that, in some cases, individuals who are active on online platforms do eventually make the leap into action, even without real-life interactions with other militants. The dynamic occurs in relation to several ideologies, but just limiting it to jihadism in Europe, two of the most prominent examples of cyber-warriors turned real-life terrorists are those of Roshonara Choudhry, abovementioned, and that of Arid Uka, a young man of Kosovar origin who, on March 2, 2011 shot and killed at point blank two U.S. soldiers at Frankfurt airport.<sup>122</sup>

Uka was not known to German authorities before carrying out the attack and there are no indications he frequented Salafist networks in the physical world. After the attack German authorities retraced Uka's online activities, discovering that he had been reading and posting on a variety of websites. It also became apparent that Uka had been connected to various elements within Germany's Salafist scene via Facebook and other media sharing sites like DawaFFM.<sup>123</sup> It is apparent that Uka was, in the words of Bundesamtes für Verfassungsschutz' vice-president Alexander Eisvogel, "a typical example of self-radicalization through the internet."<sup>124</sup>

Swiss authorities argue that it is not unreasonable to think that a case like that of Uka could potentially be replicated in Switzerland.<sup>125</sup> In its 2012 report the NDB stated that "also in Switzerland have been identified on virtual social networks like Facebook individuals clearly belonging to the Islamist ideological milieu who apparently do not possess direct ties with jihadist networks in the real world."<sup>126</sup> Assessing which, if any, of these self-radicalized individuals will make the leap from the keyboard to the gun is, of course, an almost impossible effort. There are many Swiss-based individuals who possess a profile very similar to Uka's and, like him, are young, impressionable men who spend hours absorbing jihadist propaganda online. It is obvious that the personal conditions and psychological processes that led Uka to act cannot be replicated in identical ways in any other person. But the examples of Uka, Choudhry and the many other self-radicalized European and American jihadists who have either carried out or attempted attacks on their own looms large in the mind of Swiss security officials.<sup>127</sup>

Over the last few years a few episodes have suggested that some Swiss-based online jihad enthusiasts can convert into real-life terrorists. A first case occurred in 2008, when authorities began monitoring the activities of Adlene Hicheur, a French citizen of Algerian descent who worked at CERN in Geneva and the Polytechnic of Lausanne. The man, a trained physicist, was known to authorities for having been an online contact of Garsalloui in the early 2000s.<sup>128</sup> Authorities began monitoring his conversations with leaders of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb operating in Algeria in which he discussed the possibility of carrying out attacks in Europe. Arrested in 2009 and suspected of planning an attack against a French military base in Annecy, he was tried and sentenced to five years in prison by a French court.<sup>129</sup>

A somewhat similar case took place in 2011, when Swiss authorities received information from their German counterparts that a Swiss convert had discussed via the internet the idea of attacking the U.S. military base of Ramstein with a German militant.<sup>130</sup> The Swiss convert, who reportedly had never met in person his German-based interlocutor, alleged that he could provide the explosives necessary for the attack – a fact that led authorities to intervene. A search of the convert's house did not lead to any evidence showing the man actually possessed the explosives and, after having interrogated him, Swiss authorities released him. It is unclear whether the plan was real or simply online braggadocio.<sup>131</sup>

Cases in which the internet plays a central role in both the radicalization and execution/linkage phases are, as seen, not uncommon, throughout Europe and, to some degree, in Switzerland. But in most cases the internet plays a role together with real-life factors. In the cases of Abu Saad al Tunisi and Majd N., as seen, the internet was a crucially important factor in the Biel residents' radicalization, as they were both avid consumers of online jihadist propaganda. But the internet was just one factor in their radicalization process, operating together with real-life interactions the two young men had within their communities. This dynamic seems to be the most common, as in most cases interactions with radical elements in physical spaces are equally if not more important than those in the virtual world.

122 Unquestionably the most prominent example of an individual inspired by an ideology other than jihadism fitting this profile is that of Anders Behring Breivik, the perpetrator of the mass casualty attacks in Oslo and the Norwegian island of Utøya in July 2011.

123 Matthias Bartsch, Matthias Gebauer and Yassin Musharbash, "The Radical Islamist Roots of the Frankfurt Attack," *Spiegel Online*, March 3, 2011.

124 Markus Wehner, "Wir haben längst den Online-Dschihad," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 11, 2012.

125 Interviews with Swiss officials, Bern, February 2013.

126 NDB annual report, 2012, p. 40.

127 Various interviews with Swiss officials, Bern, October 2012 to April 2013.

128 DAP annual report, 2009, p. 30.

129 Fedpol annual report, 2009, p. 34; "L'Ingénieur du CERN Soupçonné de Terrorisme Ciblait les Chasseurs Alpains," *Le Monde*, November 17, 2009; "France Jails Cern Physicist Adlene Hicheur for Terror Plot," *BBC*, May 4, 2012.

130 Fedpol annual report, 2011, p. 35; Valerie de Graffenried, "Nous Traquons les Djihadistes sur Internet," *Le Temps*, September 22, 2012.

131 Interview with Swiss officials, Bern, February 2013.



### 3.3 The role of mosques

During the first phase of European jihadism a handful of mosques scattered throughout the continent played a crucial role in connecting unaffiliated jihad enthusiasts with established groups.<sup>132</sup> Such places as London's Finsbury Park mosque, the al Quds mosque in Hamburg, the Islamic Cultural Institute in Milan, and the Multikulturhaus in Neu-Ulm were either run or extensively populated by individuals with direct connections to al Qaeda and affiliated groups, and they often served as agents of radicalization, recruitment, and linkage.

The less permissive environment of the last few years has put an end to the era of "openly jihadist mosques." Some of the old leadership of the most militant mosques throughout Europe has been arrested or deported or has voluntarily left for various reasons. In some cases, the leadership has remained virtually the same but has toned down its rhetoric and stopped or significantly diminished its recruiting and linkage efforts. In some cases, to be sure, these changes are just facade, and such activities are still taking place, but in a more discrete fashion. Some mosques still play an important role in the radicalization process and in the formation of spontaneous clusters of like-minded individuals. However, most of the activities that normally follow such initial steps no longer take place in mosques but are instead conducted in small private circles outside of the mosques.<sup>133</sup>

Switzerland has never had an openly jihadist mosque. Some Swiss mosques do embrace relatively radical positions and there are indications that clusters related to militant activities have traditionally congregated around them. But Switzerland has never been home to places like Finsbury Park or al Quds. It has never hosted places of worship where the leadership was actively involved in jihadist activities and where several overlapping networks of hardened terrorists operated. This, it will be later argued, is one of the main reasons why Switzerland has not seen levels of radicalization comparable to other European countries.

Yet mosques consistently espousing extremely conservative forms of Islam, if not openly Islamist and Salafist in their outlook, do exist in Switzerland.

Establishing the ideological leaning of a mosque is no easy feat. Even possessing vast amounts of information on its leadership, the tone of its sermons and lectures, and the kind of literature and activities it promotes, categorizing a mosque as "Salafist" or "liberal" is often an exercise in oversimplification. In most cases the task is complicated by the fact that it is quite difficult to obtain these sorts of information, even for authorities.

Well aware of these difficulties, in January 2008 the Sicherheitsausschuss des Bundesrates attempted to verify whether some Swiss mosques espoused radical views – an admittedly challenging and arbitrary task. The study that was produced for it, a 17-page report titled "Islamist imams," showed that the vast majority of Swiss mosques are moderate but that there is a minority that preaches radical messages.<sup>134</sup> While admitting its legal limitations in ascertaining what is preached inside mosques, the study spoke about "circumstantial evidence" indicating that at least eight imams preaching in some twelve mosques (in the cantons Geneva, Neuchatel, Vaud, Valais, Bern, Basel, Luzern and Zurich) adopted a radical interpretation of Islam. Various journalistic reports have occasionally revealed that some Swiss-based imams do preach views that the vast majority of the Swiss public would consider radical.<sup>135</sup> In a few cases authorities believed some of these view to constitute a crime and charged some Swiss-based imams for them.<sup>136</sup>

In the absence of openly jihadist mosques, Swiss residents sympathizing or actively involved in jihadist networks "hang around" the country's most conservative mosques. Throughout Switzerland there are a handful of mosques, such as, for example, Bern's Ikre, Zurich's al Hidayah and Biel's Errahman, where committed jihadists and jihadist wannabes feel comfortable meeting with each other, spending time and occasionally engaging with other conservative Muslims whom they can try to sway to their interpretation of Islam. There are no indications that the leadership of these mosques encourages this dynamic. Rather, it is likely that in most cases mosque officials are either unaware of or incapable of contrasting the presence of jihadist networks inside the mosque. But given the fact that these mosques do espouse very conservative interpretations of Islam they represent the ideal meeting place for more radical elements throughout their region. In many cases the mosque represent just the initial meeting point, as small clusters that form at the

<sup>132</sup> It goes without saying that the overwhelming majority of mosques in Switzerland and throughout Europe reject violence and militant ideologies. Over the last few years many of them have proactively tackled the spread of extremism among their communities and several European governments have forged important partnerships with mosque leadership in that regard.

<sup>133</sup> Lorenzo Vidino, *Radicalization, Linkage, and Diversity. Current Trends in Terrorism in Europe*, report published by the RAND Corporation, 2011. This assessment is shared by intelligence agencies throughout Western Europe. British authorities, for example, have stated that "Extremists are moving away from mosques to conduct their activities in private homes and premises. We assess that radicalization increasingly occurs in private meeting places, be they closed prayer groups at mosques, self-defense classes at gyms or training camps in the UK or overseas." MI5 report quoted in Christopher Andrew, *Defend the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (New York: Knopf, 2009), p. 827.

<sup>134</sup> *Imams Islamistes: Etat des Lieux et Moyens de Contrer le Phénomène*, report PRIOS, January 29, 2008; Urs Gehrig, "Moschee als Dunkelkammer," *Weltwoche*, Issue 5, 2009

<sup>135</sup> See, for example, the TV documentary *Hinter dem Schleier*, broadcasted on SRF on April 1, 2010. Available at <http://www.srf.ch/player/tv/dok/video/hinter-dem-schleier?id=dd4c2953-96b1-437d-b6e7-c37cfo09ad6e> (accessed March 2, 2013).

<sup>136</sup> That was the case, for example, of Aziz Osmanoglu, secretary of the Basel Muslim Community (Muslimische Gemeinde Basel), who in 2010 was prosecuted for views he expressed during the SRF documentary *Hinter dem Schleier*. The case was later dismissed. "Nach TV-Auftritt: Basler Behörden ermitteln gegen Muslim-Sekretär," *Tages Anzeiger*, April 16, 2010.

mosque then take more “jihadist-leaning” discussions to private gatherings outside the mosque.

In some cases, some of the mosques at the margin of which Swiss jihadist sympathizers occasionally congregate are those run by Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated networks and funded by Arab Gulf money. Yet the relationship between participationist, Muslim Brotherhood-leaning networks on one end and Salafists of various leanings on the other is complex and often shaped by local dynamics and individual personalities. In some cases, despite vehemently disagreeing with some of their theological and political positions, Swiss Salafists feel comfortable enough to attend, at least occasionally, mosques run or influenced by Muslim Brotherhood networks and/or by Saudi Arabia. But in other cases the two sides clash, at times not just metaphorically. It is not uncommon for some Salafists to take a confrontational approach, directly challenging the Brotherhood-leaning leadership of some mosques. In some cases they have opted for a complete break and opened their own, generally smaller, places of worship. A dynamic of this sort seems to have taken place in Basel, where around 2002 breakaways from the Saudi-funded König Faisal mosque moved to a smaller place on Elsässerstrasse (Arrahma Verein), or in Zurich, where longtime worshippers of the Rötelstrasse mosque founded the Hidaya mosque.<sup>137</sup>

Salafists also run a few hole-in-the-wall mosques throughout the country. They generally are basements, garages or small commercial or industrial buildings that, unlike most mosques, are normally closed and where small groups of Salafists congregate only on Fridays and for holidays and lectures. An example of this kind of prayer room is the storefront in the Zurich suburb of Seebach operated by the Freunde der Sunnah, a small, very conservative Salafist group led by mostly young, Swiss-born men of Balkanic descent. The group also runs a website and a web forum connected to the German Salafist scene and, despite its small size, occasionally hosts prominent speakers from the Salafist scene in Germany and the Arab Gulf.<sup>138</sup> Swiss-based Salafist networks also occasionally organize various activities such as lectures, holiday celebrations and weekends in the outdoors where they engage in both religious and physical activities.

In other cases Salafists of various persuasions opt for another tactic: infiltration.<sup>139</sup> It is not uncommon for Salafists to start frequenting a mosque by initially offering to carry out for free a variety of humble chores such

as cleaning, cooking or making repairs. In some cases they also offer to give lectures or mentor young people. Their aim is to insinuate themselves inside the mosque and slowly take it over, replacing its current leadership. In some cases Salafists will seek to do so by discrediting the imam in the eyes of the community, often by spreading rumors or ridiculing him during sermons for his supposed lack of knowledge on Islamic teachings. In some cases physical coercion also plays a role. Mosque leadership are at times outmaneuvered and overpowered by these tactics.<sup>140</sup>

It should also be noted that it is not uncommon for individuals and clusters who embrace some of the most extreme forms of Salafism to stop going to mosques altogether. In some cases that happens out of their own volition, either because they consider all mosques in the area, even the most conservative, not in tune with their interpretation of Islam or because they fear surveillance by authorities. In some other cases it is the leadership of the mosque that bans them from the premises.

It must be said that these dynamics are very difficult to assess from the outside and that each case should be assessed individually. In general terms, it can be said that the leadership of the overwhelming majority of Swiss mosques strongly rejects at least the most extreme forms of Islamism. But some mosques do constitute places where certain radical networks congregate, albeit often unbeknownst to or despite the opposition of the mosque’s leadership. Operating at the margins of these structures they seek to spread their views to other individuals they feel potentially susceptible to it. The introduction to jihadism can happen in any physical place where individuals interact, from schools to football pitches, from kebab stores to arcades. But some mosques represent ideal places where some of the most extreme Salafist groups can spread their views to potential new adepts.

### 3.4 Gateway organizations

Over the last few years many scholars and policymakers have discussed the role played by so-called “gateway organizations” in the radicalization process. The term indicates groups that, while not openly and directly advocating violence, propagate positions that fall immediately short of it and that, maintain some, provide the ideological foundations for violent groups. It has often been argued that, for the most part, gateway organizations stay within the borders of what is tolerated as free speech but provide a narrative that can be easily taken to the next step by violent groups.

<sup>137</sup> Interview with Dr. Lilo Roost Vischer, official in charge of religious dialogue for the Basel Stadt canton, Basel, February 2013; *Geschichte des Islams in den Kanton Basel-Stadt und Basel-Landschaft*, available at <http://www.inforel.ch/i21e02.html> (accessed February 15, 2013).

<sup>138</sup> The website is <http://wegdersalaf.de/salaficommunity/groups/viewgroup/30-salafis-zuerich> (link no longer active); in January 2013, for example, the mosque reportedly hosted the visit of Sheikh Abdullah bin Umar al-Adani, a prominent Salafist scholar based in Yemen (<http://verein.sunnah.ch/news/14-besuch-eines-sheikh.html>), accessed April 13, 2013).

<sup>139</sup> Interview with Swiss official, Bern, February 2013.

<sup>140</sup> Interview with Swiss Muslim community activist, Zurich, January 2013; interview with Swiss official, Bern, February 2013.

The two organizations that in regard to Islamist-inspired violent radicalization have most commonly been considered gateway organizations are Hizb ut Tahrir (HT) and Tablighi Jamaat (TJ). The former is a transnational group that, while virtually wiped out from the Middle East due to local regimes' hard repression, has experienced a rebirth in Europe in the 1990s. HT advocates the reinstatement of the Caliphate as the only solution to the ummah's current ills. While adopting an extreme rhetoric with strong anti-secular, anti-Western and anti-Semitic positions, HT for the most part stops short of directly advocating violence. Nonetheless, many of its former members worldwide engaged in terrorist activities upon leaving the group.

In the early 2000s the DAP reported the group's presence in the country.<sup>141</sup> In those years, for example, Italian authorities stopped on several occasions HT activists from the Zurich area traveling to Italy with large quantities of HT propaganda material.<sup>142</sup> In 2007 an HT activist of Tunisian descent, Lassaad A., was sentenced to six months by a court in Neuchatel for public instigation to violence and racial discrimination for distributing HT literature.<sup>143</sup> His activities were carried out in close cooperation with the more established branches of HT in Germany and France (particularly in the Mulhouse area).<sup>144</sup> As is not uncommon for HT activists worldwide, Lassaad A. is a highly educated individual, as he holds a doctorate and works as a scientist at a Swiss university.

Yet, overall, the group seems to have only a marginal presence in Switzerland. Interviewed for this study, former senior leaders of the British branch of the group who had been instrumental in developing HT branches throughout Europe claim not to be aware of any HT structure in Switzerland.<sup>145</sup> Swiss authorities believe that there might be at most some one hundred individuals throughout the country that are affiliated with HT. For the most part HT activists limit their activities to distributing leaflets, which they either print out from HT's website or obtain from more structured HT networks in Germany and France, in front of Swiss mosques.<sup>146</sup>

Similarly difficult to assess but, *prima facie*, seemingly limited are the activities on Swiss territory of Tablighi Jamaat. TJ is a transnational missionary organization tracing its origin to South Asia that has a significant influence in several European countries.<sup>147</sup> Its members

travel around the world preaching TJ's highly conservative interpretation of Islam and urging Muslims to abide by the tenets of the *sharia*. TJ does not advocate violence, but several individual TJ members have been involved in terrorist activities worldwide.

Authorities believe that the group is active in Switzerland, albeit on a very small scale.<sup>148</sup> While the group is increasingly multi-ethnic, it is still predominantly South Asian and the very limited presence in Switzerland of individuals from that area is one of the possible factors determining this limited presence. While not an exclusively TJ mosque, the South Asian mosque on Zurich's Weinbergstrasse is reportedly a center for TJ activists, as is the mosque on Elsässerstrasse in Basel.<sup>149</sup> Media reports from the mid-2000s also indicated that TJ activists in Basel were approaching Muslims who were behaving "un-Islamically" in the streets and scolded them for their behavior.<sup>150</sup>

### 3.5 The controversial role of the IZRS

A separate analysis should be reserved to the role of the Islamic Central Council of Switzerland (Islamischer Zentralrat Schweiz, henceforth IZRS). Over the last few years the IZRS has received very extensive –arguably excessive – attention from Swiss media and policymakers. Its many critics, whose backgrounds vary from conservative politicians to liberal members of the Muslim community, have leveraged a range of more or less sophisticated accusations against the group, from recruiting for terrorist groups to seeking the formation of a parallel society for Swiss Muslims. A recently formed entity with a unique background and arguably no parallels in other European countries, the IZRS represents a very interesting phenomenon. And, as most of its aspects, the IZRS's potential role on the radicalization process of Swiss Muslims is very difficult to assess.

The IZRS was formally founded in October 2009, a month before the controversial referendum on the ban of the constructions of minarets in Switzerland. The buildup to the vote led a handful of young Muslim activists who had known each other through their studies in Islamic Studies at the University of Bern and their previous activism in the Swiss Islamic scene to form an organization that could effectively participate in the debate over the minaret issue and, more in general, other subjects of concern to the Swiss Muslim community. The mostly Swiss-born activists behind the IZRS felt that the

141 DAP annual report, 2003, p. 32.

142 DIGOS note al Muhajiroun 2, Criminal proceeding 13016/99 RGNR, Tribunal of Milan, October 1, 2001.

143 DAP annual report, 2007, p. 15.

144 Interview with Swiss officials, Zurich, May 2013.

145 Interviews with various British based former HT activists, London, January and March 2013.

146 Interview with Swiss officials, Bern, February 2013.

147 Muhammad Khalid Masud, ed., *Travellers in Faith: Studies of the Tablighi Jama'at as a Transnational Islamic Movement for Faith Renewal* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

148 Fabian Eberhard, "Gefährliche Islamisten agieren in der Schweiz," *Sonntagszeitung*, July 10, 2011.

149 Interview with Swiss official, Bern, February 2013; interview with Swiss officials, Zurich, May 2013.

150 Beat Stauffer, "Islamische Missionare am Basler Rhein-Ufer," *Online Reports*, August 17, 2005.

largely foreign-born leadership of the various Swiss Muslim organizations lacked the will and skills to assertively represent the interests of a community that, in their view, was subjected to constant attacks. “The minaret vote,” argues an IZRS publication, “has shown that both existing Islamic organizations and Muslim individuals were unable to coordinate and professionally counter this degrading attack against Islam. Today we know that an effective counter-offensive had failed not only due to the lack of cooperation of the associations, but also due to the lack of financial resources. This is exactly the point upon which the Islamic Central Council of Switzerland focuses.”<sup>151</sup>

Tellingly, the two key personalities behind the IZRS are two young Swiss-born converts to Islam. The public face of the organization is Nicolas Blanco, a 30-year-old native of Biel who converted to Islam at 16. After his conversion Blanco spent several years studying Islam and Arabic both in Switzerland and in the Arabian Peninsula, where he has developed important personal connections. Blanco has long been active in the Swiss Islamic scene. In his native Biel he used to teach at the abovementioned Errahman mosque. At the national level he had gained prominence in 2006 for organizing a large gathering in Bern to protest the publications of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed by Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten*. Pictures of the prayer in front of the National Parliament held during the protest have become iconic and controversial images of Islam in Switzerland.

The other key leader of the IZRS is Abdel Azziz Qaasim (né Patric Jerome) Illi. Born in 1982 in Schaffhausen, before his conversion to Islam Illi was active in some of the most militant fringes of the pro-Palestinian movement in Switzerland. After visiting Gaza and meeting some of the top leaders of Hamas in 2002, Illi converted to Islam together with his wife Nora, who is now one of the leaders of the IZRS's women section. Widely described as extremely intelligent and strategic-minded, Illi, like Blanco, spends significant time traveling throughout Europe and the Middle East.<sup>152</sup>

The birth of the organization headed by Blanco and Illi and a handful of mostly Swiss-born activists in their twenties has had a seismic effect on the Swiss Muslim organized scene. Unlike its “competitors,” organizations run by first-generation immigrants still focusing on issues and concepts related to their countries of origin, the IZRS focuses primarily on issues facing Swiss Muslims in their daily life. Its core narrative argues that Muslims and, paradoxically, even converts of “ethnic Swiss”

background, are treated as alien elements by Swiss society and subject to constant discrimination and abuse.<sup>153</sup>

The formation of a strong and assertive Swiss Muslim identity is seen by the IZRS as the solution to this problem. Following a typical Salafist line of thinking that sees cultural variations within Islam as alien elements polluting what they consider “original” Islam, the IZRS argues that a Swiss Muslim identity should not take into consideration any cultural background.<sup>154</sup> The organization's target audiences are mostly second-generation, Swiss-born Muslims who feel strongly about their Muslim background but do not recognize themselves in the cultural Bosnian, Albanian or Turkish Islam of their parents. The IZRS seeks to provide an answer to this youth's identity crisis in an assertive and allegedly untainted form of Islam.

In reality the form of Islam embraced and spread by the IZRS seems to be largely influenced by various forms of Salafism. It is true that the literature distributed by the group and the speakers it regularly invites to its conferences cannot be all put in one category and do represent various strands of Islam, albeit all quite conservative. But, even though this trend has been somewhat diluted most recently, the IZRS seems to gravitate largely around various Salafist milieus. In its first years the organization received extensive media scrutiny for establishing strong links to Pierre Vogel and other leaders of the German Salafist scene. The IZRS' leadership has since distanced itself from that milieu, criticizing its abrasive style and lack of Islamic knowledge. But the IZRS still retains a predominantly Salafist worldview and strong ties with the Salafist scene in the Balkans and the Arab Gulf.

Critics of the organization argue that ties to the Gulf provide the IZRS not just with theological guidance but also with financial support. Interviewed for this report, former IZRS board member Oscar Bergamin claimed that the group does receive unspecified yet substantial amounts from various donors throughout the Gulf, particularly in Kuwait.<sup>155</sup> Blanco denies the allegation, claiming that, while it has actively explored the idea of receiving outside support for some of its future initiatives, as of April 2013 the IZRS has raised funds only within Switzerland.<sup>156</sup> Bergamin's claim, while supported by the prominent role he played in the organization until recently and the evidence of his trips accompanying Blanco to the Gulf, cannot be independently verified. Yet there is no question that the IZRS conducts activities on a scale that

<sup>151</sup> Official IZRS brochure obtained during a visit to the organization's Bern headquarters, March 2013, p. 12.

<sup>152</sup> Interview with Abdel Azziz Qaasim Illi, Bern, April 2013.

<sup>153</sup> Interview with Susanne Leuenberger, PhD candidate at the University of Bern, Bern, January 2013.

<sup>154</sup> Philipp Gut, “Bin Laden in Biel,” *Weltwoche*, Issue 14, 2010.

<sup>155</sup> Interview with Oscar Bergamin, Chur, January 2013.

<sup>156</sup> Interview with Nicolas Blanco, Bern, April 2013; see also Daniel Glaus, “Radikale Muslime suchen Geldgeber in Golfregion,” *Sonntagszeitung*, January 15, 2012.

is significantly larger than all other Swiss Muslim organizations and of what its small size would explain.

The IZRS claims to have some 2600 fee paying members.<sup>157</sup> A core group of IZRS activists operating out of a small office in the basement of a residential building near the Bern central station runs an impressive number of activities. Headquartered at the same address, which is registered to a Zurich-based company run by IZRS treasurer Adisin Hodza, are its charitable branch, the Union der Internationalen Humanitären Organisationen, and the Swiss branch of the Association des Savants Musulmans, a body of religious clerics.<sup>158</sup> Its media department issues regular press releases in various languages and its website and Facebook page are professionally designed and constantly updated. Its activists regularly run standpoints throughout the country (although mainly in German-speaking areas, where the group is more established) distributing books and pamphlets. Its annual conference is the largest event for Muslims in the country, attracting prominent speakers from all over the world and a few thousand attendees. The IZRS's leadership has announced its intention of opening Islamic schools, a TV station and a 20 million Swiss Francs mosque in the Bern area, although it does not seem to have followed through on these projects.

Given its controversial positions, high media profile and large range and reach of its activities, the IZRS has been under the spotlight since its birth. Its critics, many of which come from within the Muslim community, accuse it of seeking to establish a parallel society for Swiss Muslims and therefore preventing their integration into mainstream society.<sup>159</sup> The IZRS argues that Muslims should be able to live a fully Islamic life in Switzerland and that such arrangement fits within their constitutional rights. This debate is extremely important for Swiss society, touching important issues of integration and the future of Swiss society, but it has only loose connections to the core focus of this report.

What is instead more relevant here is the role of the IZRS in relation to radicalization. From this perspective, some of the characterizations of the organization and its leaders from some Swiss media seem somewhat simplistic.<sup>160</sup> Calling Nicholas Blancho "Bin Laden in Biel" and "the most dangerous Islamist in Switzerland" might make for catchy headlines but does not contribute to a balanced debate over the IZRS. IZRS leaders indeed defend the right of Muslims to fight in areas where Muslims are "under attack," like Palestine or Afghanistan – a

position that, to be sure, is hardly uncommon in Muslim communities.<sup>161</sup> And there are some tangential overlaps between some members of the organization with individuals that have been involved or advocate violence.

But there is no doubt that for moral, religious and strategic reason they do not seek to incite violence within Switzerland. The IZRS is not an easy organization to label, but it is not incorrect to see it as heavily influenced by Salafist thinking. Yet the Salafism embraced by most of its leadership has little to do with the jihadist Salafism that motivates violent radicalization. It is in that regard telling that some of the most extreme Salafist milieus in Switzerland have severely criticized the IZRS for some of its actions, like its decision to wish Swiss Christians a merry Christmas – an act the more extreme Salafist considered blasphemous.<sup>162</sup>

In substance, there are no indications of any involvement of the IZRS in any terrorist activity. Tellingly, shortly after the group's foundation, the NDB kept the IZRS under observation for a year (the time the law allows it to) and found no indications of any criminal activity nor that it promoted or incited to violence.<sup>163</sup> Yet this exoneration does not mean that the IZRS is unproblematic. NDB director Markus Seiler has stated, in fact, that the IZRS is involved "in ideological but not violent extremism."<sup>164</sup> Alard du Bois-Reymond, the former director of the Federal Office for Migration, goes further and argues that the organization provides "a potential breeding ground for terrorists."<sup>165</sup> It is arguably not unfair to state that the IZRS, while not directly advocating violence, provides a sort of mood music that creates a fertile ground for more radical and violent groups to operate. Some of the speakers they promote advocate views that are, by most standards, quite extreme. In the vast majority of cases they do not advocate violence, but they do form part of a narrative upon which violent groups can build.

Yet the IZRS leadership cannot control how some of their young and more "hot-headed" followers might interpret some of the messages they propagate. By inviting a speaker like Mohammed al Arifi to Switzerland, for example, the IZRS potentially introduces thousands of Swiss Muslims, the vast majority of which are not Arabic speakers and therefore likely unfamiliar with his positions, to the cleric's extreme views on homosexuality. There is no question that the IZRS' leadership and many of its followers have the intellectual ability to contextualize al Arifi's teachings and understand that what the cleric advocates for Saudi or his utopical Muslim society does

157 Interview with Nicolas Blancho, Bern, April 2013; Bergamin claims that the number is much smaller, in the double digits.

158 Public records available through Moneyhouse.ch (accessed March 20, 2013).

159 Interview with Saida Keller-Messahli, founder of the Forum for a Progressive Islam, Zurich, December 2012.

160 Philipp Gut, "Bin Laden in Biel," *Weltwoche*, Issue 14, 2010; Number 14, April 8, 2010.

161 Interview with Nicolas Blancho, Bern, April 2013.

162 Interview with Abdel Azziz Qaasim Illi, Bern, April 2013.

163 Daniel Glaus, Sebastian Ramspeck and Martin Stoll, "Der Taliban von nebenan," *Sonntagszeitung*, August 7, 2011.

164 Samuel Jaberg, "Einbahn-Fahrt zum Heiligen Krieg," *SwissInfo*, July 4, 2012.

165 "Zwietracht unter den Muslimen," *NZZ am Sonntag*, April 18, 2010.

not apply to modern-day Switzerland. But, also based on the observation of similar dynamics in other European countries, it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that some isolated individual might not possess that intellectual ability and will decide to, in this specific case, attack homosexuals in Switzerland based on what he heard al Arifi preach. There is no question that the IZRS would have no criminal responsibility in this case, but a moral and political one seems evident.

Interviewed for this study, Blanco argued that his organization seeks to present a wide array of views and that the only “red line” it poses is direct incitement of violence.<sup>166</sup> It is indeed true that the IZRS has increasingly tried to present a variety of voices representing a relatively broad Islamic spectrum, even though the vast majority of them are extremely conservative. Blanco also argues that the organization’s leadership cannot and does not want to police what all its members say and do. The fact that some of its members frequently link to, for example, jihadist videos on their Facebook pages should not be an indictment to the whole of IZRS. There is a growing heterogeneity within the organization – even though liberal and secular voices are hardly visible – as the IZRS does not hide its intention to represent all Swiss Muslims and the group’s leadership, argue Blanco and Illi, cannot be held accountable for what some of its members do.<sup>167</sup>

An additional aspect that should not be overlooked is both the organization’s and its leadership’s young age. The IZRS has changed some of its initial positions and attitudes. Its leaders, for example, speak with embarrassment about establishing ties with Pierre Vogel and EzP, fully admitting it was a mistake (even though still today some lower level members of the IZRS advertise lectures of EzP speakers online). On many issues pragmatism and strategic thinking seems to have replaced the emotional need for confrontation of the early days. Critics argue that the leadership has simply adopted a “brilliant obscurity” to hide its real views, which remain quite radical and subversive.<sup>168</sup> While this hypothesis is not ungrounded, it cannot be ruled out that the organization has genuinely revised some of its initial stances.

The IZRS is, in sum, a very particular and complex organization that, also due to its relatively short history, is difficult to accurately assess. Its impact on integration of Swiss Muslims should be debated separately from its role on the radicalization process. From a security perspective it can be argued that accusations of links to terrorism seem unsubstantiated and therefore unfair. It is arguably not incorrect, on the other hand, to question the IZRS’ role

in introducing and mainstreaming through its wide organizational apparatus views that, while not violent per se, are part and parcel of a narrative that might lead isolated individuals to violence.

### 3.6 Links abroad

Like their counterparts throughout Europe, Swiss jihad enthusiasts often interact with like-minded individuals and networks outside their country.<sup>169</sup> In many cases these interactions take place, as seen, through the internet. Family connections also favor the interaction with various diaspora communities in Europe and in the extra-European country of origin. Moreover, Switzerland’s small size and location at the heart of Europe favor physical interactions, as Swiss activists often travel outside of the country to interact with activists in other European countries and, similarly, European activists often come to Switzerland. Switzerland is not an island and its borders are almost meaningless for activists in the Europe’s Salafist/jihadist scene.

While some external influences come from a variety of regions, Swiss-based jihad enthusiasts seem to interact with particular intensity with three geographic areas: Germany, France and the Balkans. Over the last few years activists in the German-speaking parts of the country have developed solid ties to the thriving Salafist scene of Switzerland’s northern neighbor. Germany, in fact, has one of Europe’s most active Salafist communities, encompassing all trends of the Salafist movement.<sup>170</sup> Salafist-jihadists have long operated in the country, engaging in violent actions both within Germany (ranging from a half dozen attempted plots to carry out attacks to Uka’s killing of US airmen at Frankfurt airport to scuffles with police in Bonn that injured 29 policemen in May 2012) and outside of the country, as dozens of German militants have engaged in various actions in Pakistan, Somalia and Chechnya.

But the not-directly violent Salafist scene in Germany has been equally active over the last few years. German-based groups like Die Wahre Religion, DawaFFM, Millatu Ibrahim, the abovementioned *Einladung zum Paradies* and several others have established a small but active following throughout the country. Speaking mostly in German and crafting their message to the reality of daily life in the West, the charismatic preachers behind them have managed to attract many young German Muslims. The simple yet powerful message of Pierre Vogel, Hassan Dabbagh, Ibrahim Abou Nagie and the many other leaders of the German Salafist community appeals to individuals struggling with their identity. Their

166 Interview with Nicolas Blanco, Bern, April 2013.

167 Interviews with Blanco and Illi, Bern, April 2013.

168 Philipp Gut “Bin Laden in Biel,” *Weltwoche*, Issue 14, 2010; Martin Beglinger, “Man sollte Nicolas Blanco nicht unterschätzen,” *Tages Anzeiger*, April 7, 2010.

169 DAP annual report, 2008, page 20.

170 Dirk Baehr, *Der Deutsche Salafismus* (Munich: Grin Verlag, 2011).

organizations' ability to spread their message through slickly designed internet platforms and seminars reaching a capillary network of activists has significantly increased the German Salafists' appeal.

German authorities have expressed enormous concerns about the growth of Salafism in their country. While clearly stating that in most cases German-based Salafist organizations do not directly engage in violence, German authorities have argued that they represent a severe threat to German democracy, as they spread "fundamentalist values that are contrary to the German constitution" and "are oriented against the basic right to freedom of religion, against Christians and other faiths, including Shiites."<sup>171</sup> Authorities have moved against many of these organizations, either by formally banning them or by exerting various forms of pressure against them. It should be noted that this assertive posture by German authorities should be seen in the context of the country's constitution, which for obvious historical reasons puts a particular emphasis on the need to stem extremist ideologies within the country even if they are not immediately accompanied by violence.

Given the geographic and linguistic proximity, it is not surprising that links between the German and Swiss-German Salafist scenes exist. Authorities have spoken of instances in which Swiss-based elements were in touch with individuals from the jihadist scene in Germany. The NDB, for example, is aware of links between Swiss-based activists and individuals at the periphery of the Sauerland cell, the southern-Germany-based cell that in 2007 was dismantled after having stored some 700 kg of explosives to attack a US military base.<sup>172</sup>

It is significantly easier to detect ties between the "not-immediately-violent" Salafist scenes in Switzerland and Germany. German authorities report that they not uncommonly spot Swiss activists attending mosques and seminars of the German Salafist scene, particularly in southern Germany. But leaders of the German Salafist scene also often travel themselves to Switzerland. Seminars and lectures of top German Salafist preachers take place throughout the German-speaking part of Switzerland on a regular basis. Advertised on Facebook and other online means, they take place in mosques, public venues or private gatherings. They attract audiences that range from the dozen to a few hundred, some committed activists, others simply occasional attendees driven by curiosity. The lectures are often taped and uploaded online. Just on Youtube, for example, it is possible to find lectures EzP

leader Pierre Vogel gave in Basel,<sup>173</sup> Zurich,<sup>174</sup> Regensdorf,<sup>175</sup> and Kriens<sup>176</sup> between 2008 and 2009. Two additional videos of Vogel available on Youtube show him in Switzerland. In one, titled *Dawa in den Alpen*, Vogel is seen with two fellow EzP activists arguing that Islam will peacefully conquer the Swiss Alps.<sup>177</sup> The video was shot during Vogel's visit to a seminar organized by the IZRS in Disentis.<sup>178</sup> In the second, titled *Greuzi [sic] aus der Schweiz*, the Salafist preacher gives an impromptu speech after being stopped by border authorities in Basel enforcing a Swiss entry ban on him.<sup>179</sup> Swiss authorities have used entry bans against speakers from the German Salafist scene in other circumstances.<sup>180</sup>

One place where Swiss-German links are particularly visible is Basel. Swiss media became aware of this dynamic in the spring of 2012, when Basel-based activists began distributing free Qurans throughout the country. The effort was part of a larger campaign headed by Cologne-based Ibrahim Abou-Nagie, one of Germany's most controversial Salafist leaders. In 2012, in fact, Abou-Nagie was prosecuted in Cologne for "public incitement to crime" and "public insult of faiths, religious societies and ideological groups, even though case was eventually dismissed for lack of evidence."<sup>181</sup> His Quran-distribution effort foresaw the distribution of 25 million copies (although reportedly only 300.000 were printed as of spring 2012) of the Quran in German through mail and a capillary network of stands placed in city centers throughout the German-speaking world.<sup>182</sup>

Abou Nagie organized a conference to announce the spread to Switzerland of his initiative, which was widely criticized by several Swiss politicians and Muslim community leaders because of the modalities and the translation of certain verses adopted by Abou Nagie's Quran.<sup>183</sup> His organization, Die Wahre Religion, specifically set up a Youtube channel and a website for Switzerland (diewahre religion.ch), which is identical in format and content to its original German (diewahre religion.de).<sup>184</sup> The letter that accompanied the Quran sent by mail to those who requested a free copy through diewahre reli-

173 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4bpJyZB38Q> (accessed April 8, 2013).

174 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRBMWg7riAQ> (accessed April 8, 2013).

175 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UW2hnOnzBcA> (accessed April 9, 2013).

176 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhaNEa43siw> (accessed April 8, 2013).

177 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClNGP2Vwilo> (accessed April 8, 2013).

178 For Vogel speaking at the IZRS event, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzrgqO661Rs> (accessed April 9, 2013).

179 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZwfiPjhc8Y> (accessed April 8, 2013).

180 DAP annual report, 2008, p. 18.

181 Pascal Beucker, "Das sind Allahs Gesetze," *Tageszeitung*, September 12, 2011.

182 "Deutschland soll mit Koranen überschwemmt werden," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, April 12, 2012.

183 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HqnvivCUzs> (accessed April 8, 2013).

184 The Youtube channel can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/user/QuranProjektSchweiz?feature=watch> (accessed April 4, 2013).

171 "German Authorities Move against Islamic Extremists," *Associated Press*, March 13, 2013; "Gotteskrieger radikalisieren deutsche Muslime," *Die Welt*, October 13, 2008.

172 DAP annual report, 2009, p. 28.

gion.ch gave as reference sites both [diewahrerreligion.ch](http://diewahrerreligion.ch) and [hausdesqurans.ch](http://hausdesqurans.ch).<sup>185</sup> The latter provides as a contact an address in Cologne, a phone number and an email address that are identical to those used by Die Wahre Religion in Germany.

The person behind the Quran distribution in Switzerland is a young law graduate living in Basel. Born in Macedonia, he grew up secular in the Basel area until he embraced Salafism in his mid-twenties.<sup>186</sup> He runs his own publishing house that sells, at very low prices, books on Islam with a heavy focus on Salafist authorities like al Arifi and the late Muhammad ibn al Uthaymeen. The man's website links to [Radiodawa.ch](http://Radiodawa.ch), a bi-lingual German and Albanian website that posts articles and videos with a heavy Salafist content. [Radiodawa.ch](http://Radiodawa.ch) links to EzP's website and that of the as-Sirat mosque in Berlin, one of Germany's most controversial Salafist hubs.<sup>187</sup> The mosque is often home to Ahmad Abdul Baraa, a Berlin-based preacher under observation from German authorities.<sup>188</sup> Following a common pattern, Baraa has visited Switzerland, holding a seminar advertised by EzP and various Swiss-based activists on Facebook in the Kandil Verein in Liestal.<sup>189</sup> The mosque in the industrial section of the capital of Basel Land is a common gathering place for Swiss Salafists.

The observation of activities on online social networks and interviews conducted with both authorities and members of the local Salafist community clearly point to the existence of a lively Salafist cluster in the greater Basel area. Its members do not "control" a mosque nor belong to one formal organization. Rather, the "Salafist community of Basel," as in virtually any other Swiss city where one exists, is a loose-knit network of like-minded individuals that, given their small numbers, know each other and engage in various activities that range from setting up stands in the city center to introduce people to Islam to collecting funds for various humanitarian causes. This loosely-knit "community" is not isolated and interacts with like-minded individuals throughout Switzerland and abroad, both online and in person. It must be stressed that, while some of their views are fair to characterize as quite extreme, there are no indications that activists of the local Salafist scene have engaged in any acts of violence. And while some members of the Basel Islamist community have had problems with the law due to their extreme views, the author is not aware of any Basel resident being engaged in terrorism-related activities.

If activists in the German-speaking parts of Switzerland look up to and link up with the more established

Salafist scene in Germany, those in the French-speaking parts of the country seem to be looking at both the Arabic and French language scene. Due to migration patterns most Arab immigrants to Switzerland have settled in French-speaking parts. Those among this community who are interested in various forms of Salafism tend to refer to sources in Arabic, still unquestionably the movement's main language. They do so both online, where Arabic language websites abound, and through visits of preachers from North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>190</sup> These events are increasingly bilingual, switching from Arabic to French, as they seek to attract the new generations, who are inevitably less fluent in Arabic, or individuals of non-Arab background.

Not dissimilarly from the German-speaking one, over the last few years the French-language Salafist scene has grown significantly, to the benefit also of the small number of Swiss residents interested in it. It is in fact possible to observe the presence of ostensibly Swiss-based activists on the many French-language Salafist websites that have surfaced over the last ten years. Ironically, the precursor of these websites was *Minbar-Sos*, the site run by Moez Garsallaoui and Malika el Aroud from Guin.<sup>191</sup> Many of the online (and, to a lesser degree, personal) connections made on *Minbar-Sos* allowed French speaking cyber-jihadists to re-unite on other forums, like *Ansar al-Haqq*, once *Minbar-Sos* was shut down. Other Salafist (not necessarily jihadist) websites frequented by Swiss residents are, to name a few, *Fourqane.fr*, *al Baida* and *Le Jardin des Croyantes* (a forum for women).

In the past a somewhat similar role of magnetic pole for over a handful of individuals of North African descent based out of Ticino or other parts of Switzerland was played by the active jihadist scene in Milan.<sup>192</sup> The author has no indications that this dynamic, present in the 1990s, is still at play today. What are instead significantly more relevant poles of influence on Switzerland are the very diverse Islamist networks operating throughout the western Balkans. This dynamic is particularly relevant, since 5% of Swiss residents trace their origins to the region, making them, if not considered by separate country of origin, the largest immigrant block in Switzerland.

Balkan Islam has traditionally been extremely moderate and apolitical and, for the most part, it still is. But since the early 1990s, coinciding with the end of Communism and the various conflicts that have plagued the region, alien forms of Islam have slowly percolated into the Balkans. Arab volunteers fighting alongside local Muslims during the Bosnian war were the first importers of what locals call "Wahhabism" to indicate the Arab Gulf

185 Letter sent to author with Quran, dated Basel, April 15, 2012.

186 Personal interview with the activist, Basel, January 2013.

187 <http://radiodawa.ch> (accessed March 9, 2013).

188 "Salafismus in Berlin," *Deutschlandradio Kultur*, September 10, 2011.

189 Facebook page of a Swiss activist saved by the author.

190 Interview with Reinhard Schulze, professor at the University of Bern, Bern, January 2013.

191 Benjamin Ducoi, "Uncovering the French-Speaking Jihadisphere: An Exploratory Analysis," *Media, War & Conflict* 5, No. 1 (2012): 51–70.

192 Interview with Italian officials, Milan, July 2012.



origin of an extremely conservative form of Islam that was virtually unknown to the region. Since then, a steady stream of foundations and donors from the Arab Gulf and, to a lesser degree, Iran, have poured enormous amounts of money to subsidize the introduction of their forms of Islam to the local population through the construction of mosques, scholarships, publications in local languages and several other means. Local organizations often find themselves unable to compete with the better funded Wahhabi organizations in attracting local Muslims, particularly young people. While it would be incorrect to argue that Wahhabism has overtaken local forms of Islam, it is fair to say that very conservative forms of Islam have unquestionably taken hold through important cross-sections of the Balkans' Muslim communities. And while this dynamic first took place in Bosnia, it later spread to Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro and Sandjak.

This phenomenon has had repercussions also in Switzerland. While the vast majority of Muslims of Balkanic descent living in Switzerland does not embrace militant interpretations of Islam, some do. Swiss authorities have repeatedly highlighted the presence of various Salafist networks of Balkanic origin throughout Switzerland. Many Swiss-based activists are linked to the Aktivna Islamska Omladina (Islamic Active Youth, AIO), a Bosnian-based organization dissolved in 2006.<sup>193</sup> They fundraise for various Balkans-based networks, attend seminars and meetings in the Balkans and throughout Western Europe and disseminate in Switzerland Salafist literature in Bosnian and Albanian.<sup>194</sup> Some of them are "jihadist," involved in or at least calling for acts of violence, while others are simply Salafists seeking to spread their extremely conservative interpretation of Islam in Switzerland.<sup>195</sup>

The role of websites like [putvjernika.com](http://putvjernika.com) or [dze-mat-sabah.com](http://dze-mat-sabah.com) is fundamental in disseminating Salafist thinking, of various trends, to the Balkanic Salafist community in the Balkans and throughout the diaspora, including in Switzerland. They post news stories, commentaries, and speeches of clerics. They also host forums where individuals can interact and exchange information, connecting the global Balkanic Salafist community. But equally important are the lectures and seminars of leading scholars, important events not just to disseminate ideas but also to network and fundraise. And Switzerland appears to be an integral clog in the trans-European lecturing circle of Salafist leaders from the Balkans. Some of the best known Salafist clerics from Bosnia, Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania, in fact, speak regularly in

mosques throughout Switzerland and their lectures are widely advertised online.

One of the most controversial Salafist preachers to have visited Switzerland is Bilal Bosnic. Bosnic is a key player in the most radical fringes of Bosnia's Salafist community and has gained a high profile through his active online presence and extreme views.<sup>196</sup> On the internet it is possible to view various videos in which Bosnic calls for the destruction of America and sings songs with lyrics such as "with explosives on our chests we pave the way to paradise."<sup>197</sup> In February 2013, Bosnian media reported about a Youtube video in which Bosnic advocated imposing a special tax on non-Muslims in Bosnia.<sup>198</sup> This author has no information indicating Bosnic called for violence while visiting Switzerland, but a lecture he delivered at a mosque in the Zurich suburb of Wallisellen had clear anti-Semitic tones.<sup>199</sup>

Another frequent visitor to Switzerland is Idriz Bilibani.<sup>200</sup> Frequently featured on Putvjernika, Bilibani was active in the village of Gornja Maoca, a Wahhabi enclave in Bosnian territory where local militants refused to obey Bosnian law and set up their own de-facto parallel state. After leaving Gornja Maoca he settled in Kosovo, where he was arrested by local authorities after a raid against militants in the city of Prizren in May 2010 uncovered weapons.<sup>201</sup> In his speeches in Switzerland Bilibani often speaks of "Allah's enemies" and has argued that Muslims should leave mainstream society to live among a community of pure believers.<sup>202</sup>

Other visitors to Switzerland who can be described, albeit with significant ideological differences among themselves, as members of the diverse and scattered Salafist/Islamist community of the Western Balkans include Mohammed Porca, one of the historical founders of the Bosniak community in Vienna<sup>203</sup>; prominent Bosnian Salafist Safet Kuduković<sup>204</sup>; controversial

193 DAP annual report, 2005, p. 31.

194 DAP annual report, 2005, p. 31; DAP annual report, 2010, p. 32; DAP annual report, 2009, p. 31.

195 See, for example, fedpol annual report, 2009, p. 34; DAP annual report, 2005, p. 31.

196 *Bosnia's Dangerous Tango: Islam and Nationalism*, International Crisis Group Policy Briefing, Europe Briefing 70, Sarajevo/Brussels, February 26, 2013, p. 17.

197 <http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/3459.htm> (accessed September 1, 2013).

198 "Bosnian extremist wants to tax non-Muslims," B92, February 18, 2013.

199 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjfcN5gR16E&list=UUDrQoiTGhnA6\\_8jtiZglvHA&index=39](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjfcN5gR16E&list=UUDrQoiTGhnA6_8jtiZglvHA&index=39) (accessed April 10, 2013). The anti-Semitic parts start at 21:00, when Bosnic says that Jews think "all are slaves, while they are the holy people" and calls them "those who create disorder on Earth."

200 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixRW644YAMw&list=UUDrQoiTGhnA6\\_8jtiZglvHA&index=4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixRW644YAMw&list=UUDrQoiTGhnA6_8jtiZglvHA&index=4) and [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctRNgq8jlyl&list=UUDrQoiTGhnA6\\_8jtiZglvHA&index=5](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctRNgq8jlyl&list=UUDrQoiTGhnA6_8jtiZglvHA&index=5) and [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9L0w\\_H7Jmc&list=UUDrQoiTGhnA6\\_8jtiZglvHA&index=6](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9L0w_H7Jmc&list=UUDrQoiTGhnA6_8jtiZglvHA&index=6) and [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rofETRBJl4&list=UUDrQoiTGhnA6\\_8jtiZglvHA&index=7](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rofETRBJl4&list=UUDrQoiTGhnA6_8jtiZglvHA&index=7) (all accessed March 15, 2013)

201 Stephen Schwartz, "From Kosovo to Gaza," *Weekly Standard*, June 9, 2010.

202 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixRW644YAMw&list=UUDrQoiTGhnA6\\_8jtiZglvHA&index=6](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixRW644YAMw&list=UUDrQoiTGhnA6_8jtiZglvHA&index=6) and [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rofETRBJl4&list=UUDrQoiTGhnA6\\_8jtiZglvHA&index=9](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rofETRBJl4&list=UUDrQoiTGhnA6_8jtiZglvHA&index=9) (accessed March 28, 2013).

203 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqf6eBAOT-E> (accessed September 3, 2013).

204 Facebook page of a Swiss activist advertising the event saved by the author.

imam of Prishtina's Grand Mosque and board member of the IZRS' Association des Savants Musulmans Shefqet Krasniqi, who caused a stir in his home country when he argued that Mother Theresa belonged in hell because she was not a Muslim<sup>205</sup>; and Prizren-based influential cleric Mazllum Mazzlumi<sup>206</sup>.

The dynamics behind the visits of Balkanic speakers to Switzerland, as for others from regions other than the Balkans, are varied and often difficult to understand from the outside. It appears that local activists who are connected to the speakers' entourage organize the events, which are often stopovers of a larger tour spanning various European countries. Every event also becomes a good fundraising and networking opportunity. Some Swiss mosques, like Wallisellen's Dzemat Kosovskih Bosnjaka, appear to be frequent venues but it is unclear whether the mosque's leadership is behind the invitation or if its spaces are used by a group within the larger community, as the Wallisellen imam suggested is the case of his mosque.<sup>207</sup> In some cases speakers that were deemed "extremist" and therefore refused entry by Swiss authorities have been invited by mainstream Swiss Muslim organizations. That is the case, for example, of Salman al Awdah, invited by the Brotherhood-leaning Ligue de Musulmans de Suisse in 2007, or the abovementioned Mohammed al Arifi, invited by the IZRS in 2012.<sup>208</sup>

### 3.7 Hypotheses on linkage dynamics

While it is not inconceivable that only one played a role in the process, in most cases the elements and milieus so far described operate together in any radicalization process. A youth on the path of radicalization is likely to at the same time attend seminars held by Salafist preachers, frequently access jihadist material online, interact with like-minded individuals online and at the margins of certain mosques, and read propaganda of groups like Hizb ut Tahrir. In most cases it is not one of these elements that lead him to radicalize. Rather, each factor reinforces the message of the others and all together they provide a narrative that might lead an individual to then accept the legitimacy of the next step – the use of violence.

Having provided a general overview of the elements and milieus that might favor the radicalization process, our analysis should move to the aspect of linkage. How do the admittedly few radicalized Swiss individuals

who have engaged in actual jihad-related actions – namely, traveled abroad – done so? Answering to this question is extremely complicated and arguably too ambitious of a task for this report. First, each case has its own particular dynamics, so it would be incorrect to generalize. Moreover, authorities throughout Europe admit having serious problems in identifying linkage dynamics in most cases they have uncovered. The challenge becomes even greater in Switzerland, where security agencies struggle with severe legislative limits to their powers. Finally, there have been only a handful of known cases in Switzerland, making an analysis that goes beyond the anecdotal virtually impossible.

Despite these severe challenges, it is nonetheless possible to attempt to identify some linkage dynamics. In reality, all that can be done is make suppositions supported by patterns observed in other European countries and by the limited facts known about the handful of known Swiss cases. Based on these admittedly shaky foundations and making an enormous oversimplification, it is possible to argue that the paths that bring a Swiss-based jihadist sympathizer to militancy (which, in substance, means traveling abroad for jihad) are three: traveling solo, facilitated travel, and recruitment.

The first dynamic takes place when an individual, irrespective of how he became radicalized, does not benefit from anybody's help to get in contact with al Qaeda and affiliated groups outside of Switzerland. The aspiring jihadist would, in substance, leave Switzerland without receiving any kind of support from any accomplice and, most importantly, would make contact with the jihadist organization he seeks to join without having anybody facilitate the process by, for example, introducing him to a member of the organization.

As said, it is very difficult to exactly determine linkage dynamics. But several cases throughout Europe and North America have shown that, apparently, several individuals or small groups of Western-based aspiring jihadists have managed to successfully link up with established jihadist groups without any previous connection just by "showing up." At the height of the war in Iraq, for example, it was not uncommon for unaffiliated jihadist wannabes to simply travel to Syria and there start asking around for a way into Iraq, hoping to make the right connection. While some did not succeed, many did and joined Iraqi-based jihadist groups that way.

While the dynamics of his case are very unclear, it is possible that that is what happened in the case of Abu Saad al Tunisi. NDB Vice Director Jürg Bühler stated that "in our [NDB's] opinion, he's largely self-radicalized, likely via the Internet." More relevantly, Bühler also stated that "we have no evidence that he was conveyed from

<sup>205</sup> Public records available through Moneyhouse.ch; Krasniqi also spoke at the IZRS' annual conference in Biel in 2011 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqzldrBDchg>) and at Bern's Ikre mosque: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoOi\\_2Ykgc4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoOi_2Ykgc4).

<sup>206</sup> Mazzlumi in Wallisellen <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdYOlbyJQ8g>; and Milovan Drecun, *Alahovi Ratnici* (Belgrade: Draslar Partner, 2008), pp. 240–245; 289–291.

<sup>207</sup> Interview with Muamer Ef Elezi, Wallisellen, March 2013.

<sup>208</sup> "Pas de Visa pour un Islamiste Saoudien," *La Liberté*, May 11, 2007.

Switzerland.”<sup>209</sup> Al Tunisi reportedly advertised within the community his intention of traveling to Iraq, as the imam of Biel’s Errahman mosque later stated he had attempted to dissuade him.<sup>210</sup> And it can be argued that the fact that al Tunisi managed to join an elite al Qaeda unit might suggest that he was more than just somebody who “showed up.” But, eight years after his disappearance, authorities have no information indicating that anybody facilitated al Tunisi’s trip to Iraq.<sup>211</sup> Irrespective of what was the dynamic in al Tunisi’s case, it is not unreasonable to argue that some other Swiss jihadist wannabes might have traveled independently to areas of conflict and attempted to make contact with jihadist groups on their own.

Most counterterrorism experts nonetheless consider solo traveling an exception. In most cases individuals manage to link up with established jihadist groups outside of Europe because somebody facilitates the process. Basing their acceptance policy on selection rather than outreach and recruitment, jihadist groups tend to open themselves to individuals whose background, commitment and usefulness to the cause can somehow be verified. Exceptions are always possible, but most experts argue that it is unlikely that such security and infiltration wary groups would accept individuals who just “show up.” A facilitator, a gatekeeper, somebody who can somehow vouch for the aspiring jihadist is, in most cases, necessary.

Facilitators are individuals who possess the right connections with one or more jihadist groups and can therefore vouch for the aspiring European jihadist. Often facilitators are committed militants who have fought in various conflicts and established solid links to various al Qaeda–affiliated networks outside of Europe. Charismatic and generally older, they do not “recruit” in the traditional sense of the word; rather, they “make things happen,” connecting various European individuals and clusters with abroad. The ways in which facilitators come to meet the individuals and clusters they later connect to jihadist groups are extremely varied. The encounter can take in places that range from a mosque to a gym, from an internet cafe to a kebab store. Preexisting social and family networks play a crucial role, as they reinforce trust among militants.

Facilitators, as said, do not go around recruiting people. Rather, it is more accurate to talk about “scenarios of opportunity.”<sup>212</sup> Unless they opt to travel solo, Swiss-based jihadist wannabes looking for ways to train or participate in conflicts abroad generally seek people who might help them in their endeavor. In some cases they

might do so online, asking chat room interlocutors for traveling tips. But in many cases this sort of search is done in person, as the wannabe jihadist looks for individuals who can help him join jihadist groups abroad. They might look for a facilitator in certain mosques that are known to have a radical presence at their margins. Or they can activate social networks, asking around within trusted circles and looking for the friend of a friend, the one-time acquaintance, the individual rumored in the community to have had a militant past.

The degree of involvement of the facilitator can vary. Some can simply provide advice, indicating to the aspiring jihadist how to best enter the country he seeks to reach or, once there, in what places he is most likely to find individuals with connections to jihadist groups. But facilitators can take significantly more active roles, particularly after they have come to trust the aspiring jihadist. In that case they might provide him with the phone number of the right contact in the country of destination, provide him with a letter of recommendation or directly set up a meeting with a jihadist group’s member. In some cases they might even provide the aspiring jihadist with visas, documents, air tickets and money.

It is very difficult to exactly assess which of these dynamics are at play in Switzerland, but Swiss security authorities are adamant in stating that they believe there are facilitators operating in the country.<sup>213</sup> There are in fact individuals living in Switzerland who possess varying degrees of connections to various jihadist groups operating in North Africa, East Africa, Afghanistan/Pakistan and other regions. Some of these individuals possess these connections through their previous or current militancy. It is well known, for example, that several individuals who fought alongside jihadist formations in Afghanistan, Libya and Bosnia currently reside in Switzerland.<sup>214</sup> While they might no longer be actively engaged in jihadist activities, some of them might still possess connections they could use to link up aspiring Swiss jihadists. Other Swiss-based facilitators might have connections by virtue of their ethnic origin, as they might come from countries where jihadist groups are active. While not directly engaged in jihadist activities themselves, they might sympathize with the cause and could link up a local jihadist wannabe with a relative or an acquaintance who is active in a jihadist group in the home country.

Reconstructing linkage dynamics is very challenging, but Swiss authorities argue that in several cases of Swiss activists traveling abroad some kind of facilitation did take place. While the facts are still very murky, it is believed that in the case of Majd N. a Somali man identified as Ibrahim A. did play the role of facilitator, linking Majd

209 D. Glaus, S. Ramspeck, G. Schwegler und M. Stoll, “Der Heilige Krieger aus dem Berner Seeland,” *Sonntagszeitung*, June 19, 2011.

210 Samuel Jaberg, “Un aller sans Retour pour la Guerre Sainte,” *Swissinfo*, July 4, 2012.

211 Interview with Swiss officials, Bern, April 2003.

212 Expression used by a Swiss official, Bern, April 2013.

213 Interview with Swiss official, Bern, February 2013; interviews with various Muslim community members.

214 Interview with Swiss official, Bern, February 2013.

with al Shabaab in Kenya.<sup>215</sup> A Somali refugee living in Biel, Ibrahim A. reportedly met Majd at Multimondo, an intercultural center located in the heart of Biel providing courses and activities for immigrants.<sup>216</sup> While it is believed that Majd radicalized on his own, Ibrahim A. allegedly provided the funds to travel to Kenya and, in all likelihood, made the connection between Majd and the al Shabaab envoy who met Majd at a Nairobi hotel after his arrival in Africa.

The case of Yassin, the convert from the Freiburg area who, by his own account, joined the Taliban for a short period before being arrested by Pakistani authorities, offers even less clarity. When asked by *Sonntagszeitung* reporters if it was possible for a white man from Switzerland to join the Taliban just by “showing up” in Waziristan or, rather, if somebody had facilitated his linkage with the Taliban, Yassin reportedly smiled and stated that “he cannot tell.”<sup>217</sup> There is no publicly available evidence indicating that anybody in Switzerland helped him link up with the Taliban. But Yassin’s response suggests that the idea that anybody can easily link up with infiltration-wary terrorist groups on the other end of the world is a bit simplistic and, save exceptions, not corresponding to reality.

The third linkage dynamic is recruitment. As seen, the idea of recruiters for jihadist groups based outside of Europe operating as scouting agents looking for potential recruits on the Continent is largely a myth. But there are exceptions to this dynamic and some jihadist groups do enact what could be properly termed as recruitment in Europe. Authorities throughout Europe argue that al Shabaab, the Somali-based al Qaeda affiliate that controls large sections of the war-torn East African country, does operate what could properly be termed as active recruitment networks in various European countries. Its agents act both as facilitators channeling already radicalized individuals to Somalia and as recruiting agents, spotting and grooming potential recruits to eventually send them to join al Shabaab.

Swiss authorities believe that there are individuals with strong links to al Shabaab within the 7,000 people strong Somali diaspora in Switzerland.<sup>218</sup> The 2103 NDB report stated that, “from a Swiss perspective, Somalia is currently the most important jihad area, as the majority of the jihad travellers from Switzerland who have so far been identified were heading to Somalia.” “One reason for this,” added the report, “could be that, in this case, individuals operating in the radicalisation and recruitment

field are able to draw on existing support and trafficking structures.”<sup>219</sup> Some of the Swiss residents have traveled to Somalia to join al Shabaab are ethnic Somalis going back to their native country to fight alongside al Shabaab. Others are non-ethnic Somalis, individuals of Arab (like Majd) or Balkanic descent. It is believed that at least two predominantly Somali networks, one operating in the Bern area and the other on the north-western shores of the Lac Lemman, are operating as properly defined recruiting networks channeling these individuals to al Shabaab.

## 4 Assessing the phenomenon

The previous sections of this report have provided some evidence showing that the phenomenon of jihadist radicalization does exist in Switzerland. There is indeed a Swiss-based jihadist-sympathizing scene that is visible both online and in physical spaces. While only a tiny minority of individuals belonging to this loose and informal scene has directly engaged in violent actions in furtherance of their beliefs, there is a larger milieu that supports the ideology but simply limits its involvement in some “cheering from the sidelines.”

As elsewhere in Europe, the individuals that gravitate around this informal scene come from an extremely diverse array of backgrounds. The NDB clearly stated this in its 2012 annual reporting, claiming that “from an analysis of the cases monitored in Switzerland it appears that individuals inclined to jihad do not have a common profile.”<sup>220</sup> Moreover, the number of cases detected and known is so small and the information on them so limited that it is impossible to speak of patterns and common profiles. All that can be done at this stage is limit the analysis to the anecdotal level, as paucity of information does not allow any empirical analysis.

The diversity of profiles of Swiss-based jihadist sympathizers manifests itself in their different ethnic backgrounds. Some are first generation immigrants, mostly of Arab or Somali background. But a growing, arguably predominantly number of them are second-generation, Swiss-born or Swiss-raised immigrants, many of them tracing their origins to the Western Balkans. Some are converts of ethnic Swiss background. Differences are visible also from a sociological perspective. Some are well educated, seemingly well integrated and living well adjusted and comfortable lives. Others appear to be young

215 Interview with Swiss officials, Bern, April 2013; Daniel Glaus and Marie Maurisse, “Le Dangereux Voyage de Majd pour Devenir Combattant Islamiste,” *Le Matin Dimanche*, November 25, 2012.

216 Daniel Glaus and Marie Maurisse, “Le Dangereux Voyage de Majd pour Devenir Combattant Islamiste,” *Le Matin Dimanche*, November 25, 2012.

217 Daniel Glaus, Sebastian Ramspeck and Martin Stoll, “Der Taliban von nebenan,” *Sonntagszeitung*, August 7, 2011.

218 Interview with Swiss officials, Bern, April 2013.

219 NDB annual report, 2013, p. 30.

220 NDB annual report, 2012, p. 39.

people adrift, without a future and engaged in petty crimes and dissolute lives. Some come from extremely troubled backgrounds, facing severe physical, mental or family problems.

As said, most of these radicalized individuals will never engage in any violent action, either abandoning their views or, for any possible reason, simply never acting upon them. Determining which few will act upon them is a crucially important task for authorities but, at the same time, an almost impossible one. Exactly as it is very difficult to explain why of the thousands of people who experience the same strains only a handful will radicalize, it is very difficult to determine why (and which ones) out of thousands of individuals embracing radical views only a handful will act upon them. The answer to this puzzle is to be found both in the personal profile, the psychological and emotional characteristics of every individual, and in the circumstances around him, the potential opportunity to act that for any reason might present itself. But determining these factors a priori is virtually impossible.

Most individuals who knew Majd N., for example, described him as not particularly religious nor interested in politics. Authorities documented his frequent visits to jihadist websites and he was known to be very vocal about the Palestinian cause (hardly an unusual fact, particularly for the son of Palestinian refugees). But he hardly fit the bill of the prototypical Islamist, as he seemed fascinated by Western philosophy more than Islamist ideology. Majd even dated a Swiss girl, a source of major attrition with his conservative father. This has led some to argue, making a reasonable yet unsubstantiated guess, that his decision to leave was triggered more by his desire to break with his authoritative and controlling father than by deep religious beliefs.<sup>221</sup> Looking from the outside, it is somewhat puzzling to think that Majd, a seemingly non-radical individual with potentially a bright future ahead of himself in Switzerland, left to join al Shabaab, while other Swiss-based jihad sympathizers who, on the surface, seem to represent an almost stereotypical characterization of an Islamist extremist, never make that decision.

If, as the European Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalization argues, radicalization takes place "at the intersection of an enabling environment and a personal trajectory," it is crucially important to take into consideration both aspects. Unquestionably more research is necessary to provide explanations for the psychological dynamics behind radicalization. But it is equally important to deepen the knowledge on the "enabling environment." From this point of view this report has argued that in Switzerland there is a milieu that makes it ideologically and operationally possible for people to act upon their personal frustrations, helping them in the rad-

icalization process and, in some cases, linking them to established jihadist networks abroad.

Determining the size of this milieu is a monumentally difficult task. It is arguably impossible to determine in a way that is even remotely accurate how many people belong to it. Is somebody who occasionally posts a link to a story about al Qaeda on his Facebook page a member of this milieu? Is somebody who attends a mosque that is known to have a radical presence within it a member of the milieu? It is evident that estimations of the size of any jihadist sympathizing milieu can only be approximate.

Notwithstanding these challenges, it is fair to say that the jihadist sympathizing milieu in Switzerland is a relatively small one. As in any other European country, radicalization of jihadist inspiration in Switzerland seems to affect only a statistically marginal segment of the local Muslim population. But radicalization in Switzerland appears to be a limited phenomenon also in relative terms when compared to other European countries. Comparing dynamics taking place in Switzerland with those of other European countries of similar size and, once adjusted the assessment to relevant population differences, larger European countries, it seems reasonable to argue that Switzerland has not experienced the same level of radicalization that most other European countries have.

Various admittedly not very empirical indicators seem to point to this conclusion. First, the number of terrorism-related arrests and convictions carried out in Switzerland is extremely low. Unlike most European countries, no concrete terrorist plot has ever been hatched in Switzerland and only a handful of Swiss-based individuals have been convicted for jihadist-related activities---all of them non-violent.<sup>222</sup> There are reportedly no openly jihadist mosques and no large gatherings of jihadist-leaning individuals taking place regularly on Swiss soil. And both authorities and Muslim community leaders agree that jihadist sympathizers have only very limited appeal within the broader community.

## 4.1 Explaining Switzerland's low levels of radicalization

This report argues that four reasons might explain the significantly lower levels of radicalization within Switzerland compared to most other European countries. None of them explains by itself this difference, but taken concurrently they might help paint a clearer picture. The first, in no particular order, is the historical absence of an "inflecting cluster" on Swiss territory. Switzerland has had the

<sup>222</sup> It should be noted that each country's attitudes and legislation has a huge impact on these numbers. It could be argued that if, purely hypothetically, Swiss authorities adopted some of the tactics used by their American or French counterparts and operated under a similar legislative framework, the numbers of people arrested in Switzerland for jihadist activities would be significantly higher.

<sup>221</sup> *Quand Al-Qaïda recrute en Suisse*, RTS, November 8, 2012.

fortune of never having on its soil an openly jihadist mosque or a network of committed jihadists operating in the same small geographical area. While, as seen, jihadists have operated in Switzerland since the 1990s, this presence has always been small and scattered throughout the country. Switzerland, in substance, has never had a place like London's Finsbury Park mosque, Hamburg's al Quds mosque, or Milan's Islamic Cultural Institute, places that throughout the 1990s were real hubs of jihadist activities, regularly hosting score of militants and preachers and therefore radicalizing segments of the local population.

The importance of "infecting clusters" has been underscored by various studies recently conducted both by academics and governments.<sup>223</sup> British authorities, in particular, have conducted a study comparing levels of radicalization in 25 urban areas throughout England and Wales, trying to determine why some areas have seen high levels of radicalization and others have not.<sup>224</sup> British authorities were trying to understand why, for example, Bradford, a city with a very large Muslim community which suffers from severe economic disenfranchisement, has not seen high levels of radicalization, while a city like Luton, whose smaller Muslim community seems to be better off, has. The study appears to show that the difference lays in the fact that, for reasons that range from sheer accident to the local Muslim community's leadership's organized effort to do so, Bradford has never been home to the sort of committed militants and radical preachers that settled in or frequently visited Luton. Once in Luton that handful of committed militants spread their ideas, "infecting" a small yet significant number of local youths. Even though a few militants did concentrate in some cities, a similar dynamic never took place on a comparable scale in Switzerland.

A second concurring factor contributing to the low level of radicalization in the country is the good degree of social, economic and cultural integration of most Muslims living in Switzerland.<sup>225</sup> Scholars have endlessly debated the relationship between integration and radicalization. Unquestionably equating lack of integration with radicalization is a simplistic assessment largely disproven by facts. But there is no question that a lack of integration, combined with other factors, can provide a receptive environment for radical ideas. While exceptions do exist, the large majority of Swiss Muslims fare relatively well in most educational and economic fields. Since many of

them are recent arrivals to Switzerland, many Swiss Muslims do struggle with the difficulties that most immigrants, particularly if possessing limited education and knowledge of the language, face. But immigration, Muslim and not, in Switzerland is largely a success story, as the country has a remarkable ability to provide economic resources to and integrate its newcomers. Switzerland does not have banlieus, pockets of economic disenfranchisement and social isolation that feed resentment and could arguably be breeding grounds of radicalization. It is arguable that the generally good level of social and economic integration of Swiss Muslims, particularly in their second generation, is a factor contributing to the country's low level of radicalization.<sup>226</sup>

A third factor is possibly represented by the demographic characteristics of the Swiss Muslim population. As seen, some 80% to 90% of Swiss Muslims trace their origins to the Balkans or Turkey. The vast majority of Muslims from these two regions traditionally espouse forms of Islam that are extremely tolerant and apolitical. Moreover, many of them perceive themselves simply as "culturally Muslim," perceiving religion just as a part of their cultural heritage. It can be argued that the fact that most Swiss Muslims come from this background makes them significantly more impermeable to politicized forms of Islam than other ethnic groups.

Finally, a fourth factor to be considered is Switzerland's proverbially neutral and balanced position on the world stage. Since September 11, 2001 scholars and policymakers have debated the role of foreign policy on jihadist radicalization, particularly among European Muslims, without finding an agreement. As usual, one-size-fits-all explanations are of little use, but it is not unreasonable to argue that the foreign policy decisions adopted by individual European countries have an impact, together with other factors, on the radicalization of individuals living on their territory. Jihadists arrested in various European countries often cite the presence of troops from their country as the main reason that led them to plan to attack it. Switzerland has not actively participated in various War on Terror-related conflicts and is widely considered to hold neutral and fair positions on most conflicts of interest to the Islamist movement. This stance arguably does not give many reasons of resentment to most Swiss Muslims.

## 4.2 Potential counter-trends

While these four factors operating concurrently can potentially explain the low levels of jihadist radicalization in Switzerland, none of them is a guarantee. Each, in fact, presents weaknesses and exceptions that should be

223 For the former, see Angel Rabasa and Cheryl Benard, *Eurojihad: Patterns of Islamist Radicalization and Terrorism in Europe* (unpublished manuscript, 2013).

224 Briefing by British authorities, Washington DC, 2011.

225 In this regard, see Rapport du Conseil fédéral sur la situation des musulmans en Suisse, eu égard en particulier à leurs relations plurielles avec les autorités étatiques, en réponse aux postulats 09.4027 Amacker-Amann du 30 novembre 2009, 09.4037 Leuenberger du 2 décembre 2009 et 10.318 Malama du 1er mars 2010. Available at <http://www.ejpd.admin.ch/content/dam/data/pressemitteilung/2013/2013-05-08/ber-f.pdf>, accessed May 15, 2013.

226 Interview with Prof. Andreas Tunger-Zanetti, Luzern, February 2013.

explored. As for the first one, while it is true that Switzerland has never had an “infecting cluster” of a size even remotely comparable to those that have operated in many European cities, there are situations that, albeit on a much smaller scale, somewhat resemble it.

Swiss media have long focused their attention on the city of Biel, which has even been dubbed Biennistan (from the town’s French name, Bienne). Indeed the lake town has been at the center of various terrorism-related cases over the last ten years. It first drew attention when a group of mostly local residents allegedly linked to the Riyadh bombings were arrested in the first, very high-profile, post-9/11 counterterrorism operation in the country.<sup>227</sup> The town was again at the center of attention when it was revealed that both Abu Saad al Tunisi and Majd N. were Biel residents. Both men had frequented the town’s Errahman mosque, which has long been accused of being a hotbed of radicalism. The abovementioned 2008 study on Swiss mosques for the Sicherheitsausschuss des Bundesrates, for example, highlighted the case of the former imam of the mosque, who had voluntarily submitted the text of eight sermons that he gave between 2000 and 2004. The imam advocated suicide bombings in Muslims majority areas that are “under occupation,” preached the “eternal irreconcilability between Christians and Muslims” and called for violence “against Jews and Christians until they submit to Islamic domination.”<sup>228</sup> Public attention continued to focus on Biel and the Errahman mosque after Biel native Nicolas Blancho, who used to teach at the Errahman, made his appearance on the public scene with the formation of the IZRS.<sup>229</sup>

Alain Pichard, a teacher and local politician, has publicly denounced the role played by Blancho and the Errahman in radicalizing segments of Biel’s Muslim youths.<sup>230</sup> Aside from the well-known cases of Abu Saad al Tunisi and Majd N., Pichard argues that other young men from the school he has taught for the last thirty years, the OSZ Madretsch, have radicalized due to the influence of the mosque.<sup>231</sup> In the second half of the 2000s, recounts Pichard, some eight boys from his school began attending the mosque, which is located only a few blocks from the OSZ Madretsch, and began displaying clear signs of radicalization.

Pichard reports as particularly disturbing the case of Mustafa E., a local youth of Kurdish descent who, according to Pichard, radicalized at the mosque, broke off

with his family denouncing them as “infidels” (as they are Alevites and therefore, in the eyes of some of the more conservative Sunni Muslims, not real Muslims), and eventually enrolled in a Quranic school in Egypt. The school reportedly preached an extremist interpretation of Islam and was closely monitored by Egyptian authorities, which routinely raided it. Mustafa himself was reportedly briefly detained in one of these raids.<sup>232</sup> The young Biel resident came back eleven months later physically and psychologically devastated and has since reneged his radical views. Blancho denies having any role in the young man’s radicalization, arguing he tried to dissuade him from breaking off with his family and that the youth had even accused Blancho himself of being an “infidel.”<sup>233</sup>

Leaders of the local Muslim community argue that there is no radicalization problem in Biel and that it is just a coincidence that there have been a few terrorism-related incidents in the town.<sup>234</sup> Yet it seems unlikely that all these cases just happen to have taken place in Biel – particularly considering that even much larger Swiss cities have not witnessed a similar concentration of terrorism and extremism related cases. Such concentration is completely normal in most European countries and pales in comparison to other small cities like Neu Ulm or Luton---not to mention large cities like London, Paris or Berlin. But, by Swiss standards, it is arguable that there is a critical mass in the town of Biel. At the same time some Swiss security officials argue that Biel has attracted a lot of media attention but that, today, other urban areas throughout the country possess higher concentrations of elements with jihadist sympathies and ties.<sup>235</sup> In substance, while it is true that Switzerland has never hosted an “infecting cluster” as large and virulent as those present in many towns of most other European countries, there are some concentrations of radical elements throughout the country.

Moreover, it can be argued that the presence of an “infecting cluster” is increasingly less necessary for radicalization to spread. As seen, thanks to the internet individuals can have their first contact with and subsequently completely immerse themselves in jihadist ideology even if they live in a remote area and have no physical access to radical mosques or networks. Moreover, due to Switzerland’s small size and geographical position, it is possible that a network located in some bordering country could play the role of “infecting cluster” for some Swiss-based jihadists.

227 *Quand Al-Qaïda recrute en Suisse*, RTS, November 8, 2012.

228 Urs Gehrig, “Moschee als Dunkelkammer,” *Weltwoche*, Issue 5, 2009.

229 Samuel Jaberg, “Mosque Struggles to Shrug off Extremist Label,” *Swissinfo*, July 4, 2012.

230 Martin Beglinger, “Man sollte Nicolas Blancho nicht unterschätzen,” *Tages Anzeiger*, April 7, 2010; Samuel Jaberg, “Un aller sans Retour pour la Guerre Sainte,” *Swissinfo*, July 4, 2012; “Bieler Radikaler packt aus,” *Bieler Tagblatt*, May 10, 2010; Sylvain Besson, “Les Enfants Perus d’Al-Qaïda en Suisse,” *Le Temps*, September 6, 2011.

231 Interview with Alain Pichard, Biel, May 2013.

232 Interview with Alain Pichard, Biel, May 2013.

233 Interview with Nicolas Blancho, Bern, April 2013; D. Glaus, S. Ramspeck, G. Schwegler und M. Stoll, “Der Heilige Krieger aus dem Berner Seeland,” *Sonntagszeitung*, June 19, 2011.

234 Samuel Jaberg, “Un Réseau Terroriste ne s’Affiche pas dans un Lieu Public,” *Swissinfo*, July 4, 2012; interview with Nicolas Blancho, Bern, April 2013.

235 Interview with Swiss officials, Bern, April 2013.

By the same token, the second factor considered as contributing to Switzerland's low levels of radicalization – good integration – should not be seen as fail-proof antidote. Multiple studies and countless examples have shown that, particularly over the last few years, the vast majority of Western jihadists have been individuals who, according to most criteria used to evaluate integration, are well integrated into society. Other factors, such as search for identity or for personal meaning, are often cited as more important factors in the radicalization of Western Muslims.<sup>236</sup> While not necessarily indicative of the whole spectrum, the cases of Majd N. and, even more, of Yassin, suggest that also in Switzerland many of the individuals who embrace jihadist ideology are well integrated into Swiss society. Good integration is not always an antidote to radicalization.

But even acknowledging that good integration does somewhat act as a shield against radicalization, it is arguable that there are pockets of disenfranchisement also in Switzerland. As said, Swiss Muslims tend to enjoy economic and social benefits that few other European Muslims have and there is nothing on Swiss territory resembling a French banlieu or the other segregated ethnic ghettos that exist throughout Europe. Yet, particularly in some areas of the French-speaking parts of the country, there are areas where crime, unemployment and social malaise are particularly high, albeit in relative terms. Even though this analysis has not (and cannot) be empirically tested, it has been argued that it is no coincidence that Biel has seen, by Swiss standards, so many cases of radicalization. Biel, in fact, has been plagued by, for Swiss standards, relatively high levels of unemployment and crime (particularly related to drugs and anti-social behavior). Many of the town's Muslims, which represent roughly 10% of the local population, live with the help of welfare in underprivileged areas.<sup>237</sup>

Throughout Europe authorities have occasionally observed overlaps between crime and jihadist radicalization. In several countries, for example, authorities have warned that prisons are potential breeding grounds for radicalization, as disaffected young men can potentially be very receptive to a radical narrative.<sup>238</sup> This dynamic has been detected by authorities also in Swiss prisons.<sup>239</sup> Similarly, authorities throughout Europe have witnessed cases of gangs that, while primarily engaging in criminal activities, somewhat embrace jihadist ideology, albeit of-

ten in very hybrid forms.<sup>240</sup> While the specifics of the case need to be further verified, it appears that a somewhat similar dynamic has taken place in the region of Le Locle and La Chaux-de-Fonds. There, authorities recently detected a gang made up of first and second generation Bosnians, Afghans and Chechens that engaged in theft, extortion and drug peddling but that also expressed sympathies for jihadist ideology and reportedly forced individuals who bought drugs from them to convert to Islam.<sup>241</sup>

The third argument used to explain Switzerland's low levels of radicalization should also be seen not as an absolute barrier. There is no question that the roots in the traditionally moderate and apolitical interpretation of Islam of the Western Balkans and Turkey of the vast majority of Swiss Muslims have played a major role in preventing many of them from adopting radical interpretations of it. But there are notable exceptions to this dynamic, as small fringes within those communities embrace more militant views.

Over the last few years authorities have expressed particular concerns about the presence of small networks of militants and jihadist-sympathizers from the Balkans.<sup>242</sup> This development is due to two factors, both related to migration patterns. The first is the arrival of a small numbers of "re-Islamized" migrants after the end of the Bosnian war. The first wave of Bosnian migration to Switzerland took place in the 1970s, and comprised mostly economic migrants.<sup>243</sup> Most Bosnian migrants were not particularly religious or embraced the region's traditional apolitical form of Islam. But some of the Bosnians who arrived to Switzerland with the second wave of Bosnian immigration in the mid-1990s were refugees that had embraced more militant forms of Islam introduced in the region by Arab volunteers during the Bosnian war.

These small groups of "re-Islamized" Bosnians viewed religious practices in ways that were radically different from most Bosnians settled in Switzerland. In some cases these differences brought tensions within the Bosnian diaspora. In St. Gallen, for example, the more Wahhabi-leaning segments of the local Bosnian community broke off from the long-established leadership and started their own mosque association.<sup>244</sup> In Emmenbrücke, a Luzern suburb, the local imam took the step of distributing flyers arguing that Wahhabism is a perversion of

<sup>236</sup> See, for example, the report *A Study of Radicalization: The Making of Islamist Extremists in Canada Today* recently written by Canadian intelligence agency CSIS, cited in Colin Freeze, "Canadian Extremists More Likely Homegrown: 'Secret' CSIS Report," *Globe and Mail*, February 2, 2013.

<sup>237</sup> Samuel Jager, "Un Aller sans Retour pour la Guerre Sainte," *Swissinfo*, July 4, 2012.

<sup>238</sup> Peter R. Neumann and Brooke Rogers, *Recruitment and Mobilisation for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe*, King's College London, December 2007.

<sup>239</sup> DAP annual report, 2006, p. 32.

<sup>240</sup> Lorenzo Vidino, "Europe's 'Muslim' Hoods; Where Jihad and Criminality Converge," *Washington Times*, April 21, 2006.

<sup>241</sup> Céline Trachsel und Roland Gamp, "Schweizer Füsilier in Haft!" *Blick*, December 9, 2012.

<sup>242</sup> See, for example, Fedpol annual report, 2009, p. 34.

<sup>243</sup> Samuel M. Behloul, "From 'Problematic' Foreigners to 'Unproblematic' Muslims: Bosnians in the Swiss Islam Discourse," *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Volume 26, Issue 2, 2007, p. 23.

<sup>244</sup> Samuel M. Behloul, "From 'Problematic' Foreigners to 'Unproblematic' Muslims: Bosnians in the Swiss Islam Discourse," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 26, No. 2 (2007): 22–35.



Islam.<sup>245</sup> Some of the Wahhabi-influenced Bosnians opted for not attending the country's many Bosnian mosques but, rather, places of worship run by Arabs or without a clear ethnic affiliation. As seen, Swiss authorities argue that some of the Wahhabi-leaning Bosnians are actively involved in various jihadist-leaning organizations throughout Europe and in Bosnia.

But hints of radicalization are detectable also among another cross-section of the Swiss Muslim population of Balkanic descent: Swiss-born or Swiss-raised individuals. Following a pattern common throughout Europe, some individuals of Balkanic descent who were either born in or arrived in Switzerland at a young age have rejected their family's traditional form of Islam and opted for Salafism or other conservative and/or militant interpretation of the religion. In many cases these individuals grew up in a secular environment and, generally in their late teens or early 20s and for reasons that vary from case to case, embraced Islamism. The phenomenon, while limited, seems to be more common among individuals of Albanian descent than Bosnian.<sup>246</sup>

Most of these re-Islamized Balkanics move in circles that are completely de-ethnicized and speak German or French rather than Bosnian or Albanian. Shunning the form of Islam of their parents, which they consider corrupted by superstitions, they see in Salafism (whatever form of it they embrace) a pure interpretation of Islam that transcends ethnic divides and gives them a clear identity as Muslims. Some individuals with this profile embrace some of the most militant interpretations of Salafism, displaying clear signs of radicalization. Swiss authorities argue that, at this point, the largest home-grown threat to the country comes from this milieu.<sup>247</sup>

Finally, the fourth argument used to explain Switzerland's low levels of radicalization –its neutral foreign policy– should also be re-assessed. First, jihadist radicalization can take place within a country irrespective of the country's foreign policy. Although opinions on the issue vary significantly, it is arguable that foreign policy decisions do play a role, potentially increasing the phenomenon and making the country a target. But it is quite possible that residents of a country that has a neutral position on any "Islamic-related" issue become radicalized for other reasons. These individuals might not view their host country with hostility, but their radicalization would still take place.

There is no question that Switzerland's neutral stance contributes significantly to the low levels of radicalization within its Muslim population and to not

making the country a likely target for attacks. Nonetheless, some domestic circumstances might offset this dynamic. The November 2009 referendum in which 57.5% of Swiss voters approved a constitutional amendment banning the construction of minarets in the country attracted significant negative attention throughout the Muslim world and, inevitably, in jihadist circles. In July 2010, then al Qaeda number 2 Ayman al Zawahiri tellingly issued an audio-recording mentioning the vote as an example of Western hostility towards Islam and putting Switzerland in the camp of the "Crusaders' alliance."

Partially due to the Swiss government's excellent diplomatic handling of the situation, the backlash against Switzerland was very limited and the issue seems to have largely died down.<sup>248</sup> Yet there is a somewhat widespread perception among Muslims in Switzerland that large sections of Swiss society are "Islamophobic." The issue was publicly raised in late 2011, when a group of experts from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe publicly warned about growing intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.<sup>249</sup> A May 2013 report by the Federal Council confirmed and outlined this phenomenon.<sup>250</sup> Certain Swiss political parties and media outlets have been particularly criticized for their allegedly unfair targeting of Islam and Swiss Muslims. Irrespective of whether these accusations are founded or not, it is undeniable that the perception is widely held throughout the Swiss Muslim community. As many studies conducted throughout Europe, perception of discrimination is one of the key factors contributing to radicalization and it can be argued that it could be playing a role also in Switzerland.

Moreover, not everybody perceives Swiss foreign policy as completely neutral. Isolated individuals belonging to the fringes of the Swiss Salafist community argue that Switzerland is a country hostile to Islam, not just because of its alleged domestic "Islamophobia" but also because of some of its foreign policy stances. These elements argue that Switzerland does participate to the War on Terror, as it has sent some soldiers, albeit in a non-combat role, to Afghanistan and, more recently, to Mali. In March 2013, for example, a well-known member of the Swiss online jihadist community, a convert from the Zurich area, commented on the fact that a Swiss tabloid had

245 Samuel M. Behloul, "From 'Problematic' Foreigners to 'Unproblematic' Muslims: Bosnians in the Swiss Islam Discourse," *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Volume 26, Issue 2, 2007, p. 28.

246 Phone interview with Dr. Samuel Behloul, national director of Migratio, June 2013.

247 Interview with various Swiss officials, Bern, March and April 2013.

248 Simon J.A. Mason, Abbas Aroua, Annika Åberg, *Mediating Tensions over Islam in Denmark, Holland, and Switzerland*, report published by the Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich and Cordoba Foundation, Geneva, 2010.

249 Country Visit: Switzerland Report of the Personal Representatives of the OSCE Chair-in-Office on Tolerance Issues November 7–9, 2011 (available at <http://tandis.odhr.pl/documents/07042.pdf>, accessed May 23, 2013); "OSCE Calls for Muslim Umbrella Organization," *Swissinfo*, February 7, 2012.

250 Rapport du Conseil fédéral sur la situation des musulmans en Suisse, eu égard en particulier à leurs relations plurielles avec les autorités étatiques, en réponse aux postulats 09.4027 Amacker-Amann du 30 novembre 2009, 09.4037 Leuenberger du 2 décembre 2009 et 10.318 Malama du 1er mars 2010. Available at <http://www.ejpd.admin.ch/content/dam/data/pressemitteilung/2013/2013-05-08/ber-f.pdf>, accessed May 15, 2013.

reported that some Swiss troops had been dispatched to Mali saying that “Switzerland has lost its neutrality and it has therefore become an enemy....Therefore certain things are justified also here.”<sup>251</sup> While these views are limited to a negligible minority, it is within this milieu that radicalization and, potentially, violent actions against Switzerland might occur.

### 4.3 Conclusion

This report presented evidence indicating that radicalization of jihadist inspiration does exist in Switzerland. It is, as seen, a very limited phenomenon, with dimensions that are difficult to assess but that are arguably inferior to those of most Western European countries. Yet, as authorities repeat, Switzerland is not an island. Many of the dynamics present throughout the continent are visible also in Switzerland, albeit on a smaller scale. There are in Switzerland loosely knit milieus, both in the virtual and physical world, that sympathize with jihadist ideology. And, as seen, occasionally individuals who belong to these milieus do make the leap from words to action.

This report aimed at providing an inevitably summary overview of these dynamics, over which there is a dearth of information. Various reasons explain the limits of this study. It is always challenging to analyze a microcosm that, by its very nature, is extremely closed and secretive. In the case of Switzerland these difficulties are increased by the small size of the local jihadist-sympathizing community and the limited number of cases directly linked to violence. The Swiss academic community has not displayed much attention to these dynamics and the limited publicly available information on them comes from the occasional journalistic reports of good quality. Swiss authorities face their own problems in deepening their knowledge on the subject. Unlike their counterparts in many European countries, in fact, legislative obstacles prevent them from deepening their knowledge of certain individuals and networks unless there is evidence of a direct involvement in criminal activities.

More research on the subject seems therefore to be sorely needed. Additional research would ideally inform a debate that, both at the public and policymaking level, has often been simplified and not grounded in facts. The fact that, according to a 2006 report by the Federal Commission against Racism, most Swiss do not differentiate between Islam and Islamism and erroneously believe that orthodox interpretations are embraced by most Swiss Muslims, is indicative of how uninformed the level of the debate on Islam and Islamism is in the country.<sup>252</sup>

This lack of information inevitably leads to a politicization and polarization of the debate. In Switzerland, as in all other European countries, the debate on the issues of Islamism and radicalization has often been polarized between two camps (although, to be fair, several balanced voices do exist). While one tends to deny or severely downplay the phenomenon, the other seeks to unduly magnify it. On one hand denying the existence of problematic ideologies, which occasionally produce episodes of violence, within small cross-sections of the Muslim community does not seem to be a constructive position. The experiences of other European countries on the matter have shown that ignoring the problem does not make it disappear. On the other hand, exaggerating these dynamics and painting all Muslims as potential radicals is an extremely unfair and dangerous approach. Only an objective and fact-based approach to the issue can trigger a constructive debate. Despite its many limits, this report seeks to be a small step in that direction.

<sup>251</sup> Facebook page of a Swiss activist saved by the author.

<sup>252</sup> *Les Relations avec la Minorité Musulmane en Suisse. Prise de Position de la CFR sur l'évolution actuelle*, Federal Commission against Racism, 2006.





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