
JIHADIST TERRORISM IN JIHADISM IN AUSTRIA EUROPE

Guido Steinberg



Imprint

Published by:

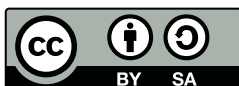
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2021, Berlin

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Images: p. 6 © APA/picturedesk.com, Roland Schlager;
p. 15, p. 24 © 123map; p. 25 © picture alliance/REUTERS, Leonhard Foeger
Design and typesetting: yellow too, Pasiak Horntrich GbR
The print edition of this publication was climate-neutrally printed by
Druckerei Kern GmbH, Bexbach, on FSC certified paper.
Printed in Germany.

Printed with financial support from the German Federal Government.



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ISBN 978-3-95721-893-3



JIHADISM IN AUSTRIA



**A Dangerous Scene with
Considerable Ideological Reach**

Guido Steinberg

AT A GLANCE



In 2020, it became clear that the danger emanating from organizations like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda has not been eliminated. Instead, there is talk of a new outbreak of jihadist terrorism, to which, among others, Austria and France have recently fallen victim. This publication is part of the “Jihadist Terrorism in Europe” series, in which renowned experts analyze the current state of the jihadist threat in various countries, as well as the related counter-terrorism strategies and the political debates.

In the present study, Dr. Guido Steinberg looks at Austria, which in November 2020 suffered the most serious Islamist terrorist attack in its history in Vienna.

- › Although the jihadist milieu in Austria is weaker today than a few years ago, it has also become younger and more unpredictable. It is currently estimated to consist of between 70 and 150 particularly dangerous individuals.
- › The author identifies and analyses key actors, locations and networks of Austrian jihadism since its beginnings in the early 2000s.
- › In relation to its total population, Austria has very large contingents of Syria fighters and returnees. A country-specific peculiarity is the exceptionally high proportion of Chechens.
- › The perpetrator of the Vienna attack, Kujtim Fejzulaj, was the “most successful” member of a new generation of transnationally networked jihadists, who – directed from outside the country by the Islamic State – planned and, in some cases, carried out attacks in Austria and Germany.
- › The Austrian government’s combat against “political Islam” risks tying up security service resources that could be needed for counter-terrorism in the narrower sense. In this regard, it is important to strengthen the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counter-Terrorism (BVT).
- › Contrary to the ongoing debate about the refugee crisis of 2014 to 2016, none of the known Austrian terrorists come from the group of those who fled Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan in those years. The example of Chechen immigration shows, however, that migration from war-torn regions in the Islamic world entails a longer-term risk.

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On 2 November 2020, Kujtim Fejzulaj, an ethnic Albanian with Austrian and North Macedonian dual citizenship, carried out the first jihadist attack in Austria.

Armed with an assault rifle and a pistol, he wandered through a popular night-life district in the Vienna city center, killing four people and wounding 23 others, before he was himself shot by the police. For the first time, the attack made clear to a wider public how dangerous Austrian Islamist terrorism is. Along with a few Austrian converts, Chechen, Bosnian, (ethnic) Albanian and Turkish extremists have developed a highly active scene that, starting in 2012, participated in the war in Syria with a large contingent of fighters. As a result of the military defeat of the Islamic State (IS) in 2019, some of the scene's activity moved back to its home country. Here, jihadists are weaker than a few years ago, but their milieu has become younger, more transnational and more unpredictable.



Police operation after the terror attack in Vienna on 2 November 2020

1. BEGINNINGS IN AUSTRIA

The beginnings of Austrian jihadism go back to the early 2000s, when the Sahaba mosque in Vienna developed into an important nucleus of Islamist terrorism in the German-speaking part of Europe. Originally a meeting place for older Arab Islamists, a younger generation of preachers took over in the middle of the 2000s. It was led by the Austrian of Afghan origin Jamaluddin Q. (alias Abu al-Khattab, b. 1971), but the latter's younger brother Farhad Q. (alias Abu Hamza al-Afghani, b. 1977) and the Bosnian Nedžad B. (alias Ebu Muhammed el-Bosni, b. 1975) also belonged to it.¹

One of the most prominent jihadists from this milieu was the Austrian of Egyptian origin Mohamed Mahmoud (alias Abu Usama al-Gharib, b. 1985). When he was just 17 years old, Mahmoud traveled to Iraq, where he joined the Kurdish-Iraqi group Ansar al-Islam (Supporters of Islam) and took part in combat. Back in Austria, he set up the German-language branch of the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF): a small Austrian-German propaganda group. In March 2007, the group produced a video in which a speaker with covered face called for the withdrawal of Austrian and German soldiers from Afghanistan and threatened attacks in both countries.² In September 2007, Mahmoud was arrested and subsequently sentenced to four years in prison.

While Mahmoud was in prison, the first generation of local jihadists grew up in Vienna. This became apparent in 2009 and 2010, when around a dozen people traveled from Austria to Somalia and Pakistan. Their head was the convert Thomas Al J., who was in contact with Mahmoud. The (Bosnian-speaking) Serb Mirsad O. (alias Ebu Tejma, b. 1981) functioned as religious authority in the background. At the time, he taught at



1. BEGINNINGS IN AUSTRIA

the Altun Alem Mosque (or Sandzak Mosque) in Vienna's 2nd district. Around ten to fifteen young men attended Islam lessons there, in which they received instruction on the ideological foundations of jihadism. The attempts of Thomas Al J. and six other young people to travel to Somalia failed, because they were sent back at the airports in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia and in Djibouti. Only one member of the group succeeded in reaching his goal: the al-Shabab militia in southern Somalia.³

The second group, which traveled to Pakistan, was more successful. It consisted of two young men, at least one of whom, the Austrian of Afghan origin Maqsood L. (b. 1989), joined al-Qaeda. In Pakistan, he may have met the then highest-ranking Austrian jihadist: Abdulrahman Hussein (b. 1983) from the Mödling suburb of Vienna. The latter traveled to the tribal areas in the Afghan-Pakistani border region, where he rose to the position of a trainer within the organization and is supposed also to have been responsible for "external operations": i. e., terror attacks around the world.⁴ In spring 2011, Maqsood L. returned to Europe and was arrested in Berlin in May 2011. His trip was part of a series of al-Qaeda activities, commonly known as the "Europlot". At that time, the organization was going through a period of weakness. Since the 11 September 2001 attacks against the United States, it had only succeeded in carrying out one other major attack in the Western world: namely, in London in 2005. In order to overcome its period of crisis, it sent new recruits back to Europe, who were supposed to carry out smaller attacks to demonstrate that al-Qaeda was still capable of fighting its enemies in the West.⁵ Maqsood L. was supposed to meet contacts of his German friend Yusuf O. in Berlin and ask for their help. Yusuf O. had been sent by al-Qaeda along with Maqsood L. and, for his part, had contacted the latter's friends in Vienna before he was also arrested.⁶ For the first time, the Austrian scene revealed the danger that came into being for their home country when young Austrian men and women were mobilized.

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- 1 Guido Steinberg: *al-Qaidas deutsche Kämpfer: Die Globalisierung des islamistischen Terrorismus*. Hamburg: edition Körber-Stiftung, 2014, p. 190.
 - 2 Eine Nachricht an die Regierungen von Deutschland und Österreich (Video). *Globale Islamische Medienfront*, March 2007.
 - 3 Thomas Al J. was sentenced to three years in prison in 2011: Prozess gegen Muslime: Haft für Hauptangeklagten. *Die Presse*, 4 July 2012.
 - 4 Paul Cruickshank: *The Militant Pipeline Between the Afghanistan-Pakistan Border Region and the West*. New America Foundation, National Security Studies Program Policy Paper, Second Edition July 2011, p. 26. https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/4358-the-militant-pipeline/Cruickshank_Militant_Pipeline_a051a39dd3074c998ff04df944ab3064.pdf (last accessed: 18 January 2021).
 - 5 Steinberg: *al-Qaidas deutsche Kämpfer*, pp. 336–339 and 392–393.
 - 6 Kammergericht Berlin: Urteil gegen Yusuf O. und Maqsood L. [Verdict against Yusuf O. and Maqsood L.], 25 January 2013, *passim*.

2.

PREACHERS AND RECRUITERS

Since the days of the Sahaba mosque, the Austrian jihadist scene has been shaped by several charismatic preachers who worked in mosques in Vienna, Graz and Linz. Mohamed Mahmoud became the scene's most prominent figure. His influence was mostly of indirect nature in his home country, however, since, shortly after his release from prison in September 2011, he decided to move to Berlin, where he presumably hoped to have greater possibilities to take action, a larger public and more followers. Together with the German convert Denis Cuspert (alias Abu Talha al-Almani), who would later become one of the most prominent figures among the European combatants in Syria, he set up a German-language propaganda group called Millatu Ibrahim (Community of Abraham). The latter grew rapidly and had taken over a mosque in Solingen in North Rhine-Westphalia, before it was banned in May 2012. Mahmoud had already left for Egypt at the time, in order to escape the risk of deportation. From Egypt, he then went to Libya and, in spring 2013, to Turkey, where he spent a full year in prison before traveling to Syria to join IS in August 2014. Nonetheless, during these years, he maintained contact with Austrian friends – above all, the circle around Ebu Tejma in Vienna – and also tried to mobilize specifically in Austria using videos. In March 2013, a film attracted attention, in which Mahmoud renounced his citizenship, burned his Austrian passport and threatened attacks against the country.⁷ Even though there was great interest in the videos, with Mahmoud being far away, the influence of other jihadist preachers in Austria grew.

2.1 Ebu Tejma in Vienna

Between 2009 and 2014, Ebu Tejma became the most successful jihadist preacher and recruiter in Austria. In the eyes of his followers, his relatively high level of education was likely the decisive factor: Ebu Tejma was regarded as the most important religious authority in Austria among jihadists.⁸ Moreover, he preached in German, so that many young people who did not know any Arabic, Turkish or Bosnian came to him. His following was thus a mirror of the Austrian scene, which included both converts and people of Chechen, Bosnian, Albanian, Afghan, Turkish and Arab origin.

Ebu Tejma comes from the Sandzak: a Muslim-majority area in Serbia where Bosnian is spoken. From 2002 to 2008, he studied Arabic and Religion at the Islamic University of Medina: an educational institution that serves as a missionary center of Saudi Arabian Wahhabis at which mainly foreigners study. Many Salafists worldwide long to study at the university, since the most important basic works of their faith are taught here. But the problem often arises that foreign graduates subsequently oppose the Saudi state, due to their adopting a more radical interpretation of Salafism than that taught in Medina.

This was also the case for Ebu Tejma, who mainly preached in the Altun Alem mosque after his return to Vienna. He had his Salafist lessons recorded in hundreds of videos, which he disseminated on his own YouTube channel. He tried to give his followers a comprehensive introduction to Salafist teachings in the style of a classical scholar. His lectures on jihad, moreover, revealed him to be a particularly radical jihadist, such that, starting in 2013 at the latest, dozens of his followers went to Syria.⁹ In spring 2014, however, events in the Middle East led to controversy at the Altun Alem mosque. In Syria, the conflict between the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – as IS was known until June 2014 – and its rivals had begun. The conflict led to a global split in the jihadist movement. The trigger was the desire of ISIS to assume control over all rebel areas. It thus turned against the Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra), which had initially been part of ISIS until early 2013, but rebelled against the parent organization's claim to hegemony and sought help from al-Qaeda. The conflict led to open combat, starting in January 2014, and also had an impact in Austria, where most jihadists turned away from Nusra and al-Qaeda and opted for ISIS. At the time, Ebu Tejma also took the side of ISIS, whereas the mosque's head imam, Adem D., sided with the Nusra Front. Ebu Tejma had to leave the mosque. He was arrested in November 2014, after which recruitment in Austria clearly declined. In July 2016, Ebu Tejma was sentenced to 20 years in prison: a sentence that went far beyond what is usual in terrorism trials in Austria.

2.2 Ebu Muhammed and the Graz Takfiris

The case of Ebu Muhammed, on the other hand, was far more complex. In 2004, he took over the Sahaba mosque, where he preached in Bosnian and thus became an authority, above all, for Islamists of Bosnian origin. He too had studied at the Islamic University of Medina in 2000 and 2001, so that he was able to build up a reputation for learning. Around the end of 2006 and the beginning of 2007, however, Ebu Muhammed underwent a change, turning to Takfirism. Takfirism is a (Sunni) school that is principally distinguished by the fact that it denounces the overwhelming majority of Muslims as “infidels” (this denunciation is known as *takfir*) and regards its own, very small communities as the only true Muslims.

Some Takfirists are especially disposed to violence, since they believe that the many non-believers around the world must also be combated. Others, however, are peaceful for the moment, since, although they still believe in the theoretical necessity of jihad, they, nonetheless, regard the number of true Muslims to be too small at present for a war against the “infidels” to be waged successfully. According to their reasoning, it is only once a strong Islamic state is founded that the duty to wage jihad again applies. This is why in 2013 and 2014, the fundamental question of what attitude they should adopt to the rise of ISIS and the proclamation of the Islamic State arose for Takfirists. Although IS was not a Takfirist organization, it came closer than any other grouping to the radicalism of their worldview.

A conflict developed in the Austrian Takfirist scene over the question of whether there was now an obligation to travel to IS. Ebu Muhammed moved into focus of the authorities, since numerous Takfirists from his entourage traveled to Syria to join IS. The largest sub-group consisted of 38 people (including many children) of Bosnian origin from the al-Taqwa mosque in Graz; the members of this group regarded Ebu Muhammed as their religious authority.¹⁰ Since the Takfirist members of IS were persecuted for some time due to their exceptional radicalism, some of them returned, disillusioned and demoralized, to Austria. A second part of the mosque community rejected a departure for Syria from the outset, because, in their view, IS was not a true Islamic state. It is thus not clear whether Ebu Muhammed had really recruited for the organization. It seems rather that the preacher avoided giving a clear answer, in order not to diminish his influence on his already weak following any further.¹¹ It was, nonetheless, conspicuous that some of those who attended his Melit Ibrahim mosque in Vienna went to Syria. Before his departure in 2018, the perpetrator of the Vienna attack, Kujtim Fejzulaj, was also repeatedly to be found there.¹² In March 2020, Ebu Muhammed was sentenced to five years in prison, but the Austrian Supreme Court overturned parts of the ruling and referred it back to Graz for retrial.

2.3 Dilaver K. and the Turkish-Speaking Jihadists

Dilaver K. (alias Hamza Hodja, b. 1972) also became an influential preacher in the 2010s. He was imam of the Rahmet mosque in Linz, in which instruction was given, above all, in Turkish. Hamza Hodja had grown up in Turkey and had studied religion for five years in Cairo in the 1990s. From 1998 on, he lived in Austria, where, starting in 2012 at the latest, he made a name for himself as a Turkish-speaking preacher who often spoke about the special importance of jihad. Besides a small circle of about 15 particularly committed followers, hundreds of people came to his lectures: some of them even from Vienna, where there was no comparable mosque. In addition, Hamza Hodja served as the religious authority for Turkish-speaking Muslims at the Furkan mosque in Graz. Starting in 2013, some of his own students and some of his followers in Graz left for Syria and joined IS.¹³

On the one hand, Hamza Hodja had contact with Ebu Tejma in Vienna; on the other hand, however, he was part of a network of Turkish-speaking jihadists, which reached from Berlin, by way of Austria and Bulgaria, to Turkey and which facilitated travel to Syria. In Berlin, he maintained close contact with the Fussilet 33 mosque in the Moabit neighborhood, which became the most important German recruitment center for the Syrian struggle in between 2012 and 2014.¹⁴ In Bulgaria, the members of the Abu Bakr Mosque in Pazardzhik had close ties with Linz and Berlin. The center of the network, however, was presumably in Turkey. The closest ideological contact from Linz seemed to have been to Halis Bayancuk (alias Ebu Hanzala, b. 1984) in Ankara, whose writings and lectures were attentively followed. The latter had made a name for himself as a jihadist ideologist since 2008 and had supported IS since 2014. He was long regarded as the most important IS preacher in Turkey, a large number of whose followers traveled to Syria.¹⁵ Since Ebu Hanzala also held Takfirist positions, evaluating Hamza Hodja's activities was more difficult than in the case of Ebu Tejma.

In October 2019, Hamza Hodja was sentenced to seven years in prison by the Higher Regional Court of Graz. But in his case as well, the Supreme Court overturned parts of the judgment, so that there will be a retrial in 2021.

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- 7 Der Mujahid Abu Usama Al-Gharib: Unter meinen Füßen die Staatsbürgerschaft der Kreuzzügler (Video). Veröffentlichung der Globalen Islamischen Medienfront/Millatu-Ibrahim, 1434/2013.
 - 8 At his trial at the Graz Regional Court, a witness (Ishak K.) testified on 12 July 2016 (in the presence of the author) that Ebu Tejma was recognized by many young Salafists as “the highest authority in Austria.”
 - 9 The press spoke of more than 50 departures from Ebu Tejma’s entourage; cf., for example, Florian Klenk/ Eva Konzett/Lukas Matzinger: Vom Beserlpark ins Kalifat. In: *Falter* 47/20, 18 November 2020. https://www.falter.at/zeitung/20201118/vom-beserlpark-ins-kalifat/_d47e8a6f29?ver=b (last accessed: 18 January 2021).
 - 10 „Schmutziges Spiel“ beim Grazer IS-Prozess. *Kurier*, 18 November 2019. <https://kurier.at/chronik/oesterreich/schmutziges-spiel-beim-grazer-dschihadisten-prozess/400678346> (last accessed: 18 January 2021).
 - 11 Under questioning, the IS returnee Hasan O. said that he did not receive a clear answer from Ebu Muhammed on this matter.
 - 12 Moschee und Verein werden nach Anschlag geschlossen, acht Männer in U-Haft. *Der Standard*, 6 November 2020. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000121496755/anschlag-in-wien-schliessung-von-radikalen-moscheen-angeordnet> (last accessed: 18 January 2021).
 - 13 Observations in the trial of Karaveli and others at the Regional Court of Graz (in the presence of the author) on 16 October 2019.
 - 14 On the early recruitment for the Chechen group Junud al-Sham, cf. Guido Steinberg: Junud al-Sham and the German Foreign Fighter Threat. In: *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 9, Issue 2, February 2016, pp. 24–28. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/CTC-SENTINEL-Vol9Iss213.pdf> (last accessed: 18 January 2021).
 - 15 A brief overview is provided by Ahmet S. Yayla: Portrait of Turkey’s ISIS Leader Halis Bayancuk: Alias Abu Hanzala. International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, 13 October 2016. <https://www.icsve.org/portrait-of-turkeys-isis-leader-halis-bayancuk-alias-abu-hanzala/> (last accessed: 18 January 2021).

3.

AUSTRIANS

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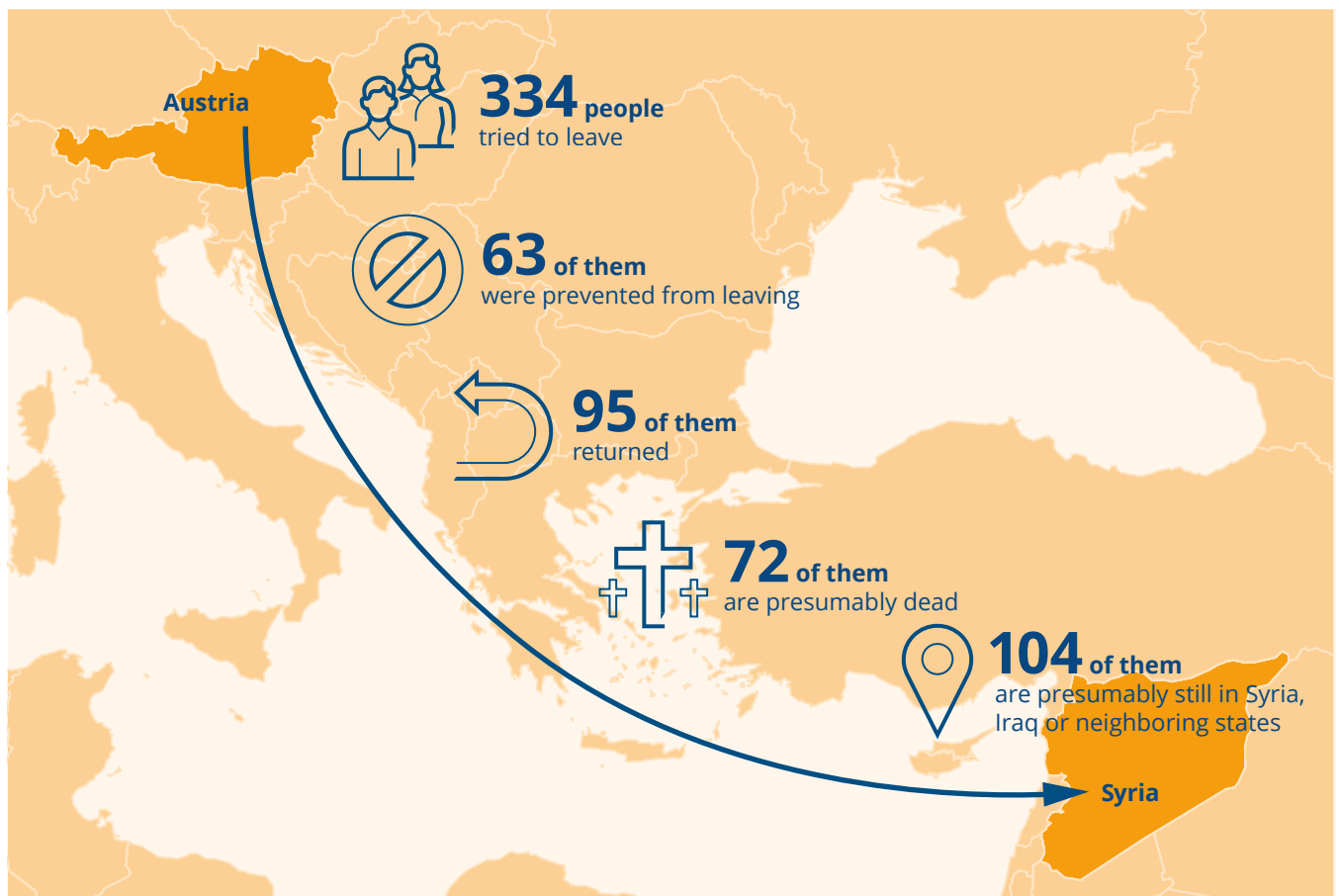
SYRIA

The activities of Mahmoud, Ebu Tejma and other recruiters resulted in a large wave of departures. According to official figures, up to January 2021, 334 people had attempted to leave Austria for Syria. 63 of them had been prevented from leaving the country by the authorities. 95 people have returned thus far, 72 are presumed dead, and 104 are still in Syria, Iraq or neighboring countries.¹⁶ The total of 271 people who left for Syria or Iraq is very high. A comparison with Germany makes this clear. Around 1,070 people left Germany (as of 2020) in the same period. Since altogether around 8.8 million people live in Austria, but more than 80 million people live in Germany, the number of people leaving for Syria is proportionately more than twice as high as in Germany. This is in line with what has been observed in several small EU countries, like, above all, Belgium, which have very large contingents of Syria fighters and returnees in relation to the total population.

Compared to the other European groups, the Austrian Syria contingent exhibits an important particularity. Of the 334 persons who wanted to leave for Syria, around 130 were Russian citizens. Most of them are ethnic Chechens from the autonomous republic or other Caucasus republics. Only around 35,000 to 40,000 people from Chechnya live in Austria, the majority of them having come to Austria since the late 1990s as asylum-seekers. The enormously high number of Syria fighters in light of this low total is explained by the continuing desire of many of them to fight against Russia. For the first time since the end of the Second Chechen War in 2006, the civil war that began in Syria in 2012 offered them the opportunity to take up arms again and to combat the Bashar al-Assad regime's Russian ally.¹⁷

To some extent, the other contingents reflect the ethnic composition of the Muslim population in Austria. Right after the Chechens come people from Bosnia (whether with Austrian or Bosnian citizenship), Albanians from Kosovo or North Macedonia and people with Turkish roots. The people of Bosnian origin are mostly second-generation immigrants whose parents fled Bosnia in the first half of the 1990s due to the Bosnian War (1992–1995) and its consequences. In addition, there are the Albanians who moved to Austria, above all, after the Kosovo War at the end of the 1990s. Turks and people of Turkish origin constitute the fourth largest contingent.

Illustration 1: Foreign Terrorist Fighters – from Austria to Syria



3.1 The Chechen Commander Ahmed Chataev

Given this background, it is not surprising that Chechens have had a greater influence than any other group on the history of jihadists from Austria in Syria from 2012 to 2019. They not only provided one-third of all those departing for Syria, but they also fought in particularly prominent IS units and provided important IS commanders at various levels.

By far the most important “Austrian” in the ranks of IS was Ahmed Chataev (alias Ahmed al-Shishani, b. 1980).¹⁸ Chataev had taken part in the Second Chechen War (1999 to around 2006) on the rebel side. He lost his right arm at the time, thus earning him the nickname of “one arm.” In 2003, after a period in Russian captivity, he fled to Austria, where he was recognized as a refugee up until 2013. From his place of exile, he was, during these years, an important recruiter of the Chechen jihadists that, starting in 2007, organized themselves into the Caucasus Emirate. He traveled back and forth between Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, Georgia and Turkey. In 2008, he was sentenced to 16 months in prison in Sweden for having attempted to smuggle weapons into the country, but he was released after one year.¹⁹ In Bulgaria in 2011, he barely managed to escape the extradition requested by Russia after he was arrested on the Bulgarian-Turkish border.²⁰ In September 2012, finally, Chataev was seriously wounded – he is said to have lost a foot – and detained during fighting with security forces in the Lopota Gorge in Georgia. His group was presumably trying to infiltrate into neighboring Dagestan, in order to fight against the Russians there. Chataev was surprisingly acquitted in a subsequent trial.²¹

In 2013, Chataev traveled to Syria, where, in the second half of the year at the latest, he joined the Chechen organization Jamwa (Jaish al-Muhadjirin wa-l-Ansar or, in English, Army of Emigrants and Helpers). Jamwa was the most prominent of several groupings with roots in the Caucasus, which emerged starting in mid-2012 and whose members included numerous jihadists from Austria. In November 2013 at the latest, a large part of the organization joined ISIS under the command of Abu Umar al-Shishani. By this time, the Chechens had already acquired a reputation as elite fighters, such that their leaders also moved up the ranks quickly in the new organization. Abu Umar became their military chief; Chataev assumed the command of the Badr Battalion (Katibat Badr) and later that of Katibat al-Yarmouk of IS. Subsequently, Chataev is said to have been named a leader in the external operations section of the IS intelligence service, responsible for attacks by Russian-speaking volunteers. According to reports in the press, Chataev was the planner behind the IS attack on Ataturk Airport in Istanbul on 28 June 2016, which was perpetrated by three suicide bombers from the Caucasus and Central Asia and in which 45 people died.²² Chataev managed to flee Syria before the defeat of IS. He was killed in November 2017 during an exchange of gunfire with security forces in Tbilisi in Georgia.

3.2 Mohamed Mahmoud and the Germans

Mohamed Mahmoud attracted greater public attention than Chataev and the Chechens. He had, however, to overcome difficulties initially, since in March 2013, he was arrested by Turkish security forces near the Syrian border. He continued to communicate freely with his followers from prison but he could only observe the rapid growth of the German and Austrian contingents in Syria in 2013 and 2014 from a distance. Like some Austrian Chechens, Millatu Ibrahim's followers initially joined Junud al-Sham (Soldiers of Syria); another organization with roots in the Caucasus. But most of them switched to ISIS already in autumn 2013. Mahmoud joined his friends only after a prisoner exchange between the organization and Turkey in August 2014.²³

Mahmoud quickly made a name for himself as a propagandist. Millatu Ibrahim's followers supposedly asked the IS leadership to be permitted to form a German-speaking unit (*katiba*) at the time. But they did not receive permission and were instead assigned to an English-speaking group, which was named Katibat Anwar al-Awlaqi (after a well-known al-Qaeda ideologue). Non-Russian-speaking Austrians were also integrated into this unit, since, due to their limited number, there was even less question of their having their own *katiba*. Mahmoud was the leader of the Germans within the unit. Starting in 2014, he stayed mostly in Raqqa and worked for IS's Hayat Media Center in a leading position. In 2015, he produced the propaganda video "Der Tourismus dieser Ummah" (The Tourism of this Ummah) along with German members of Katibat Anwar al-Awlaqi. (The *ummah* means the community of Muslims.) In the film, Mahmoud and the German Yamin Abou Zand shoot two alleged government soldiers in the ruins of Palmyra. In addition, Mahmoud also calls on like-minded people in Austria and Germany to come to Syria or to carry out attacks in their home countries.²⁴ The execution of other regime soldiers by Mahmoud and his group in the new city of Palmyra is not shown in the video.²⁵ These constituted the most serious crimes committed by Austrians and Germans in Syria that have come to light up to now.

Mahmoud's career in IS may have stalled after summer 2015. There are reports that he assumed a function in the religious administration of the organization and – like Chataev – became an emir for foreign operations.²⁶ This would also explain why somewhat less was heard of him in the following years. Other versions speak of problems between Mahmoud and the IS leadership, which culminated in a temporary banishment from Raqqa and his later being imprisoned.²⁷ The details of his role in IS have yet to be clarified, but there are indications that Mahmoud himself believed that he could assume a more important function. It is regarded as certain that he was killed in an airstrike in eastern Syria in November 2018.

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- 16 Author interview with Austrian security expert, 26 January 2021.
 - 17 The protests began in February and March 2011, the armed rebellion in mid-2011, and the civil war – which was far more intense and resulted in far greater casualties – in June 2012 at the latest.
 - 18 A complete list of his aliases can be found here: <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/recent-actions/20151005> (last accessed: 25 January 2021).
 - 19 Julian Hans/Mike Szymanski: Der Einarmige, der stets entwischt: Als Kopf des Istanbulers gilt ein IS-Mann aus Tschetschenien. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2 July 2016.
 - 20 Bulgaria refuses to extradite Chechen man to Russia. *Agence France-Presse*, 21 July 2011.
 - 21 Joanna Parasczuk: Russian Citizen Linked to Lopota Gorge Incident Now Heads IS Battalion in Syria. *Radio Free Europe*, 25 February 2015. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-lopota-gorge-incident-islamic-state-syria/26869379.html> (last accessed: 18 January 2021).
 - 22 Fatih Karimi/Steve Almasy: Istanbul airport attack: Planner, 2 bombers identified, report says. *CNN*, 2 July 2016. <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/01/europe/turkey-istanbul-ataturk-airport-attack/index.html> (last accessed: 18 January 2021).
 - 23 Türkische Polizei lässt Hassprediger frei. *Spiegel Online*, 24 September 2014. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/mohamed-mahmoud-tuerkei-entlaesst-hassprediger-aus-gefaengnis-a-993562.html> (last accessed: 18 January 2021).
 - 24 Der Tourismus dieser Ummah (Video). N. d. [June 2015].
 - 25 Souad Mekhennet/Greg Miller: This ISIS Defector Said He Was An Innocent Bystander. A New Video Questions His Story. *Washington Post*, 4 October 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/how-a-former-isis-recruit-and-media-darling-edited-his-own-story/2016/10/04/5740ff50-8582-11e6-a3ef-f35afb41797f_story.html (last accessed: 26 February 2021).
 - 26 Police interrogation of Muhamed H., Erbil, 13 September 2017, p. 4.
 - 27 Björn Stritzel: BILD enthüllt unbekannt Details über Mohamed Mahmoud: Wie ISIS einen Terror-Henker brutal fallen ließ. *BILD* 28 January 2019.

4. TERRORISM IN AUSTRIA: FROM LORENZ K. TO KUJTIM F.

Since 2020, the long-term consequences of the war in Syria and in Iraq for Austrian jihadism are starting to become clear. Past experience with foreign fighters shows that the time together in war zones like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Chechnya, Iraq or Somalia creates longer-term ties, which lead to the emergence of new, often transnational organizations and frequently have an impact on terrorist activity in the countries of origin. In the case of the Syria war, IS supporters are today still in the process of regrouping after the defeats of 2017 to 2019 and in light of the heavy losses. This also applies to Austria, since at least 72 combatants and family members who left for Syria were killed.²⁸ Many of the 104 activists who are still in Syria, Iraq or neighboring countries are likely to be fully engaged in escaping the grasp of their enemies or surviving their time in captivity. Some of the, up to now, 95 returnees are likely to have sworn off jihadism on account of their experiences in Syria.

As consequence, the jihadist scene in Austria is currently estimated to consist of between 70 and 150 particularly dangerous individuals: considerably less than in 2013/2014, but still a lot for a small country.²⁹ They are already distinguished today by a degree of transnational networking that has increased significantly over the last two decades: especially in the direction of Bosnia, Germany, Kosovo, Switzerland, North Macedonia and Turkey. Although many of the preachers – such as Ebu Tejma, Ebu Muhammed and Hamza Hodja – who until now promoted these linkages from the Austrian side have been in prison for years, a new generation has come into being, some of whom are very young. These newcomers are more and more seizing

the initiative, and they take close ties, above all, to the much stronger German scene for granted. Some of the members of this age cohort were students of Ebu Tejma, others do not know him personally anymore, but continue to regard him as their most important religious-ideological authority.

This first became apparent in Austria in the case of Lorenz K. (alias Sabur Ibn Gharib), who was responsible for the most dangerous attack plans of an Austrian before November 2020. When he was just 16 years old, the Austrian of Albanian origin was at the center of a small network of three young jihadists in Austria and Germany who had contact with IS via the Telegram messenger and planned attacks. At the beginning of 2016, after converting to Islam from Christianity, Sabur turned toward IS and especially the teachings of Ebu Tejma.³⁰ In summer 2016, he managed to make contact with a German in IS in Iraq or Syria, who convinced him that it is better to carry out an attack in Germany rather than traveling to the caliphate.³¹ At the beginning of September, Sabur sent this individual, who called himself Mujahid (jihad fighter), an oath of allegiance, which the recipient claimed had been accepted by Mohamed Mahmoud on behalf of IS.³²

Mujahid seems to have convinced Sabur Ibn Gharib to carry out an attack in Germany instead of Austria. At this time, Sabur had obtained old al-Qaeda bomb-making instructions and was in contact with the like-minded German convert Kevin T. (alias Sayfullah: "Sword of God") in Neuss, who was then only 17 years old. At the end of November 2016, Sabur traveled to the city on the Lower Rhine, where the two young men – in constant contact with Mujahid, who was advising them – built a test bomb and started a trial run in a park. The aim was to carry out a (suicide) attack on the German military or German police. At one point, Sabur spoke about soldiers from the US Ramstein Air Base, but there were no more precise indications of a planned site for the attack. The two jihadists are supposed to have already built the second explosive device when Sabur was arrested in Aachen on 9 December 2016. Although he was quickly released, he instructed Sayfullah to get rid of the bomb, which was never found.³³

In parallel, starting in summer 2016, Sabur Ibn Gharib was in contact with the German-Iraqi Kurd Yad A. in Ludwigshafen, who was only 12 years old at the time and who called himself Abu Irhab al-Kurdi (Father of Terrorism) or simply Irhab (Terrorism). Since the latter could not find any way of leaving for Syria, he decided, in discussions with Mujahid and Sabur, to undertake a suicide attack with a homemade bomb in Germany. He originally wanted to attack a church in Ludwigshafen, but Sabur persuaded him to carry out the attack at a Christmas market in the city.³⁴ On 26 November 2016, Abu Irhab went into action and only failed because the bomb's detonators did not work.³⁵

After his arrest in Aachen, Sabur Ibn Gharib returned to Austria. Mujahid now authorized him – allegedly again after consultation with Mahmoud – to carry out a terror attack in Austria.³⁶ But this did not come to pass, because Sabur was arrested in Vienna on 20 January 2017. Although his plans failed, they make clear the danger that IS represented at the time. Since 2015, the organization had repeatedly moved to directing individual perpetrators who no longer had to travel to the Middle East

in order to join IS. Directed attacks were a solution that combined the advantages of both organized and inspired actions. Organized terror attacks are planned, organized and carried out by IS. The terrorists are trained in Iraq, Syria or other IS theaters of operations and then sent to the target country to carry out the attack. The Paris attacks on 13 November 2015 are a striking example for this sort of approach. Their “advantage” is that they usually result in a large number of victims and thus are highly successful from the point of view of the organization. But the disadvantage from the terrorists’ point of view is that long distances have to be traveled and communications can be intercepted, such that IS was only able to carry out attacks of this sort during the period of its greatest strength between 2014 and 2016 – and even then only a few of them.

The counterpart to the organized attack is the inspired attack, in which the (individual) perpetrator does not have any contact with IS, but is moved to undertake an attack by the organization’s appeals. The “advantage” of inspired attacks consists of the fact that it is very difficult to prevent them, since perpetrators do not have to travel and they also do not have to communicate. The “disadvantage” is that individual perpetrators of this sort (at least when they are Islamists) for the most part only do little damage. Hence, IS put together small teams of propagandists and attack planners, which developed contacts via social media such as Telegram and advised the potential perpetrators on the choice of the means to use in their attack and the determination of the target – exactly as Mujahid had done in the case of Sabur Ibn Gharib. Some of the most serious terror attacks in Europe since 2014 were directed attacks of this sort, including the attack in Nice on Bastille Day in 2016, when the perpetrator drove a truck into the crowd on the famous Promenade des Anglais, killing 86 people. Even if the actions of Lorenz K., Yad A. and Kevin T. are not as spectacular, they illustrate the danger that directed attacks can represent.

From 2017/18 on, the number of directed attacks also declined considerably. The reason was that IS was coming under pressure in Iraq and Syria and the personnel responsible for the attacks in the Western world were being killed or taken prisoner or were on the run. But IS in Iraq and Syria managed to save many leaders and fighters, who are now operating underground and building new structures. After a long pause, IS apparently succeeded in again directing a terror attack in Europe in the form of the Vienna attack on 2 November 2020. This is, above all, suggested by the fact that Fejzulai sent his video claiming responsibility for the attack to the Amaq News Agency in advance. In the preceding years, IS had given its followers clear guidelines for directed attacks. According to these guidelines, the terrorist is supposed to record a video in which he or she takes responsibility for the upcoming attack and pledges loyalty to the leader of IS. The video is then supposed to be sent to Amaq for publication after the attack. The fact that Fejzulai managed to obtain firearms and knew how to use them reasonably well can be regarded as a further indication that he had at least virtual support. The Vienna attack could thus be a first sign that IS is growing stronger in Europe.

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- 28 It can be assumed that the actual number of dead is higher. Since little or no information is available on many of those who departed for Syria, the authorities do not count them as dead.
- 29 Klenk/Konzett/Matzinger: Vom Beseerpark ins Kalifat.
- 30 Besides Ebu Tejma, he also described the Iraqi-Kurdish preacher Abu Wala (Ahmad A.), who is in prison in Germany, as his teacher. The latter was arrested in November 2016 and is accused of being an IS member. As of January 2021, however, his trial before the Higher Regional Court of Celle was not yet completed.
- 31 In a chat with Kevin T. on 21 November 2016, Lorenz K. said: "The brother Mujahid said we need people much more urgently in Germany than here he said you people there are worth more than diamonds for us." Indictment of Lorenz K., Vienna, 3 January 2018, p. 43.
- 32 Oberlandesgericht Düsseldorf: Urteil gegen Kevin T. und Amal El H. (Verdict against Kevin T. and Amal El H.), Düsseldorf, 24 August 2018, p. 17.
- 33 Staatsanwaltschaft Wien: Anklageschrift Lorenz K. (Indictment of Lorenz K.), Vienna, 3 January 2018, p. 39.
- 34 Thomas Hoisl: Die verstörenden Telegram-Kontakte des Wiener Terrorverdächtigen Lorenz K. *Vice*, 9 January 2018. <https://www.vice.com/de/article/ev5a3p/die-verstorenden-telegram-kontakte-des-wiener-terrorverdachtigen-lorenz-k> (last accessed: 18 January 2021).
- 35 Jörg Diehl/Hasnain Kazim: Zwölfjähriger bastelte Bombengürtel. *Spiegel Online*, 13 January 2018. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/ludwigshafen-anschlagsversuch-zwoelfjaehriger-bastelte-bombenguertel-a-1187516.html> (last accessed: 18 January 2021).
- 36 Staatsanwaltschaft Wien: Anklageschrift Lorenz K. (Indictment of Lorenz K.), Vienna, 3 January 2018, p. 50.

5. COUNTER-TERRORISM, THE REFUGEE CRISIS, AND THE CRIME OF “POLITICAL ISLAM”

In Austria too, the 2014–2016 refugee crisis is an important topic in the debate on the right way to combat terrorism. It is thus all the more striking that the known terrorists in the country do not include any Syrians, Iraqis or Afghans who entered Austria during those years. Austria was only affected by the terrorist repercussions of the 2014–2016 crisis to the extent that IS sent fighters via the Balkan route – which passes through Austria – to France and Belgium, where they carried out terror attacks like the Paris attacks on 13 November 2015. Two IS members disguised as refugees, who were supposed to have been part of the Paris terror cell, but arrived too late due to time they spent in jail in Greece, were detained in Salzburg in March 2016 and later extradited to France. Instead, the issue of refugees, migration and counter-terrorism is significant in the case of the many Chechens, the majority of whom came to Austria since the late 1990s and early 2000s and in the early years (until around 2005) were hardly screened. Their example shows that the immigration of refugees from regions in the Islamic world where there are civil wars always entails a more or less high risk that conflicts from these regions will be brought to Europe: either by fighters returning to a war zone like Syria or the Caucasus (and building new structures there that threaten Europe in turn) or by their bringing the armed struggle to the host country. The fact that jihadist field commanders like Ahmed Chataev were given refuge in Austria and were able to plan the resumption of the fight against the Russians from Europe shows that the Austrian government did not take the danger represented by Chechen terrorists very seriously in the 2000s. The problems discussed here make clear the extent to which the careful screening of refugees from civil war regions is an important precondition for successful preventive counterterrorism. In the Austrian case, this applies not

Illustration 2: Flight route through the Balkans

only for Chechnya, but also for Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bosnia. In relation to their population sizes, an especially large number of jihadists have gone to Syria from these countries and many of them in turn have contacts with like-minded people from and in Austria.

The Austrian government adopted a hard line in response to the attack of 2 November 2020. Chancellor Sebastian Kurz announced a package of measures, which was supposed to include indefinite detention of terrorists after the end of a prison sentence, such as is possible, for example, in the case of mentally ill perpetrators.³⁷ He made it clear, moreover, that even non-violent Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood could no longer count on being tolerated by the state, and he promised to institute a criminal offense of "political Islam". In the package of legislation that was presented in December, however, there was no longer any mention of unlimited detention. Instead, several less restrictive conditions were proposed for when a terrorist is released, including electronic monitoring using ankle bracelets. The criminal offense of "political Islam" was not to be found anymore either, but was replaced by the religion-neutral concept of a "religiously motivated extremist association", which is supposed precisely to facilitate the prosecution of non-violent Islamists.³⁸

The government is thus continuing an Islamism-critical line that has already been taking shape for some time. In summer 2020, it established the Political Islam Documentation Center (*Dokumentationsstelle Politischer Islam*), which is meant to investigate all the Islamist organizations, associations and mosques in Austria. That this is part of a larger strategy should in fact have become apparent on the day after the Vienna attack, when, during "Operation Ramses", altogether 60 raids in four states were planned on persons and associations linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and that are alleged to have provided support to the Palestinian organization Hamas. After the attack, the raids were first canceled and then carried out one week later under the new name of "Operation Luxor".³⁹ Together with France, Austria thus put itself at the head of those European countries calling for more comprehensive action against Islamist terrorism and its underlying ideology, by combating not only jihadists, but also non-violent Islamists on a broader front than has been usual up to now.

The Austrian approach is a possible response to the question of how to deal with the evidently wide dissemination of Islamist ideas among Muslims in Austria. In the author's view as well, tougher action against Islamists is in fact urgently needed. The problem with the measures is that resources which could be needed for counter-terrorism in the narrower sense are tied up in the security services. The responsible Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism (BVT) has already been having considerable difficulties with the significantly increased number of jihadists since 2013/2014.⁴⁰ Since the growing number of departures to Syria and the 2014–2016 wave of refugee arrivals gave rise to numerous new cases – many of which, however, are Shia Islamists and suspected cases that are difficult to clarify – and efforts in other fields of work like, above all, counter-espionage has grown, it is not likely that this situation has changed in any way up to today.

*Chancellor Sebastian
Kurz at a commem-
oration for the
November 2 attack*



If Austria wants to expand its counter-terrorism and take aim at Islamism, there is no way around considerably strengthening the BVT and all its regional offices, which have often done far better work than the Austrian debate after the Vienna attack would suggest. The relatively early arrest of Ebu Tejma in November 2014 broke up what was presumably the most important recruitment network in Austria. Many dangerous jihadists in Austria and returnees from Syria were sentenced to prison terms that are often considerably longer than in Germany or other European countries. Others have been deported to their country of origin. The work of the counter-terrorism officials was aided by the tough terrorism paragraph 278b of the Austrian Penal Code, which already criminalizes merely attempting to leave Austria to join a terrorist organization. On the other hand, the BVT appears to have problems, above all, with threat prevention. Like the FBI in the USA, the agency is both police and intelligence service at the same time, whereby the apparatus functions better in police investigations than in threat prevention or in the preceding intelligence work. According to the mutually supporting statements of many people who work in the field, when dangers are visible, but not enough material is available yet for a criminal investigation, authorizations and resources are often scarce. If the BVT and the Regional Offices for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism (LVTs) are to be strengthened, then special attention has to be given to their intelligence sections.

This is not to say that the sometimes very harsh criticism of the BVT after the Vienna attack was not justified. As quickly became known, Fejzulai traveled to Slovakia before the attack to obtain ammunition – and the Slovak authorities informed the BVT. Since the later perpetrator of the attack only failed to reach Syria because he was arrested in Turkey, there is no justification for not subsequently placing him under observation. But this does not change the fact that strengthening the BVT will be the most important mission of Austrian policymakers, if they want to make counter-terrorism more effective in the future. Fighting against political Islam may be the right thing to do, but it is a long-term and essentially political task. It only has to do with counter-terrorism when the Muslim Brotherhood supports organizations like the Palestinian Hamas, which is close to it.

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Following the most serious terrorist attack in the history of Austria, which took place in Vienna in November 2020, Dr. Guido Steinberg analyses the country's jihadist scene. The author analyzes the Austrian jihadist milieu, its international network and its relations with the Islamic State. In his assessment of the counter-terrorism strategy of the Austrian government, Steinberg also considers the connection to the refugee crisis and the criminal offense of "political Islam."