

Germany bans Islamic organization and police searched 190 sites

By Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (23.11.2016) – In mid-November, the German government banned (*) a Salafist Islamic group named "The True Religion" which is suspected of targeting teenagers as potential foreign fighters for Syria and Iraq. At the same time, police raided about 190 offices, storehouses, mosques, and apartments of members and supporters of "The True Religion" in seven German states. More than 1,000 police were involved in the largest anti-Islamist operation in 15 years.

According to German Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere, during searches that took place in 60 cities across western Germany and Berlin, police seized documents, hard drives, smartphones and weapons. In a warehouse near the western city of Cologne, authorities seized about 21,000 German-language copies of the Quran.

The head of "The True Religion" group, 52-year-old Palestinian-born Ibrahim Abou-Nagie, is thought to be currently in Malaysia. In the past, he has repeatedly preached against "infidels" at mass events in Germany and on videos and social media.

Security officials said that the group had about 500 members in Germany, but, all in all, it is estimated that there are about 9,200 so-called Salafists who practice an ultra-conservative form of Islam that can also turn violent. Their number has almost tripled in the past five years.

Muslims, who make up about five percent of the population in Germany, comprise the third-largest religious group in the country. Of the approximate four million Muslims, only about one percent can be considered Islamist, German security services say.

According to the organization Sekteninfo North Rhine-Westphalia, only about 5,000 of these are Salafists. Of these, 100 are seen as "missionaries," while twenty-four have been labeled as "dangerous."

Recruitment of foreign fighters, including among refugees

The ban came a week after authorities arrested five men who allegedly aided an Islamic State group in Germany by recruiting members and providing financial and logistical help.

The group — also known as "Read!" — has been distributing German-language copies of the Quran across the country. The interior minister said that more than 140 youths had traveled to Syria and Iraq to join fighters there after having participated in the group's campaigns in Germany. All in all, it is believed that some 850 people have traveled from Germany to the Middle East to fight with extremist groups like the Islamic State.

The sudden operation was propelled in part by increasing concern that the Salafists are trying to recruit among the hundreds of thousands of Muslim refugees who arrived a year ago, encouraging some to sign up for jihad in Syria and Iraq or to carry out attacks in Germany.

Some 400 cases in which Salafists approached refugees have been reported nationwide in recent months according to Boris Pistorius, the interior minister of the state of Lower Saxony in north-central Germany.

In many of those cases, the authorities were alerted by staff members at refugee centers who had noticed Salafist activists seeking to recruit asylum seekers.

Messages conveying hate speech and fight against the German constitution

In the last few years, Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution has noted "increasing travels in the direction of Afghanistan and Pakistan" from people who come from "milieus influenced by the Salafist ideology."

The German Interior Minister stressed that the ban of the group "The True Religion" does not restrict the freedom of religion in Germany or the peaceful practice of Islam in any way. However, he said the group had glorified terrorism and the fight against the German constitution in videos and meetings. Moreover, "the translations of the Quran are being distributed along with messages of hatred and unconstitutional ideologies," de Maiziere told reporters in Berlin. "Teenagers are being radicalized with conspiracy theories."

One of Salafist preachers using hate speech against non-Muslims in Germany is a 32-year-old Iraqi who goes by the name Abu Walaa and whom the German authorities arrested on 8 November.

Better known as "the man with no face" because he often preached in Arabic and in poor German with his back to the camera, he was identified by officials as Ahmed Abdulaziz A. He was based in Hildesheim, a quiet city of 100,000 south of Hanover (State of North Rhine-Westphalia), drawing an increasingly devoted following and even offering his own app in 2014. He is considered to be the "chief ideologist" of Salafists in Germany.

A hate crime by a teenager

In addition to the recent arrests, the authorities have begun increasing funding to hire new personnel and to add video surveillance in many public areas. This political decision was taken under pressure of growing criticisms about alleged security lapses which were voiced after a teenage girl stabbed and seriously wounded a police officer during a routine identity check at a Hanover train station in February.

Opposition politicians in Lower Saxony say the authorities missed several clues that the girl, now 16 years old and identified only as Safia S. under German law, had long veered toward jihad. As early as 2009, Safia was seen in a video being paraded with pride by a leading German Salafist convert, Pierre Vogel, as a fine example of a young girl determined to wear the head scarf and live a devout life.

She was also seen at Quran distribution stands in Hanover. So were her brother, an Afghan who has since disappeared, and a young Muslim suspected of links to a thwarted terror attack that led the authorities a year ago to call off a national soccer match with the Netherlands.

More clues to Safia's radicalization may emerge during her trial, which is closed to the public under youth protection laws. But already it seems clear that she had run off to Turkey in January, apparently intending to reach Syria. Her Moroccan mother, who is said to be extremely religious, traveled to Turkey to bring her back to Germany.

According to Stefan Birkner, an opposition lawmaker in Lower Saxony who sits on committees investigating and overseeing police and intelligence work in the state, the police observed the return but later classified Safia as no risk to public security.

Some teachings

Salafists promote the idea that democracy is the "work of the devil," while they believe that jihad is comprised not of religious devotion but armed struggle for the six pillars of Islam. Men and women are not seen as possessing the same rights, and anyone who disagrees is labeled an "infidel."

"It is a very closed and sect-like communal life," said Prof. Ceylan, an Islamic Studies professor in Osnabrück. "The more you enter this circle and integrate into its structures, the less contact with the outside world you'll have."

"It's also the attractiveness of simplicity," Ceylan added, referring to the black and white picture that prevails among extremist groups of all non-Muslims being condemned to hell, while all believers will find paradise.

Risk perceptions

In German public perception, Salafists played virtually no role for a long time. This only changed once they started handing out thousands of Korans in public places and getting into street battles with right-wing extremists of the Pro-NRW movement.

In the last two years, Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution has noted "increasing travels in the direction of Afghanistan and Pakistan" from people who come from "milieus influenced by the Salafist ideology."

Constitutional Protection President, Heinz Fromm, stated that although not every Salafist is a terrorist "almost all terrorists that we know of have had contact to Salafists, or are Salafists."

Friedmann Eißler of the Evangelical Central Department for Questions of Worldview warned of groups, which in their interpretation of Islam "explicitly reject democracy and glorify martyrdom." They refer "statements from the 7th to the 9th Century. That was the golden age of Islam, when politics and religion were intertwined," said Eißler.

Eißler added that the complexity of a globalized world has led some to seek out "simple black-and-white solutions," something which may be contributing to the rise of fundamentalist tendencies in other areas of society.

(*) Other Islamist movements were previously banned by Germany as terrorist organizations or for using/advocating violence: Tauhid Germany (2012), Millatu Ibrahim (2012), DawaFFM and Al-Nussrah (2013), and IS (September 2014). Hizb ut-Tahrir was also banned as a political movement (2003) although it does not use violence but calls for the elimination of Israel and the killing of all Jews. The decision of Germany's Federal Administrative Court and Federal Constitutional Court was unsuccessfully challenged at the European Court (Court decision on 14 March 2013). See Hizb ut-Tahrir and Others v. Germany (Application no. 31098/08).