Islamist propaganda videos on the internet

Young people primary target of online recruiting for the jihadist movement in Syria

The civil war in Syria is the most important propaganda topic for Islamists in Germany at the moment. Even German youngsters have already followed the calls, left their homes to join the fight and have been killed. When recruiting new followers, the jihadists use videos as a central element for spreading their Islamistic ideas and inciting to the armed struggle against 'non-believers'.

Platforms like Facebook and YouTube, very popular among young people, make these videos widely accessible even outside of the spectrum of Islamist movements. This increases the risk for children and youngsters of stumbling across Islamist's ideas, hatred and depictions of extreme violence.

Within the bpb project on political extremism, jugendschutz.net looked into the messages these videos promote, which hazards they present for children and youngsters and how specifically young Muslims are recruited with emotionally charged clips.

> **Syria's civil war**
> What began as a peaceful protest against the regime of President Bashar Al Assad in a few Syrian cities escalated into a **civil war** with more than 140,000 people killed so far. The conflict takes place along confessional lines, broadly speaking, between Sunnis (mostly in opposition) and Alawites/Shiites (mostly faithful to the regime) and attracts people from all over the world to take part in the battle for either side.

Depictions of suffering make susceptible for Islamist's ideas

Many videos rely on an emotionalizing effect with images of children suffering or dying. The use of close-ups of faces contorted by pain, serious injuries or even severed limbs is very common. The producers of these clips emotionally appeal to the empathy, sense of justice and protective instinct of the recipients. Very often, Islamists directly approach young men with slogans like 'Where are the lions? Where are the men? Where are you?' and try to make more young

Muslims shoulder responsibility for 'their brothers and sisters' and support them in their fight.

The drastic images make the Muslim audience feel guilty: If they do not actively help in this crisis situation how should they stand trial before Allah? As the minimum form of support, Islamists demand from them to become aware of their Muslim identity and to comply with the rules of the fundamentalist groups.
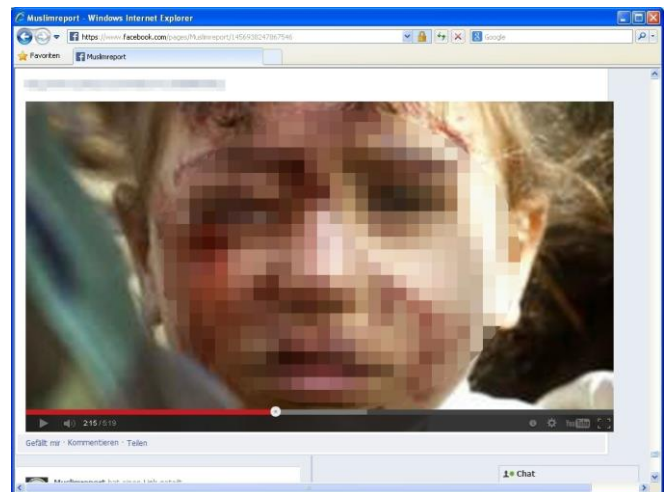
Drastic images: The depiction of suffering children shall influence the emotions (the original image is not alienated).

Agitation and atrocities incite to hatred

The confessional aspect of the conflict and the enmity between Sunni and Shiite Muslims in Syria can even be observed among German speaking users in social networks. Members of the various confessions within the Muslim community in Germany, among them many young people, increasingly express their hatred for one another. To a great extent this hatred is fueled by videos in German language.

For example, there are films in which extremist followers of the Sunni Islam stir up hatred against Shiites saying that they actually were not Muslims and that they had un-Islamic traditions. They use derogatory terms like 'kuffar' (non-believers) to dehumanize the followers of this religious

denomination and legitimize the use of violence against them. These videos regularly lead to hate-filled and racist comments on platforms like YouTube and Facebook.

Extremists exploit depictions of most serious crimes to show how cruel and inhuman the followers of the other denomination supposedly proceeded. They disseminate videos in the social web depicting torture and beheading scenes as well as serious injuries and severely disfigured corpses. Young people can come across such videos on popular platforms like Facebook and YouTube and can be substantially impacted. The violent content shocks and disturbs, but can also intensify or even evoke hatred for other groups of people.

Concepts of the enemy: Torture and beheading videos as an integral part of the war propaganda.

Terror organizations recruit German youngsters

German social media accounts make propaganda videos of terrorist organizations easily accessible. The Syrian al Qaeda organization Jhabat al-Nusra (JN) and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), a jihadist group acting independently from al Qaeda, publish films to recruit new followers – also from abroad.

The texts are mostly Arabic (titles, fade-ins, songs and spoken word), however, comments in German language on the social media accounts attract a German speaking audience. Reports in the media reveal that western jihadists, including Germans, preferably join these groups.

The videos are very professionally designed – special effects and animations remind of action, war and martial arts films. They show militant operations like bombing and gunfights, recruits undergoing weapons, martial arts and physical training. The iconographic design claims strength, discipline and heroism. They specifically promise young would-be jihadists a real adventure.

Videos of terrorist organizations showing gun-toting children e.g. in street fights or in a training camp, are particularly perfidious. They demonstrate the next generation of jihadists growing up and militarily trained from the begin-

ning. However, the films also intend to increase the pressure on potential recruits: The fact that even children are ready to fight and die for God and their brothers and sisters shall encourage specifically young men to join the terrorist organization.


Recruiting: Children in jihadist training camps set an example.

German fighters in Syria are idolized

Islamists from Germany actively participate in the Syrian conflict; videos on social media platforms turn them into role models and stars for some German Muslims. These Jihadists send video messages presenting themselves as 'proud fighters'. They broadcast their messages on their own Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts and profiles. This makes them heroes especially in the Salafist scene at home, eager to follow in their footsteps.

The videos shall provide evidence of their courage and willingness to make sacrifices. Attributes such as strength and honor are highlighted. According to the propaganda message, jihadists dying in combat fulfilling their presumed religious commandment become martyrs and attain the highest level of paradise. The video messages propagate the militant jihad as the 'sacred duty' of every 'true' believer.
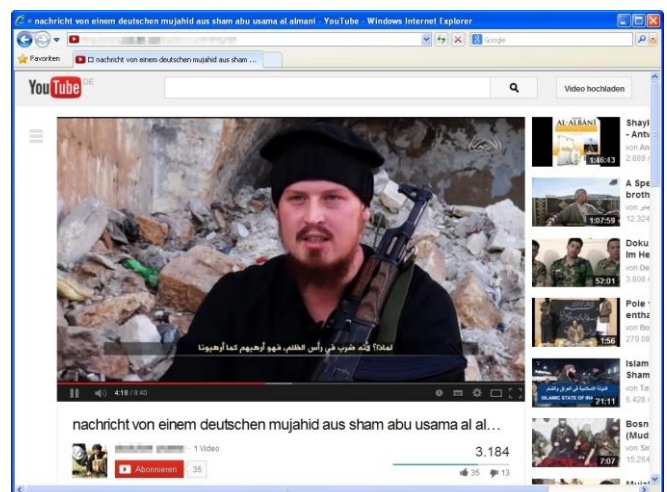
'Sacred duty': German jihadists in the war zone call on Muslims to wage jihad.

Jihadists approach their audience – specifically young Muslim men – directly and romanticize the war. They glamorize the terrorist lifestyle and praise brotherhood, comradeship and the certainty to fight and die for what seems as a just cause. Next to trivializing the real consequences of war they call for action, to not just sit around and watch how their 'Muslim brothers and sisters' are oppressed and fought against, but to come to Syria and join the jihad.

Some of the German jihadists were well-known and popular among young Muslims before they left their homes. The former gangster rapper from Berlin Denis Cuspert, also known as Abu Talha Al Almani, is the most prominent example. In 2013 he appeared in several videos claiming to be on a jihad mission in Syria and calling for Muslims in Germany to join him. The fact that Cuspert is well-known among youngsters increases the chances of easily catching listeners.

Providers must be aware of this and take action

Islamist videos on the internet pose a major risk factor for children and young persons. Numerous video clips incite to hatred, justify violence or call for jihad. On popular social media platforms they reach a wide audience of young users even outside the Islamist movement and they can quickly be disseminated.

Most platform operators close down sites and remove extremist videos or block them for German users. However, the vast amount of Islamist videos on the internet demands more stringent actions going far beyond an ad hoc basis removing one by one. There is a need for more exchange of experience and expertise with providers to make them more aware of this problem and encourage them to take appropriate technical safety measures.

It is essential to not only remove the content, but also to implement prevention programs to avoid that young people follow Islamist ideas and join terrorist organizations or the militant jihad.