

All Radicalization Is Local: Media Influence on Local Islamist Radicalization Processes in Five German and Austrian Hotspots

KATHARINA NEUMANN
LMU Munich, Germany

PHILIP BAUGUT^{1,2}
Macromedia University of Applied Sciences, Germany

Given the paucity of research on media influence on radicalized individuals, this study explored journalism's influence on the dynamics of local Islamist scenes in five German and Austrian hotspots. Theoretically, based on the concept of key events, we conducted 21 interviews with local deradicalization workers and former Islamists. Our findings show that sensational media coverage of key events that exaggerated the local scene's dangerousness fostered local Islamist radicalization by bolstering the propagandistic narrative of Muslim victimhood. Moreover, the news media contributed to state authorities' repression of the local scene. This caused the local Salafis to retreat from the public in all five hotspots. In three hotspots, the more moderate legalist Islamists benefited from sensational and undifferentiated media coverage of the Salafis and accused the society of Islamophobia. In this climate of accusations, critical reporting on Islamist activities seemed lacking, explaining why some participants perceived indications of a public Salafist comeback.

Keywords: Islamism, journalism ethics, key events, local journalism, news media, radicalization, mediatization of politics, propaganda

Fighting Islamism is an important issue across the globe. Numerous terrorist attacks, such as 9/11 and the attacks in Paris, Berlin, and London, have challenged democratic societies, calling for measures against Islamist radicalization (Ahmed, Belanger, & Szmania, 2018). Against this background, societies must understand the process by which individuals and groups adopt Islamist ideologies and even demonstrate their willingness to use violence. Despite being a global challenge, previous research has emphasized that radicalization is shaped by the local context (Starodubrovskaya, 2020; Varvelli, 2016). For example, studies on where the radicalization of ISIS foreign fighters occurred have demonstrated that "specific cities, towns,

Katharina Neumann: katharina.neumann@ifkw.lmu.de

Philip Baugut: p.baugut@macromedia.de

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and even neighborhoods provide a disproportionate number of recruits as compared with other locations” (Soufan & Schoenfeld, 2016, p. 17; see also Kanol, 2022; Saal, 2021).

Although the Internet may be an important factor in explaining radicalization and providing a supralocal platform for disseminating extremist propaganda, research has found a strong intertwining of online and offline contexts (Whittaker, 2022). For example, online Islamist propaganda can prompt people to join a local extremist group, and individuals may be exposed to Islamist propaganda within this group in radical mosques. Therefore, research on the causes of radicalization should consider specific local contexts. Therefore, a psychological perspective can be fruitfully connected to a sociological perspective in considering local Islamist groups and other local circumstances of radicalization.

Since the process of radicalization is typically influenced by a multitude of factors (Borum, 2011), calling for interdisciplinary research, it is important to note the contribution of communication studies in focusing on media coverage and Islamist propaganda as factors that potentially influence Islamist radicalization (Rieger, Frischlich, & Bente, 2013). However, studies on the relationship between the media and Islamist radicalization have suffered several shortcomings. First, they have mainly focused on how nonradicalized individuals are psychologically affected by media coverage and propaganda (Heeren & Zick, 2014; Rieger et al., 2013). Second, research addressing media effects on a scarcely accessible group of heavily radicalized individuals, such as Islamists, is rare and characterized by a strong psychological perspective (Baugut & Neumann, 2020). Studies have thus neglected the local context in which individuals develop radical attitudes, emotions, and behaviors. Third, research has not taken a long-term perspective on the transformation of local Islamist groups because of media coverage. The lack of comparative research on the dynamics of the relationship between media and local Islamist groups in different cities complicates the generalization of findings on media effects.

We, therefore, pose the following overarching research question:

RQ1: How do media coverage and propaganda influence transformations of the Islamist scene in five selected hotspots?

More specifically, we ask the following from a long-term perspective: How do media coverage and propaganda, particularly their interplay, affect the process of radicalization and, thus, the formation of the Islamist scene in terms of its public appearance? Drawing on interviews with former Islamists and prevention and deradicalization workers, we finally present a model explaining how the dynamics of a local Islamist scene relate to media coverage.

Media Influences on Islamist Radicalization

Streams of Islamism

The global problem of Islamism requires a closer look at the process by which individuals adopt this extremist belief system and/or demonstrate a willingness to use violence. This process is called radicalization (Neumann, 2013). It is important to distinguish between cognitive radicalization and

behavioral/violent radicalization, since individuals holding an Islamist worldview do not necessarily support the use of violence to realize this worldview (Wiktorowicz, 2006). Conversely, the extent to which people's use of violence is based on Islamist ideologies may vary (Khalil, Horgan, & Zeuthen, 2022; Neumann, 2013). Thus, an Islamist scene cannot be considered a black box; it is crucial to differentiate between different Islamist streams.

The Salafi community shares a common creed, but its scenes differ on whether the use of violence is appropriate (Wiktorowicz, 2006). In Germany, where Salafis might number about 12,000 people, the majority (so-called Salafi politicians) reject the use of violence, in contrast to jihadis (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat [BMI], 2022). However, the risk of politicians' radicalization toward jihadism remains.

Beyond the Salafi community, which has been closely monitored by security agencies, there exists the so-called legalist scene, consisting of organizations such as Mili Görus and the Muslim Brotherhood. Legalist Islamists have adapted to the legal environments in European societies (Mares, 2015). Instead of following a revolutionary approach and using violence to change Western societies, they perform missionary work to create an Islamic order step-by-step (BMI, 2022; Mares, 2015).

Media Influences on Islamism

Research has demonstrated that news media coverage of Islam and Islamism and Islamist propaganda may influence Islamist radicalization. News media coverage is relevant during an early phase of (pre-)radicalization as negative, stereotyped portrayals of Islam, particularly lacking differentiation between Islam and Islamist terrorism (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; von Sikorski et al., 2022), can elicit feelings of being discriminated against fears, and identity threats among Muslims (Heeren & Zick, 2014; Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019; Schmuck, Matthes, & Paul, 2017). Perceived discrimination can be considered a risk factor for radicalization, since it may predict hostility toward out-group members (Schmuck et al., 2017; Schmuck, Matthes, von Sikorski, Rahmanian, & Bulat, 2022). Concerning individuals who are already radicalized at a cognitive level, the media's exaggeration of Islamists' dangerousness, culminating in sensational news coverage of (potential) terrorism, has been found to radicalize individuals toward violence (Möller, 2014).

The effects of news media coverage on radicalizing individuals may be explained by their social identities. This concept deals with "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership" (Tajfel, 1972, p. 292). The more individuals feel affiliated with a Muslim or Islamist community, the more they can be assumed to be strongly affected by the news media coverage of that community. Berger (2018) and Sageman (2017) demonstrated the value of adopting a social identity perspective in explaining violent extremism.

Importantly, media coverage, particularly undifferentiated news, may serve as a breeding ground for propaganda effects, for example, when propaganda refers to negative media coverage of Islam to illustrate that Muslims typically face discrimination and must defend themselves because they are allegedly under attack by a hostile media-political system (Baugut & Neumann, 2020). From the radicalizing

individuals' points of view, Islamist propaganda seems credible when it raises the issue of allegedly Islamophobic media coverage. Therefore, propaganda may shape how individuals subsequently perceive and interpret journalistic content (Baugut & Neumann, 2020). It is, therefore, important to consider the interplay of media coverage and propaganda effects in explaining radicalization.

It is important to acknowledge that radicalizing individuals are typically exposed to both local and supralocal media content, and that they may be strongly intertwined. For example, undifferentiated news that does not clearly distinguish Islam from Islamist terrorism is an internationally widespread phenomenon (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017), which internationally disseminated propaganda claiming Muslim victimhood often underscores (Baugut & Neumann, 2020). We may assume that individuals' reception of this content provides a basic framework for interpreting what they perceive at the local level. For example, radicalizing individuals arguably perceive local news media reporting on allegedly pressing state measures against an extremely dangerous Islamist group as confirmation of the more general problem of Islamophobia. Furthermore, since political socialization typically occurs in local contexts, local media content may shape individuals' views of the media and politics in general. Interestingly, previous research has demonstrated that (nonradicalized) Muslims' evaluations of the quality of undifferentiated news did not depend on whether the reported events were close to or far away from the audience (Schmuck et al., 2022). Thus, Islamist radicalization at the local level seems to have a global dimension.

From Media Reporting on Key Events to the Mediatization of Politics

To explore the transformation of a local Islamist scene, the concept of key events (Brosius & Eps, 1995; Rauchenzauner, 2008; Stöber, 2008) may be helpful. While key events are not primarily created for media attention, media reporting on a key event can enhance its societal impact (Stöber, 2008). For example, key events can attract the attention of journalists and the public and, increase their interest in corresponding information (Rauchenzauner, 2008). Consequently, key events may impact journalists' news selection criteria (Brosius & Eps, 1995), which may explain waves of media coverage of similar events irrespective of their frequency. These waves may finally compel political actors to take certain actions. Thus, the concepts of key events and the mediatization of politics (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014) can be fruitfully linked. The latter deals with the process of increasing media influence on several aspects of politics, such as political negotiations, decisions, and the self-presentation of political actors. This impact can be traced to political actors' assumptions that the news media exerts a strong influence on citizens (e.g., Cohen, Tsifti, & Sheaffer, 2008). A large body of empirical research in Western countries indicates that political actors and their decision making are often influenced by news media—not only by existing media coverage but also by the prospect of media coverage (e.g., Fawzi, 2018).

Method

Given the paucity of research on the relationship between journalistic media and Islamism at the local level and the ethical problems of media effect experiments eliciting radicalization, we chose a qualitative approach to explore severe media effects (Flick, 2014). From January to August 2022, we conducted semistructured interviews with (a) 17 prevention and deradicalization workers capable of making general statements about media influences on Islamists and Islamist groups and (b) four individuals who

were (de-)radicalized to varying degrees, some of whom had participated in exit programs to leave the Islamist scene. We considered our interviewees key informants and experts in the field of Islamist radicalization processes (Flick, 2014; Payne & Payne, 2004).

The participants were located in five German and Austrian cities, including the surrounding regions. We selected cities that reports on the protection of the constitution, scientific literature, and media coverage have claimed are characterized by intense Islamist activities and extraordinarily many Salafis, among them numerous individuals who became foreign fighters for ISIS. Correspondingly, we labeled these cities "hotspots." The average number of inhabitants of the five cities is about 600,000; all five cities have more than 250,000 inhabitants and are thus among the 25 largest cities in both countries.

Ultimately, we decided to compare five hotspots (A–E) because we expected a comparative perspective to yield more general findings on the relationship between journalistic media and Islamist scenes. Regardless of which hotspot they were in, most participants were able to give insights into the dynamics of Islamist scenes in other hotspots.

To recruit participants, we contacted the key local organizations for prevention or deradicalization work with clients radicalized to different degrees (including purely cognitively radicalized individuals and violent individuals). Some of the interviewed prevention and deradicalization workers helped us connect with their clients. Moreover, we contacted scene-leavers—those who had left the local Islamist scene in the respective hotspot and were publicly speaking about it. The typical interview lasted about 40 minutes and was conducted either in person or via phone/Zoom. We guaranteed confidentiality to all participants.

Our interviews with prevention and deradicalization workers first focused on their characterization of their clients' degrees of radicalization. Specifically, we asked how their radicalized clients consumed, processed, and were affected by local media coverage and propaganda. We also asked them to describe both the present structure and, from a long-term perspective, the past transformations of the respective local Islamist scenes.

Our interviews with scene-leavers focused on the causes of their radicalization. We also asked them to describe the local groups to which they had belonged and the key events that had influenced the local Islamist scene. We were particularly interested in how participants consumed, perceived, and were affected by media coverage of these key events and Islamist propaganda.

Since it cannot be ruled out that even people undergoing the deradicalization process may answer in an ideologically distorted way or lie, we adopted forensic interview techniques, asking, for example, about the same incidents from different perspectives to identify untruthful answers (Volbert, 2008). The interview material was analyzed using MAXQDA software. The interviews were first paraphrased and then assigned to main categories and subcategories for each hotspot (Mayring, 2014). The main categories included statements about (a) the structure and transformations of the local Islamist scene; (b) key events; (c) media consumption, processing, and effects; and (d) propaganda effects.

We defined those events as “key events” that the interviewees, from a long-term perspective, consistently described as having an enormous societal impact, eventually transforming the Islamist scene induced by media and state actions. While the interviews typically dealt with several events, there was no disagreement about the most influential, and thus intensively discussed, events.

Results

We will first focus on (a) the characteristics of the Islamist scene in each hotspot. Second, we will portray (b) key events identified as having a deep impact on the local Islamist scene because of the intensive media coverage they received. Third, we describe in detail (c) the media effects on the Islamist scene resulting from the media coverage of a particular key event, thereby addressing (local) news media effects and the effects of (local) Islamist propaganda. Finally, we will draw more general conclusions by presenting a model summarizing the media’s impact on local Islamism.

Hotspot A

Characteristics of the Islamist Scene

In hotspot A, Salafi actors were no longer visible in public. For example, Koran distribution stands in the city streets had disappeared. Most interviewees saw the scene shifting to private spaces and online networks, where Salafis sought to foster Islamist (online) radicalization among adolescents in a way that was less observable to security agencies.

In contrast to the Salafi scene’s public disappearance, the interview material indicated a currently active legalist scene with a local public presence. For example, legalist Islamists pushed the accusation of Islamophobia as a public agenda via local poster campaigns. Participant A1 explained that legalist actors were in search of political supporters, particularly among the city’s left-wing political camps.

Interestingly, A3 noted a new development in some parts of the city. Some teenagers with jihadist tendencies had started receiving “old” ISIS propaganda: “They let their beards grow . . . and hang out in the parks.”

Key Event: Islamist Recruitment in a Mosque

Understanding the structure of Islamism in hotspot A demands reflecting on Islamist recruitment activities in a certain mosque, where the city’s jihadi scene conglomerated and from where several young people traveled to Syria to join ISIS. While jihadist activities scarcely attracted public attention before the rise of ISIS, the success of the terrorist organization in 2014 caused the local media and state authorities to scandalize the mosque and raise the issue of fighting Islamism. The state authorities subjected the mosque to several repressions, including house raids and criminal proceedings. Although the mosque closed in 2016, several interviewees identified events surrounding the mosque and the corresponding media coverage as key events.

Media Effects

According to our experts, the mosque was subjected to intensive media coverage that at least partly exaggerated its threat to society. Overall, our interview material indicated that media coverage contributed to radicalization and recruitment.

At the individual level, our analysis revealed that radicalized individuals perceived the news media as part of a hostile system; the media allegedly collaborated with Austrian politicians to erase Islam. Correspondingly, members of the mosque perceived negative local media coverage of their mosque as an attack, creating a need to defend themselves violently.

Scene-leaver A4, a former attendee of the mosque, recalled that media coverage of the Islamist scene was often perceived as hysterical and (ridiculously) exaggerating the local scene's dangerousness. Importantly, the media thereby inspired scene members to act in line with the "dangerous" media image as a way to strike back: "I show myself the way they show me, so in other words, I should become a criminal, I should become violent. . . . This was exactly the image they conveyed of us," said A4. He added, "one wanted to be simply brutal and unscrupulous" and the media were "helping" them become famous "by reporting almost on a daily basis how brutal they were."

Individuals' radicalization toward violence was accompanied by the consumption of violent propaganda distributed in Telegram groups. In particular, the idea of being "invincible" and "terrifying," disseminated by both propaganda and media coverage, made scene members feel proud and affirmed. Local reports on the dangerousness of single heads of the local scene were perceived as inspiring: "One thought, look at our leader; the whole world fears him" (A4). A3 explained that the emphasis on the dangerousness of single heads of the scene could trigger imitation effects. For example, V4 reported that violent attacks on members of a local Shiite mosque were perpetrated to garner media attention.

Moreover, media coverage piqued or intensified young individuals' interest in Islamism as a "fashion phenomenon" (A1), and this perception led to (online) contact with the local Islamist scene. Thereby, the propagandistic narrative of Muslims as decades-long victims was disseminated. Globally, Muslims were portrayed as victims of a Western war against the Umma; locally, they were portrayed as victims of the Austrian state, exemplified by negative media reporting on mosques.

Finally, our interview material indicated that the intensive media coverage of the mosques had an indirect effect on the Islamist scene. By provoking public outrage and pressure on political actors, the media contributed to state repression targeting the mosque. In turn, these political actions triggered even more media coverage. However, the harsh sanctions against the mosque led to a turning point in the public appearance of local Islamists. To avoid further sanctions, the scene shifted its activities to private spaces.

Key Event: Islamist Terrorist Attack in A (2020)

In 2020, a lone Islamist terrorist shot and injured people in the center of A. Most interviewees perceived the intensive media coverage of the attack as strongly focused on political blame and the

perpetrator's characteristics, such as his country of origin. Shortly after the attack, sweeping raids against Islamist institutions in Austria took place; however, the courts later evaluated these measures as unlawful. The operation was followed by several packages of political antiterror measures aimed at Islamist organizations, such as the legalist Muslim Brotherhood.

Media Effects: Terrorist Attacks

According to our interviewees, breaking news coverage of the ongoing attack had several problematic effects on individuals undergoing Islamist radicalization. A4 recalled that false speculations about the perpetrator being Chechen were perceived as attacks against the Chechen community, triggering feelings of discrimination among radicalized Chechens. A4 reported, "I thought to myself, you idiots . . . , because of such statements . . . , such deeds [terrorist attacks] happen." Since Islamist propaganda typically framed violence as a way to defend against injustice, indicated by unfounded statements about the perpetrator being Chechen, the media's contribution to the radicalization of individuals should not be overlooked.

A4 also criticized public speculation about additional terrorists and terror targets. According to A6 and A4, who knew the perpetrator personally, such speculation exaggerating the extent of terror attacks helped the perpetrator achieve his propagandistic goal of appearing as scary and powerful as possible. Several participants noted that the media's strong focus on terrorists, particularly pictures portraying them with weapons, motivated radicalized adolescents to imitate him: "I can become famous with it' . . . especially when it comes to young people, the imitation problem is indeed a big one" (A7). Consistently, A3 noted that media coverage of the perpetrator was "a guide on how to go crazy." This appears particularly problematic at the local level, where identification with personally known terrorists from one's hometown might increase the likelihood of copycats.

Importantly, the attack caused wide-ranging political measures to fight the so-called political Islam. These harsh measures finally reinforced the Islamist victimhood narrative:

Then some populist asshole came along and proposed the anti-terror package, and that gave the assassin a meaning . . . and of course, this anti-terror package was great for propaganda. If one had simply not done that, then the assassination would have achieved zero. (A6)

The interview material revealed that the decision to impose harsh political measures was also influenced by media reports suggesting that political failure was a reason for the terrorist attack. Political actors' fears of being blamed for inactivity might have motivated overreactions. According to our interviewees, state repression initially led to the Salafi scene's withdrawal from the public.

Interestingly, legalist actors in A, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, benefited from the political "overreaction" (A2) in the aftermath of the attack. According to A1, legalists used the accusation of Islamophobia as a media topic to portray themselves as victims and win partners from leftist parties. Following A1, left-leaning local media outlets were especially prone to adopt the Islamophobia accusation.

The Muslim victimhood narrative, in turn, strengthened the jihadi scene because it served as a justification to strike back.

Hotspot B

Characteristics of the Islamist Scene

The local Salafi scene was once omnipresent in hotspot B, but its members withdrew from the public. According to B4, Salafis "don't want to attract attention." Their need for privacy was traced to several ongoing trials and imposed contact bans. Interestingly, participants stressed that B was famous for its numerous trials against Islamists that, according to scene-leaver B2, resulted in strong hostility toward Islam among citizens of B. As accusations of Islamophobia were typically leveled by legalist Islamists, such as Muslim Brotherhood-linked entities (Vidino, 2017), our interview material indicated that B was also characterized by an active legalist scene and was even labeled "a hotspot" (B3).

Key Events: Recruitment Activities in Two Mosques

According to our interviewees, Salafis used to gather in two mosques, from where numerous radicalized individuals departed to ISIS. Consequently, the mosques were subjected to the raids and arrests of believers. However, most arrested individuals were acquitted. Importantly, several interviewees perceived the intensive (local) media coverage as "show trials," "media spectacle," and "theater play almost" (B4). Obviously, the judiciary's staging of trials, occurring in a symbiotic relationship with news media, was also meant to exert deterrent effects, illustrating what could happen to ISIS supporters and returnees.

Media Effects

Interestingly, we found no significant news media influences on what happened within one of the mosques: "a newspaper, television, news, that was not present" (B2, a former attendee of the mosque). The radicalization of attendees can instead be explained by their consumption of online propaganda and group dynamics. The scene used online propaganda as a "bait" (B4) to connect with adolescents and "to hook in exactly where they notice that the person needs something," such as knowledge of how to behave like a "real Muslim" to avoid hell after death. Propaganda circulating within the mosque community was part of the communication on social media, especially Telegram groups consisting of adolescents in Austria on the one hand and Austrian "foreign fighters" on the other. The latter sought to persuade group members to follow them. In this regard, as A4 added, the chance of becoming a glorified, powerful, and masculine "hero" when joining ISIS and the alleged "coolness factor" (B4) of posing with weapons fostered individuals' radicalization.

Although the mosque community tended to avoid consuming news media content, members intently followed (local) media coverage of "show trials" against other community members. Most congregants perceived the trials and media reports as confirming the Muslim victimhood narrative. Importantly, their negative portrayal mainly had a deterrent effect on radicals, who showed a "big feeling of shame" (B4) for falling for ISIS propaganda, and this reinforced their wish to avoid further public attention.

While it was mainly young men from one mosque who traveled to Syria, the other mosque was the departure point for several families seeking to join ISIS. B2 spent several months in ISIS territory hoping for a life without discrimination; however, she desperately returned to Austria. According to her, attendees of the mosque radicalized each other by rewarding those who most strictly followed Islamic rules, as explained by propaganda. Importantly, B2 trusted the reports of congregants who had already traveled to join ISIS and raved online about their lives. The returnee recalled one video that inspired her decision to depart: "Then I saw a scene where a man was standing in the middle of this park with his trunk open and lots of toys in it. Children had come for Ramadan and he was distributing gifts to each child." While female congregants were exposed to propaganda depicting the advantages of life in ISIS territory, men consumed violent content, such as combat videos. When asked if she did not see media reports on the brutality of ISIS, B2 stated that she did not consume any news due to a lack of political interest. Moreover, isolation from journalistic media might have resulted from propaganda that discredited the media as part of a hostile system fighting Islam.

However, a general disinterest in news media turned into heavy media consumption when reports of repression and trials against returnees and potential recruiters began in 2014. In sum, exaggerated media reports fostered radicalization in different ways. First, violent radicalization was accelerated by such media coverage, as some people reacted by adopting the image the media conveyed of them: "If they're going to report on us like that, then they should have a reason to do so" (B2). Second, in most cases, media reports echoing the suspected danger of scene members confirmed the victimhood narrative, particularly after the defendants were acquitted. Third, such media reports could have hampered the deradicalization of Islamists, who perceived a lack of acknowledgment of their distancing from the scene.

Importantly, similar to participants in A, B3 observed a "self-limitation" of the media that included not mentioning religious backgrounds in cases of (local) incidents in schools. Such restraint from the media might (at least partially) be traceable to the active legalist scene in B that possibly benefited from harsh judicial actions (accompanied by intensive media coverage) that resulted in acquittals in many cases and thereby served the victimhood narrative also used by legalists.

Hotspot C

Characteristics of the Islamist Scene

Similar to the developments in hotspots A and B, the Salafis in hotspot C were hardly visible in public. According to our interviewees, local Salafis connected online and held "private meetings in small groups" (C1). Although some Salafis still visited local mosques, they were "careful because they have to assume that they are being watched" (C2).

Consistent with our findings on hotspots A and B, legalists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, were widespread in the slipstreams of Salafi groups. According to C2, these Islamist actors publicly proclaimed that they stood for integration and valued education. Interestingly, C1 said that at the beginning of 2020, there was an "incredible effort" to restructure the Salafi scene. Salafis appeared in public to conduct street advertising campaigns, but the pandemic stopped those efforts.

Key Event: The Prohibition of the Salafi Association Die Wahre Religion

The Salafi association *Die Wahre Religion* [The True Religion] (DWR) was founded by a local preacher in 2005 as an Internet platform before it became a German-wide Islamist organization. In 2011, DWR initiated the Koran distribution campaign "LIES!" [read!], a "flagship of the very radical scene in Germany" (C1). As the campaign, characterized by information stands in cities' pedestrian areas, was suspected to have recruited ISIS fighters, DWR was officially outlawed in 2016.

Media Effects

The interviewees stressed that DWR benefited from the extensive media coverage of "LIES!": "The level of popularity was important because they were also looking for people to smuggle into Syria" (C2). According to C2, the Islamists were "basking in glory" and perceived as "cool" when the media reported on them. Interestingly, C1 stressed that several years before, the media had been rather uncritically reporting on single heads of DWR, but this changed with the rise of ISIS: "LIES!" became associated with the recruitment of foreign fighters.

Several participants criticized media reports highlighting Islamists' dangerousness, making the scene attractive for young individuals: "According to the motto . . . if the unbelievers have such panic, the brothers must really be on the winning track" (C1). Not only did the media contribute to radicalization, but extensive news reporting also led to "a significant increase in personnel at the . . . State Security Service . . . Then, of course, the authorities, the police in particular, had to react" (C2).

Importantly, political repression and the outlawing of the DWR were exploited by Islamist propagandists, who also blamed the media for the restrictions. According to C1, conspiracy theories propagated the idea of targeted combat of the "Islamic movement" by "a conglomerate of media, politics, [and] security authorities."

Consistent with the propagated victimhood narrative, radicalizing individuals perceived the prohibition of "LIES!" as indicating society's goal to stop the spread of Islam. Although propagandists exploited the prohibition of DWR, the fear of criminal prosecution ultimately dissolved the local scene. That is, local Islamists stopped preaching and meeting in public.

On one hand, the media's focus on DWR increased public awareness of the potential danger of "classic Salafi" (C2) groups. On the other hand, as C2 criticized, the media thereby neglected legalist Islamists emerging "in the slipstream" of Salafis in certain city districts. From his perspective, journalists feared unjustified accusations of Islamophobia and therefore did not scrutinize legalists, who typically accused society of Islamophobia (Vidino, 2017). C2 said, "I think many media now . . . no longer necessarily report on things that are in the grey area. It is also simply difficult because . . . there is also the stigmatization." In sum, the lack of critical public debate over local Islamism enabled legalists to spread in local districts. The interview material indicated that Salafis possibly also benefited from the absence of a critical public, which might explain the Salafis' efforts to reenter the public domain before the pandemic, as C1 noted.

Hotspot D

Characteristics of the Islamist Scene

Consistent with findings on hotspots A–C, local Salafis in hotspot D retreated from the public. Interviewees pointed out that the scene shifted to the private sphere and online networks. Consequently, security agencies were confronted with the problem of monitoring the scene. Interestingly, we found no evidence of legalist Islamists seeking publicity.

Key Event: EZP's Islamic School Dispute

In 2011, the Salafi missionary group *Einladung zum Paradies* [Invitation to Paradise] (EZP) moved its headquarters to hotspot D, seeking to establish an Islamic school. Consequently, citizens launched an initiative against this project. The corresponding public pressure contributed to political repression, including raids against EZP members. To avoid the prohibition of the organization, EZP finally disbanded. However, its members did not stop their activities, and some even joined more radical groups, such as DWR [The True Religion]. The interview material indicated that the Islamic school dispute was crucial to the overall German Salafi scene because it contributed to the radicalization of key actors within the scene. They felt the need to resort to violence to defend themselves against the injustice of state authorities and the media.

Media Effects

The interview material indicated that local news media reporting on the Islamic school dispute was a "huge media topic" (D3). Journalists tended to exaggerate the scene's dangerousness, suggesting that the EZP sought to send young people to combat zones. According to former scene members, however, this was not true at the time of reporting. According to scene-leaver D2, the intensive media coverage of the EZP influenced him to join his first EZP rally.

I thought, "Wow, that's impressive." . . . There were hundreds of people who were actually only there for one thing: "The German state can do nothing to us; we still meet here and pray in the marketplace." And that impressed me, of course, and that was the decision: "Okay, now, I want more of it."

Importantly, propagandists used negative local news media reports on the scene to fuel the Islamist victimhood narrative. D2's consumption of local media reports and propaganda convinced him that the media and the state had sought to suppress him simply for being Muslim. He added that his (further) radicalization was fostered by media reports suggesting that terrorism and Islam were synonymous. The need to use violence to defend against injustice thus emerged.

Interestingly, the interview material suggested that EZP initially benefited from media coverage, as it could be considered to indicate Muslim victimhood. However, at some point, public pressure stemming from media coverage led to political repression and weakened the scene. D2 stated that he lost interest in

following the news media coverage: "Because it was always then the reporting that more and more [scene members] have been arrested." He instead consumed violent propaganda "to make myself strong again by seeing, okay, maybe we're losing ground in Germany right now, but we're gaining ground in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria." Therefore, owing to intensive media coverage and associated political repression, the EZP finally disbanded to prevent official prohibition, and members radicalized toward violence and joined other Islamist groups outside the city.

D1 described what happened in the aftermath: "It has become very quiet in the [local] area as they realized, 'We are now under suspicion and there are now restrictions' . . . they don't want that anymore, and then you automatically withdraw because of the disadvantages." For example, D2 did not want his family to suffer because of the publicity. Consistent with this, prevention and deradicalization worker D3 clarified that his current Islamist clients wanted to avoid "this social label that you then get, ah, here's the Salafi." This could be traced to the "traumatic" experiences of EZP members in the city. According to D4, these experiences are a plausible explanation for legalist Islamists avoiding publicity.

Hotspot E

Characteristics of the Islamist Scene

Consistent with our findings from other cities, the local Salafi scene in hotspot E shifted to private spaces. E1 stressed that radicalized individuals now conceived of their former missionary activities as "a burden on religion and the image of Islam in Germany and the religion."

Interestingly, E1 indicated that despite the existence of a local scene of legalists, they tended to avoid speaking publicly. For example, they were reluctant to publicly accuse society of Islamophobia. E1 explained that against the background of public outrage in the times of ISIS and the recruitment of foreign fighters, Islamists "have become much more cautious and less active, at least outwardly."

Key Event: The Sharia Police

In 2014, a Salafi group led by well-known preacher Sven Lau patrolled through E and lectured people in the streets about Islamic rules of conduct. They wore high-visibility orange vests with the inscription "Sharia Police" and entered bars and casinos calling for the prohibition of alcohol and gambling. After the incident, they posted videos of their actions on social media. This attracted media hype, and politicians even commented on the incident, labeling it, for example, a Salafi "war declaration." The Salafis were finally accused and convicted of violating the prohibition of uniforms.

Media Effects

Importantly, the Sharia police have attracted intensive local, national, and international news reports. In our interview material, the patrol was even called a "media bomb" (E1), comparable to the intensity of media coverage on 9/11. Scene-leaver D2 recalled that the Sharia police sought to gain attention. However, at some point, the Salafis lost control of their media presentation: "In the end, it wasn't

planned that it would go public like that.” Furthermore, E1 reported that media reports initially provoked feelings of joy and pride among members of the local Salafi scene.

D2 stressed that the media exaggerated the Sharia police’s activities. The sensational media coverage contributed to the accusation against and conviction of the initiators of the Sharia police, which finally strengthened the Islamist victimhood narrative.

However, harsh negative media reporting and the repression of the Sharia police deterred young people, as E1 stated. Consequently, scene members agreed “that the idea was good, but the way it was done wasn’t . . . clever” (E1). This was evaluated as particularly true for the use of uniforms, which ultimately led to judicial punishment.

Nevertheless, the Sharia police were role models for other Salafi groups; they “looked back on the Sharia Police” (D2) as an example of how to influence the media. D2 recalled, “We knew we had to be recognized quickly—that is, identified. So, we had to wear the same clothes.” He said that his group wanted to get media attention to attract (violent) people and stir up fear. According to D2, the group, inspired by the Sharia police, immediately received coverage from several media outlets. Yet, despite his satisfaction with the media attention, D2 was afraid of being targeted by security agencies. Against the background of the Sharia police and the subsequent political repression of the local scene, Salafis finally completely withdrew from the public sphere.

Interestingly, the interview material revealed that the media hype surrounding the Sharia police also influenced the local legalist scene, inspiring public silence. The legalists did not use the media hype to accuse the public of Islamophobia but rather became invisible, which could be traced to several communication “mishaps” (E1), such as invitations extended to radical preachers, causing the media to equate the legalists with the Salafis and their Sharia police. E1 explained that legalists “don’t want to appear political to the outside world, so they don’t become the target of the media or security authorities.” Interestingly, E1 reported that the Salafi scene criticized legalists for their passivity in public: “They think they are wishy-washy Muslims; they conform to the system.” Therefore, one can assume that Salafis sought to benefit from, or indeed benefited from, an active local legalist scene accusing the society of Islamophobia.

Media Influence on the Local Islamist Scene From a Comparative Point of View

All investigated cities were public Salafi hotspots, but due to public pressure, the Salafis shifted to private spaces and online networks. Consequently, the self-purported less radical legalists began shaping the public image of the Islamist scene in three of the five investigated cities.

Explaining this development requires a closer look at the media’s role. In all cities, we were able to identify key events that attracted intensive media coverage. Moreover, the media tended to overemphasize the scene’s dangers. This is unsurprising, given the literature’s underlining of a symbiotic relationship between news media and extremist actors that both seek to maximize public attention (Nacos, 2016). Importantly, the media’s scandalization of Islamist activities supported the Islamist victimhood

narrative and motivated radicalized individuals to join dubious groups and demonstrate a willingness to use violence, as suggested by media reports. Thus, media coverage served as a breeding ground for severe propaganda effects that radicalized individuals at both the cognitive and behavioral levels.

Importantly, media coverage contributed to and reflected public outrage about Islamist activities, which can be considered an important factor in explaining state measures against Islamist groups, such as raids, association bans, and trials. These measures and the scandalization of local Islamist activities may explain Salafis' disappearance and their replacement by more moderate legalists in three of the five hotspots. In the other two hotspots, where legalists did not dare enter the public domain, public outrage about Salafis' activities seemed to have had a long-lasting impact.

Discussion

This study highlights how news media coverage of Islamism shaped local Islamist scenes in Germany and Austria. Since previous research mainly scrutinized the psychological level and explored how news media coverage and propaganda affect weakly or nonradicalized Muslims (e.g., Heeren & Zick, 2014; Rieger et al., 2013; Schmuck et al., 2017), this study aimed to connect psychological microlevel findings on media influences on radicalized Muslims with the mesolevel findings of a local Islamist scene's structure. By examining the media's role in five local Islamist hotspots, this comparative study allowed for generalizations on how changes to an Islamist scene relate to media influences.

Importantly, we found that all local Salafi scenes retreated from the public because of key events that triggered intensive media coverage, which finally provoked state repression against the Salafis. Staged events, such as terrorist attacks or patrols by the so-called Sharia police, typically attracted sensational reporting with the tendency to exaggerate the local scene's dangerousness. Such media coverage, aimed at maximizing public attention, contributed to the radicalization of individuals in several ways. For example, they realized that acting consistently with their violent media image, for example, by showing brutality and strength, was awarded media attention. Moreover, the media's tendency to scandalize and exploit local Islamist activities was perceived as affirming the Islamist victimhood narrative. Unintentionally, from a journalistic perspective, the media coverage was water to the mills of propagandists who illustrated Muslim victimhood using the example of media coverage of Islamist activities. Importantly, key events and the subsequent radicalization of individuals and associated media hype forced state authorities to fight Salafi's activities. The corresponding repression can be considered an indicator of the mediatization of politics (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). The media impact on anti-Islamist politics is likely because audience-oriented media outlets are plausibly motivated to extensively report on Islamism to elicit emotions, such as fear of terrorism. Importantly, the state's fight against Islamism has the potential to reinforce Islamists' perceptions of a hostile system in which the media and politics collaborate to erase Islam. Nevertheless, political pressure caused the Salafi scene to move underground.

Since previous research found that news coverage did not clearly differentiate Islam from Islamist terrorism (Baugut, 2020; von Sikorski et al., 2022) to elicit negative attitudes toward Islam (Salem & Ramasubramanian, 2019; see also Schmuck et al., 2017), it is plausible that legalist propagandists accused the society of Islamophobia, sometimes in alliance with left-wing political actors

who raised this important issue. Consequently, even journalists who critically reflect on their former media coverage of Islamism might conclude that their dramatized coverage of Islamism harmed the nonradical Muslim community. Possibly, journalists became reluctant to report on Islamism, which may explain why legalists (and even some Salafi groups) felt free to reenter the public domain. Figure 1 summarizes these considerations in a model intended to stimulate further research on the relationships between news media and the structure of an Islamist scene.

Importantly, this qualitative study revealed that the media coverage of trials against Islamists deserves more scientific attention. On one hand, our findings indicate that the media's spectacular reporting on trials may have exerted a deterrent effect on Islamists, causing them to retreat from the public. On the other hand, persistent negative media coverage of Islamists on trial may have been perceived as consistent with the problematic victimhood narrative disseminated by propaganda.

In sum, this study highlights that news media and propaganda are important factors in explaining Islamist radicalization at the local level. As we found similar patterns of media influences in five different hotspots, there seems to be a relatively stable media logic that can enhance the pressure on state authorities to fight Islamism. Paradoxically, however, the media called for repression to solve the problems to which they contributed by their manner of reporting. Moreover, neither the exaggeration of Salafis' dangerousness nor the neglect of legalist activities appears to help fight Islamism.

Since Islamist actors can be influenced by both local and supralocal media content, future research should disentangle these two levels and explore the extent to which responsible local journalism can counter, or at least neutralize, the problematic impact of undifferentiated news disseminated by nonlocal media. However, our findings on the problematic influences of local media point to the problem of local media content and supralocal media content reinforcing each other. From the perspective of local Islamists, local media are a part and an indicator of a hostile media-political system. Compared with the national media, we can assume that local media report on more local details of Islamists (e.g., the city district in which they live and the exact name of the mosque in which they pray). Islamists may thus be strongly affected by local media coverage. Moreover, local details in the media coverage of other Islamists may make recipients identify with them, particularly when they realize that they share commonalities, such as their place of residence and the mosque they visit.

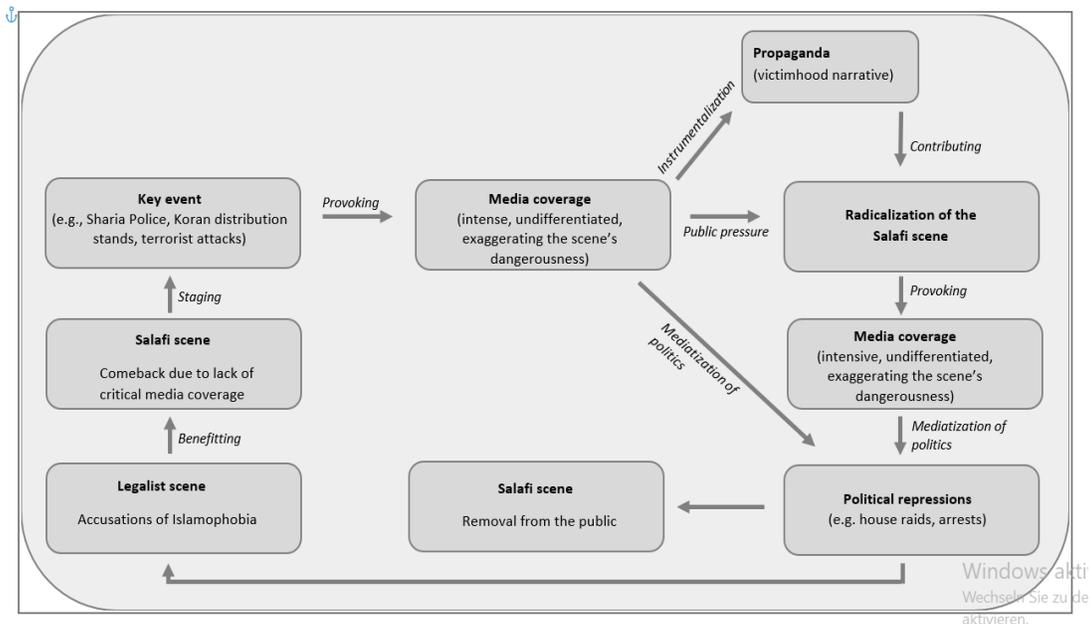


Figure 1. Illustration of media influence on local Islamist scenes.

Limitations

First, our findings were based on a relatively small sample in each hotspot. Given the difficulty in finding and getting access to scene-leavers willing to discuss a past they want to leave behind, it was important to interview key deradicalization and prevention workers. They were addressed as experts with information about many radicalized individuals; however, their information was limited to what their clients had told them. Second, the findings of this study depended on what the respondents remembered. Third, we used our respondents' media perceptions to explore the characteristics of media coverage that ultimately affected the local scene. Content analyses of media coverage would have provided a more objective description of media reporting. However, our respondents strongly agreed on the basic characteristics of media reporting, and their perceptions of media coverage of Islamism were consistent with findings from previous content analyses. Fourth, our findings on media influences on state authorities are not based on interviews with decision makers. Future empirical validations of our model, particularly concerning the mediatization of politics, should explore how political actors perceive and are influenced by news media coverage and corresponding public opinion.

Conclusion

In sum, this study sheds light on problematic media influences on Islamist radicalization. Journalists should be aware of their responsibility in reporting on a local Islamist scene whose members can be influenced by the interplay of media coverage and propaganda. The latter typically refers to negative media coverage of Islamism to spread the narrative of Muslim victimhood. It is therefore important that the

economic pressure on the media toward audience orientation does not provoke sensational, emotionalizing media coverage of Islamist scenes. Exaggerating their dangerousness may bolster a scene's radicalization and thereby contribute to state repression. Since this may foster the narrative of Muslim victimhood and impact the local Islamist scene's structure, journalists should also be aware of their contribution to the questionable mediatization of security politics. Importantly, journalists covering Islamist scenes composed of Salafis and legalists face the dilemma of a strong audience-oriented focus on Salafis exaggerating their dangerousness, which may cause hostile attitudes toward Islam among both populist politicians and citizens, backing the legalists' accusation of Islamophobia. However, Salafis' dangerousness and even their public comeback may remain unrecognized when journalists do not cover Islamism because of the fear of being blamed for or indeed inducing hostility toward Islam.

Moreover, journalists oriented toward a mass audience risk neglecting the nonviolent part of the Islamist scene. However, if this part is the object of undifferentiated media coverage of terrorism, individuals refusing political violence may feel criminalized and be more likely to turn to violence (Baugut & Neumann, 2020). On the one hand, scrutinizing nonviolent Salafis and legalists without any association with terrorism seems to contribute to preventing Islamism. On the other hand, one may question whether market-driven editorial offices will refrain from maximizing audience attention by linking their reports on nonviolent Islamists to terrorism.

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