

# MIRAD – Power and Marginalisation

Constructions of Masculinity, Islamist Radicalisation and Counter-Models in the Digital Age

*A collaborative research project funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR)*

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**Project duration: 1 October 2026 – 30 September 2029**

How does masculinity become a gateway to Islamist radicalisation – and how can it be countered with something that demonstrably works? To this end, the collaborative project MIRAD combines a large-scale empirical survey – a representative survey of 700 to 1,000 young Muslims, around 40 qualitative interviews and a systematic analysis of the digital sphere – with the development of gender-equitable counter-narratives drawn from within the Islamic tradition itself, whose effectiveness is then scientifically tested in a purpose-built intervention study. MIRAD thus takes a decisive step beyond existing research: it does not stop at analysis, and understands itself explicitly as a solution-oriented research project at the interface of theology, social science and prevention practice.

## The starting point

Debates on Islamist radicalisation focus in particular on young men with a Muslim background. Experiences of exclusion, powerlessness and humiliation, together with an unmet search for recognition, are regarded as central drivers of the turn towards Islamist milieus. Gender is not a side issue here but constitutive: images of masculinity built on dominance, control and authoritarian roles can become amplifiers of a readiness for radicalisation and violence.

MIRAD works from a more differentiated assumption: “masculinity” is not a uniform but a **contested** concept. Authoritarian, hegemonic models based on superiority and demarcation stand opposed to egalitarian, caring and responsibility-oriented ones. Precisely because hegemonic masculinity rests on strength and invulnerability, it reacts with particular sensitivity to powerlessness and devaluation – and can thereby become a vehicle for resentment and the symbolic restoration of “wounded masculinity”. It is in this plurality that the key to prevention lies.

## Our approach: from analysis to effective prevention

MIRAD combines four complementary perspectives around **one** guiding question: what role do different constructions of masculinity – in interplay with humiliation, religious interpretation and digital self-staging – play in Islamist radicalisation processes, and how can egalitarian counter-models be made effective? No single discipline can answer this question. It requires the interlocking of quantitative-empirical, theological-hermeneutic, ideology-critical-comparative and milieu-specific qualitative approaches.

The consortium understands religion not as a problem but as a **resource**: it draws on intra-Islamic sources for gender-equitable models of masculinity, translates them into credible counter-narratives that connect with the everyday realities of young men, and makes them visible in theology, social work, educational institutions and digital publics.

## At the heart: the intervention study

What sets MIRAD apart is the move from insight to verified impact. In an experimental intervention and effectiveness study – rare in this field – gender-sensitive digital counter-narratives (short video clips,

Instagram formats and interactive stories) are developed and tested for their impact in a pre-post design. The content draws directly on the intra-Islamic resources opened up by the consortium's theological work and is disseminated via the established practice project "Muslim aktiv und weltoffen".

Impact is measured on two levels: at the level of attitudes (through the experimental design and post-exposure focus groups) and at the level of dissemination (through reach, engagement and resonance indicators). This produces robust knowledge about which forms and content of digital counter-narratives actually work preventively or de-radicalisingly – rather than merely being well-intentioned.

## **The consortium: four interlocking subprojects**

The four subprojects are not placed side by side additively; they are interwoven from the outset through a shared theoretical framework, a common system of categories and continuous exchange.

### **Subproject I – Islamist radicalisation, resentment and constructions of masculinity (University of Münster)**

Project leadership: Prof. Dr Mouhanad Khorchide and Abdulkерim Şenel, M.Ed. (doctorate within the project)

The consortium's empirical and intervention-oriented core project examines the reciprocal relationship between experiences of humiliation and constructions of masculinity – testing two directions of effect empirically against each other: do experiences of humiliation encourage a turn towards dominance-oriented masculinity? Or does an already internalised, power-oriented notion of masculinity itself increase susceptibility to humiliation? Building on a representative online survey of 700 to 1,000 young Muslims, some 40 qualitative interviews and an analysis of relevant social-media content (TikTok, YouTube, Instagram), the subproject culminates in the development and experimental effectiveness testing of the digital counter-narratives. It connects directly to the "Graz Data Report" (Khorchide & Şenel, in press) – with the pivotal finding that specific hegemonic masculinity norms explain Islamist attitudes more strongly than religiosity.

### **Subproject II – Islamic sources as a resource for modern constructions of masculinity (University of Münster)**

Lead and implementation: Prof. Dr Mouhanad Khorchide

The theological key resource of the consortium opens up the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions through a historical-critical, context-sensitive hermeneutics, examining their gender-related anthropology and ethics. At its centre is the reconstruction of intra-Islamic alternatives grounded in care, justice, self-reflection, responsibility and an egalitarian gender relationship – forming a well-founded counter-model to the authoritarian, masculinist narratives of Islamist ideologies. The findings feed directly into the counter-narratives of Subproject I and are validated for their relevance to the everyday realities of young Muslims through focus groups with practitioners from educational work, youth work and pastoral care.

### **Subproject III – Islamism and the manosphere in comparison (University of Passau)**

Lead: Prof. Dr Karin Stögner

An ideology-critical juxtaposition of constructions of masculinity and femininity in Islamism and the manosphere – two anti-democratic worldviews that spread primarily through digital channels and hold a lasting appeal for young people. The subproject sharpens the distinction between what is specifically Islamist and what follows broader dynamics of gender-based and authoritarian radicalisation.

### **Subproject IV – Turkish-Islamic milieus (Catholic University of Applied Sciences NRW, Aachen)**

Lead: Prof. Dr Stephan Grigat · Dr Ismail Küpeli

A milieu-specific reconstruction of constructions of masculinity and gender in Turkish-Islamic contexts within the field of tension between nationalism and Islamism. The subproject contextualises the consortium's findings and develops scientifically grounded recommendations for prevention and educational practice.

## **Transfer into practice**

In MIRAD, transfer into practice is not an add-on but part of the design. The findings feed directly into imam training and religious education and are developed further together with a broad network from education, prevention and civil society – including the North Rhine-Westphalia State Agency for Civic Education, the state programme Wegweiser NRW, the CJD and numerous other education and prevention providers. The aim is to enable religious professionals and multipliers to counter radicalisation offers early on with well-founded, credible alternatives drawn from the religious tradition itself.

## **Coordination and project leadership**

Coordination of the overall project lies with Prof. Dr Mouhanad Khorchide at the Faculty of Islamic Theology of the University of Münster.

The Münster-based Subproject I is led by Prof. Dr. Mouhanad Khorchide and Abdulkерim Şenel, M.Ed.

## **Cooperation and contact**

MIRAD brings together recognised expertise in Islamic theology, radicalisation and gender research, and in the development and evaluation of digital prevention formats. We welcome exchange with academia, educational institutions, providers of prevention and youth work, as well as public administration and civil society. We are glad to be available for cooperation enquiries, lectures, professional training and joint transfer formats.

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