



**Online-Beratung
zu religiös begründetem
Extremismus**

Experiences of online
counselling in the field of
religiously motivated extremism

Summer 2019



Türkische Gemeinde in Deutschland
Almanya Türk Toplumu



The project is supported by the Turkish Community in Germany (TGD). It has set up and operates EMEL, the online counselling service. SABIL is implemented in cooperation with the Turkish Community in Schleswig-Holstein (TGS-H) and in cooperation with PROvention, the local state prevention and advisory centre against religiously motivated extremism.

The Turkish Community in Germany (TGD) was founded in 1995 to represent the interests of people of Turkish origin living in Germany. As an ideologically neutral association, the TGD represents people who—regardless of their actual ethnic and religious affiliations—are directly affected by the current debates on Islam and religiously motivated extremism. The TGD has always been firmly opposed to any form of extremism and social polarisation. As a supporter and partner of migrant and Muslim organisations, the TGD also supports the interests and social and political participation of marginalised people. It aims to bring about a lively immigrant society, one which is diverse and visibly represented in institutions, politics and the media. The TGD has extensive practical experience in prevention work against religiously motivated extremism, both through the project Prevention Network against religiously motivated extremism and through the online counselling services of EMEL and SABIL.

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1. Introduction

With its Online counselling against religiously motivated extremism, launched in January 2019, The Turkish Community in Germany (TGD) has created a unique and innovative counselling service. The online counselling service sees itself as a complementary service to the already existing and established counselling landscape in Germany and Europe. Those seeking advice can now seek support via e-mail or chat on top of the offers of face-to-face counselling in the field of religiously motivated extremism.

The aim of online counselling is to reach, above all, people who have barely been reached by the previous counselling services in the field of religiously motivated extremism.

This brochure serves as an interim report in which we would like to present our initial experiences in developing and implementing our online counselling services in the field of religiously motivated extremism. Many people are not (yet) aware of how counselling in the online sector works and what special features and potentials it has. That is why we would like to use this brochure to explain the background, approaches and methods of online counselling in general.

Furthermore, we would also like to provide specific insights into our work to date and the experience we have already gained. What approaches and intentions are we pursuing with our online counselling? What were the challenges we have had to deal with? And what do our attempts to guarantee the best possible counselling for our clients look like?

It should be noted, however, that our online counselling service has only been available for a short period of time and is still in the consolidation phase. For this reason, the experience and knowledge reported here are not yet generally representative.

2. From the idea to the project:

background and baseline position

In face-to-face counselling, working together with parents and other secondarily affected people has established itself as an important component in the prevention of religiously motivated extremism. Building on these experiences, TGD's online counselling is aimed primarily at parents of Turkish origin, but also those of Arab and German origin, who fear that their children could become or have already become radicalised.

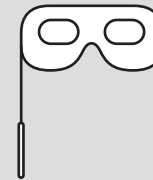
Particularly for the target groups of parents of Turkish and Arab origin, so far, only a few specific counselling services are available, such as those in the designated languages, which are embedded in the general counselling structures and are committed to upholding the quality standards of online counselling. The need to reach these target groups in particular is extremely high: empirical studies very clearly show that there are a disproportionate number of young people among those leaving Syria, for example, who have an Islamic cultural background, but who have so far had hardly any dealings with their religion. This means that there is a danger if – because of their new situation – they turn more strongly to religion and get involved in groups that propagate views that are problematic (e.g. antipluralistic, pejorative and exclusionary). In contrast to young people with a solid religious background, they tend to be less resilient to such standpoints.



The TGD is aware of many cases in which parents react in a confused, frightened and aggressive way when their offspring start to take an interest in Islamic issues. In less religious families, parents and relatives often find it difficult to decide how to regard the change in their child's behaviour. Often, major concerns about the child are associated with uncertainties regarding how to handle the situation.

This often this leads to family conflicts, which can lead to the loss of the parental authority regarding how to raise the child and to the child turning to possibly problematic groups. Such family conflicts are then exploited by these groups, who can make young people more loyal to and more dependent on them.

The aim of the Turkish Community in Germany was, therefore, to create a new online service that would also offer these anxious parents a protected space in which they can find individual ways of resolving existing conflicts in a joint process. The specific religious, cultural and linguistic needs and sensitivities of this target group should, at the same time, be taken into account.



3. Proximity despite distance:

the potentials, effects and workings of online counselling

Online counselling can get by without any personal data being given at all. It therefore constitutes a low-threshold approach, one which can be particularly advantageous if people cannot or do not wish to seek counselling because of fear, immobility or social pressure, for example. In an online counselling session, they do not have to turn up in person anywhere, nor do they have to reveal their voice. The anonymity of the counselling format thus not only makes it easier for those seeking advice to seek support in sensitive and taboo areas, but can even lead to a certain level of disinhibitedness: people often write much more freely about what concerns them. In line with the motto »proximity despite distance«, many people find it easier to open up if the other person is not actually there in person. This can further strengthen the development of a trustworthy counselling constellation.

The medium of writing is at the forefront of online counselling. Written communication is limited in comparison to face-to-face consultations (facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, speaking speed and volume are missing – all of which helps to interpret what is being said). But besides the effect of disinhibition due to anonymity, writing also offers other specific advantages. Writing, for example, has been shown to have a therapeutic effect. Writing can be a preliminary vent: the person seeking advice has »got something off their chest«. In principle, writing slows down communication, thus encouraging reflection. At the same time, what has been written can also be reflected on. Writing forces those seeking advice to put their thoughts into words and to describe their situation more precisely. This way they themselves deal with the topic in much more depth. It is, therefore, possible for the person seeking advice to look repeatedly at what has been written and to re-read what the counsellor has replied or how the person seeking advice has felt and described their personal situations. In some cases, those seeking advice do not even need to get a direct answer, as the writing process has already helped them to clarify their situation.



In order to be able to make use of this therapeutic effect, however, it is necessary that a certain amount of trust is placed in the online counselling service. What happens to my data? Is anyone else reading my messages? Will I get myself or any of my relatives into trouble if I make contact? These and similar questions may buzz around in the minds of a lot of people seeking advice when they approach an online counselling service. It was, therefore, crucial for us to lay a good foundation for establishing a confidential relationship through a high level of professionalism and transparency from the outset. This initially included developing a data protection concept of our own.

4. Trust as our most valuable asset:

data protection and confidentiality in online counselling

When the online counselling services were initially being implemented, the technical implementation and the creation of a data protection concept were particularly challenging. This interim report will deal with the latter; the experience gained with regard to the technical implementation will be discussed in a final report on the project.



Data protection concept of online counselling against religiously motivated extremism

The fundamental question that has accompanied the project from the start is the transferability of data protection and confidentiality of a counselling session from the face-to-face context into the context of an online counselling session. In online counselling, the door cannot simply be »shut« as it can in the face-to-face context, and a confidential conversation is conducted. Asynchronous conversations have to be stored in some form, otherwise communication is not possible. However, storage always goes hand in hand with questions relating to data protection. That is why concrete prerequisites have to be fulfilled in order to be able to offer a trustworthy online counselling service.



The online counselling services of EMEL and SABIL are based on the principle of confidentiality. The topic being counselled on is a very sensitive one for both the public and security authorities, which is why it is also necessary to develop a reliable basis for the counselling work, such as an appropriate confidentiality agreement and crisis intervention guidelines.



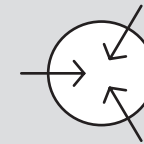
Due to this fundamental importance of data security, an independent symposium on the topic entitled Data protection, confidentiality and counselling practice was organised. Within its framework, various topics and challenges were discussed and data protection standards defined, such as the development of a data protection concept, data protection in connection with systemic work in online counselling and the handling of security-relevant aspects in the field of counselling.

In the process of implementing data protection, a data protection officer was charged with developing a data protection concept in accordance with the project objectives and counselling mandate. These, as well as the corresponding terms of use, can, of course be viewed freely on the online counselling platforms EMEL and SABIL. So as to ensure that the counsellors also have a comprehensive grasp of the issue of data protection, they have received extensive training on the subject.

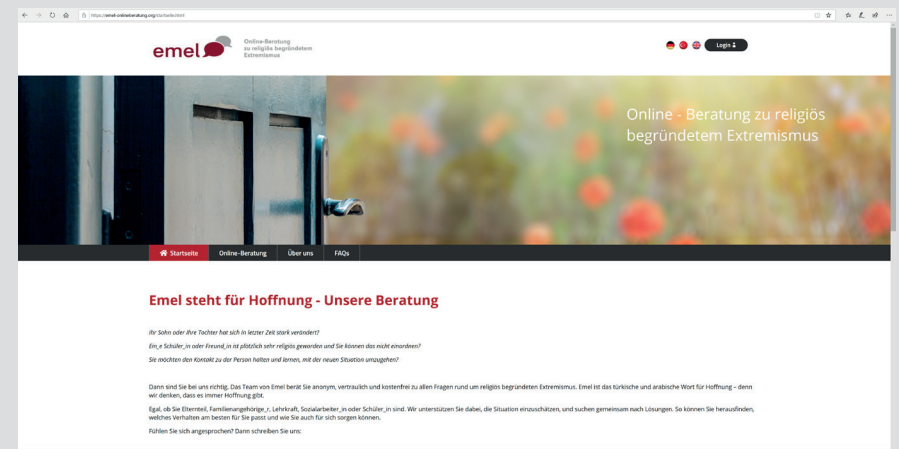


5. Our counselling services: EMEL and SABIL

In the course of drawing up the online counselling service, establishing two independent services for the target groups proved to be the sensible thing to do.

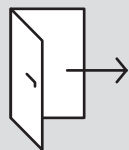


Emel – The first online counselling centre in the field of religiously motivated extremism at all represents online counselling on religiously motivated extremism. It was founded in January 2019 and addresses all people with questions, worries, fears and concerns about religious extremism, in particular parents, family members, teachers, social pedagogues and school social workers, but also those interested in the topic. EMEL is run by The Turkish Community in Germany, which is headquartered in Berlin.

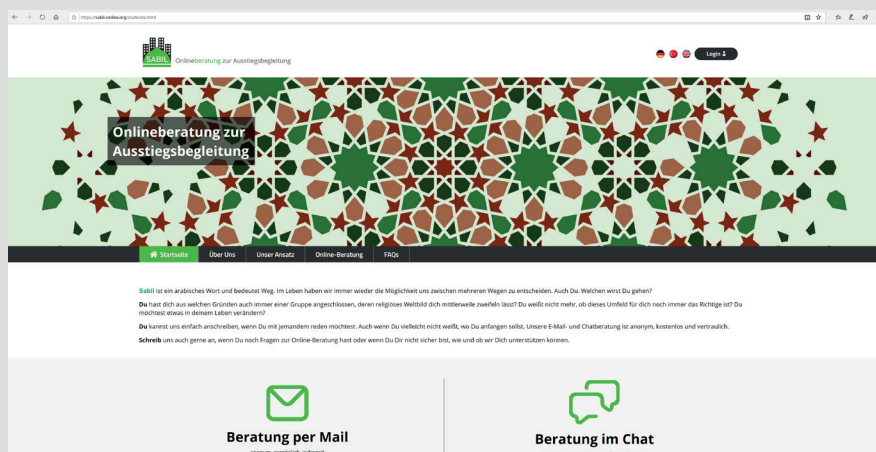


www.emel-onlineberatung.org

The second available service is the SABIL counselling centre. SABIL is an online counselling service for those seeking to exit extremism and is run by the Turkish Community in Schleswig-Holstein.



Sabil – Online counselling for those seeking to exit extremism was launched in May 2019. The counselling team advises and supports all people wishing to liberate themselves from the religiously motivated extremist scene and turn to the counselling centre with their concerns. They are given help to develop new perspectives and opportunities for change and encouraged to find their own solutions to their concerns, fears and questions, as well as a possible desire for change in their lives.

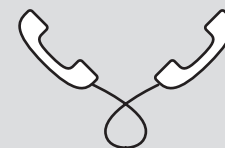


www.sabil-online.org

In summary, online counselling (indirectly) enables people affected by religiously motivated extremism – such as parents, relatives or actors in the social space and those interested in the topic, as well as people who wish to break away from the religiously motivated extremist scene – to receive counselling if they cannot access conventional counselling services or if they have reservations about them. In this sense, it does not regard itself as competing with the existing counselling services but as complementing them. It cannot be ruled out that, in the course of the counselling process, reference is also made to face-to-face counselling should it appear helpful.

6. Individual, strengthening and holistic: the systemic counselling approach

Wie die meisten Beratungsstellen zu religiös begründetem Extremismus arbeiten auch die Onlineberatungsstellen SABIL und EMEL nach dem systemischen Ansatz.



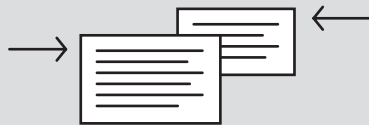
Starting from the basic assumption that every person can develop their own solutions, the counselling searches for conditions under which those seeking advice can discover, use and activate their own strengths and resources so as to arrive at their own solutions and goals with the aid of the counsellors. Systemic also means that the people seeking advice are not advised independently of their system, i.e. the people seeking advice are given advice in the context of their (social) environment. There are no universal or »one-size-fits-all« solutions. The person's respective individual situation is taken into consideration. The people seeking advice are recognised as experts regarding their own situation. The counsellors turn their attention to the social interconnectedness of human beings. Thus people's behaviour is not viewed in isolation from their inner qualities, but rather from the point of view of their relationships and interactions with each other and with their system environment, such as with their own family, relatives and friends. All participants are part of the system and have a specific function. Systemic counsellors do not evaluate or value the system, so it is not a question of assigning blame. Instead, they observe and describe how someone behaves and what exactly he or she does. The view from the outside is meant to stimulate a process of reflection that helps the people seeking advice to become capable of acting again and developing new perspectives and possibilities for change. Although it is more difficult to work in the field of systemic online counselling with proven methods from systemic counselling, such as constellations (e.g. family board) and drawings (e.g. lifeline, genogram), due to the spatial separation, the already mentioned therapeutic writing is a great benefit.

7. Building trust and reflection:

methods of counselling

The primary aim of online counselling is to establish a trusting relationship with those seeking advice. To guarantee this, we also orient our counselling on the basic attitude of online counselling, which is derived, among other things, from the basic systemic attitude and incorporates the following values:

Neutrality and curiosity, empathy and appreciation, congruence and transparency as well as constructivism¹. In online counselling, however, it is not only one's own attitude that plays an essential role. According to the famous saying that »first impressions count«, it is especially important with regard to online counselling that the trust of those seeking advice is reinforced with the initial response. Depending on the type of inquiry, we decide how detailed an (initial) answer will be formulated. It may initially be a matter of a request that appears to involve a request for information, but it may also be an attempt to make contact in order to write about other needs.



As a rule, e-mail counselling processes consist of either 1 to 5 contacts, in this case a short-term e-mail consultation. People seeking advice often stop corresponding after just a few e-mails, because their concerns have been clarified, the initial responses are sufficient or they have been relieved of the acute pressure and see no further need to maintain contact. Long-term e-mail counselling, on the other hand, usually consists of 15 to 25 contacts, resulting in a more intensive exchange of a psychosocial counselling nature.

The counsellors' initial response may be decisive in determining whether the person seeking advice will reply. As a rule, an initial response includes an explanation of the framework conditions of the online counselling process. They include the counsellor introducing him- or herself, acknowledgement that the person seeking advice has

contacted the online counselling centre, and an indication of what online counselling can achieve and where its limits lie. In essence, however, it is a matter of responding to the concerns of those seeking advice and reflecting to them what the counsellor has understood and perceived so far. The initial response concludes by inviting the person seeking advice to write back.

An initial answer can be structured as follows:

- *Acknowledging the contact/allowing the client to »settle in«*
- *Counsellor presents him- or herself*
- *Explaining the framework conditions*
- *Responding to concerns, clarifying questions*
- *Mirroring feelings*
- *Clarification of the mandate*
- *Explaining the consultation procedure*
- *Invitation for a further response*

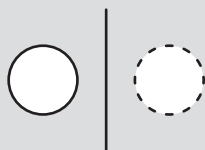
Becoming a counsellor

The counsellors of the two online counselling centres of EMEL and SABIL work methodically and professionally according to their expertise and specific concepts that emanate from online counselling. Since online counselling is usually purely text-based, this demands that the counsellors be specially qualified to enable them to handle that. They now have to read rather than listen and write rather than speak. Besides their actual professional and counselling skills, they also have to have appropriate media skills and Internet experience. To be able to do justice to the special requirements of online counselling, which is so far only usual practice in a few counselling facilities, the advisors did the certified further training course relating to online counselling. This guarantees that the counselling team works in line with the current quality standards and methodical concepts, such as the 4-slide concept. The 4-slide concept is a proven and tested online counselling concept. It focuses



on the way in which the initial contact can be made by e-mail so as to gradually establish a relationship with the person seeking advice – which is indispensable for successful counselling.

It is also particularly relevant in online counselling to combat religiously motivated extremism, also with regard to the intention of reaching parents and relatives of Turkish, German and Arab origin and to read and answer enquiries from a point of view that is sensitive towards both culture and religion. For this purpose, the counsellors also underwent a specially designed 6-module training series on the topic of Counselling practice in the field of religiously motivated extremism.



8. Reflecting on one's own role: reflection chats as a quality standard

Besides training, the continuous training and support of counsellors is a key prerequisite for providing high-quality and methodically sound counselling services. For this purpose, case reflections are offered at regular intervals to the counsellors of the online counselling projects. In these sessions, they have the chance to exchange and reflect among themselves, in a chat, on a specific counselling case from their own online counselling practice. A qualified mentor assists with this exchange and acts as supervisor. As a rule, the reflection chats last approximately 90 minutes and take the form of a scheduled moderated group chat. One major advantage of the reflection chat is that it is independent with regard to time and place, as the counsellors need not travel anywhere specific for the case discussion, but rather they can participate in the online supervision from their own workplace.

What is the aim of the reflection chats?

Among other things, the reflection chat offers space for one's own concerns, for unresolved questions, challenges and/or one's own uncertainties – for example, how one could have acted differently in

a certain case or what intervention options are available according to the perspective of the other participants. The aim of the reflection chats is, among other things, to reflect on one's own actions and to receive new ideas and suggestions as to how one can work methodically within the framework of online counselling. The reflection chats thus contribute significantly to quality development and quality assurance with regard to one's own online counselling practice.

Example of how a case reflection works

Within the framework of case reflection, the topics that are to be reflected on in the chat are collated and defined in advance. For example, in one case reflection, the topic of »the breaking off of contact« was dealt with in depth. One female counsellor reported a case in which the client did not report back after receiving the initial reply. This made the counsellor feel insecure, as she did not know the reasons for this and, due to the anonymity of the counselling, she had no opportunity to ask the client. This is a very typical phenomenon in the context of online counselling and was an ideal topic to be reflected on in a group chat. The counsellor initially assumed her client might have felt misunderstood and dissatisfied with her reply and had not, therefore, contacted her. Her objective of the reflection was to find out if there could have been other reasons for the breaking off of contact.

In the case of text-based counselling, one can read up on one's own case at any time, so that the counsellors can once again deal in depth with the contents of the counselling. That is why the counsellor, along with her colleagues and the mentor, took another look at how the counselling went. In this particular case, one of the issues was that a social worker from a youth institution was unsure about how to deal with the changing behaviour of a young person he was looking after. The social worker feared that the young person might develop extreme religious attitudes and convictions and adopt a corresponding ideology. In the group chat, the counsellor's reply was first examined with regard to possible interventions and critically reflected upon. The counsellor thus received new ideas for her own counselling work. Overall, her response was assessed as being very appreciative and conducive to building trust. In the context of the case reflection, the following reasons were thus also discussed and they also debated why the client may not have written back any more.



The client didn't contact the counsellor any more because

- *he was not aware that in order to read the reply he had to log back in to the virtual helpdesk and/or had lost his access data*
- *the client had sent the request to several counselling centres at the same time and had already received a satisfactory reply and no longer felt the need to react*
- *a technical error had occurred: the login did not work and the client did not know how (via which communication channel) to inform the counsellor of this*
- *the client already feels relieved through simply writing down his or her concerns*
- *the client did not dare to enter further into any (more in-depth) counselling contact*
- *the client was satisfied with the answer, but did not see any reason for feedback due to the setting (non-binding offer) (some only give feedback if they are dissatisfied or do not feel sufficiently understood/advised)*

In addition, it is often the case with online counselling that clients do not contact us again until after a longer period of time or a few months have elapsed.

For the counsellor, the case reflection was thus very useful, as she was able to re-evaluate and regard the breaking off of the contact in a different light. She was also able to develop further ideas on how she could optimise dialogue design and relationship contact in an initial response in the future.

What was and is exciting for the counsellors, is that they experience what it is like to be a person seeking advice when they take on that role in the context of the online case reflection. A beneficial change of perspective takes place. Likewise, the act of writing itself already offers a structuring and reflexive moment – as it does for the person seeking advice. The participants are called upon to deal with the description of their concerns and the associated questions or problems more intensively. They need to be much more explicit about what their real concern is in this supervision session and often, by writing, answer many questions without having been aware of them before. The reflection process thus already takes place during the writing and re-evaluating phase. This was also true of the case described above.

Furthermore, the reflection chat is documented in a chat report, which can be read by all participants and reflected on again at any time. Thus documenting the process serves quality assurance and represents an additional added value for counselling practice.



9. Outlook: challenges and experiences

For the coming project phase, two topics in particular that seem to be particularly relevant due to the experiences had so far and that should be focused on will be identified. They are a) data protection and b) case reflection. Both topics have already been acknowledged in this interim report. Nevertheless, further challenges and opportunities have been identified so that these issues remain important.

Data protection

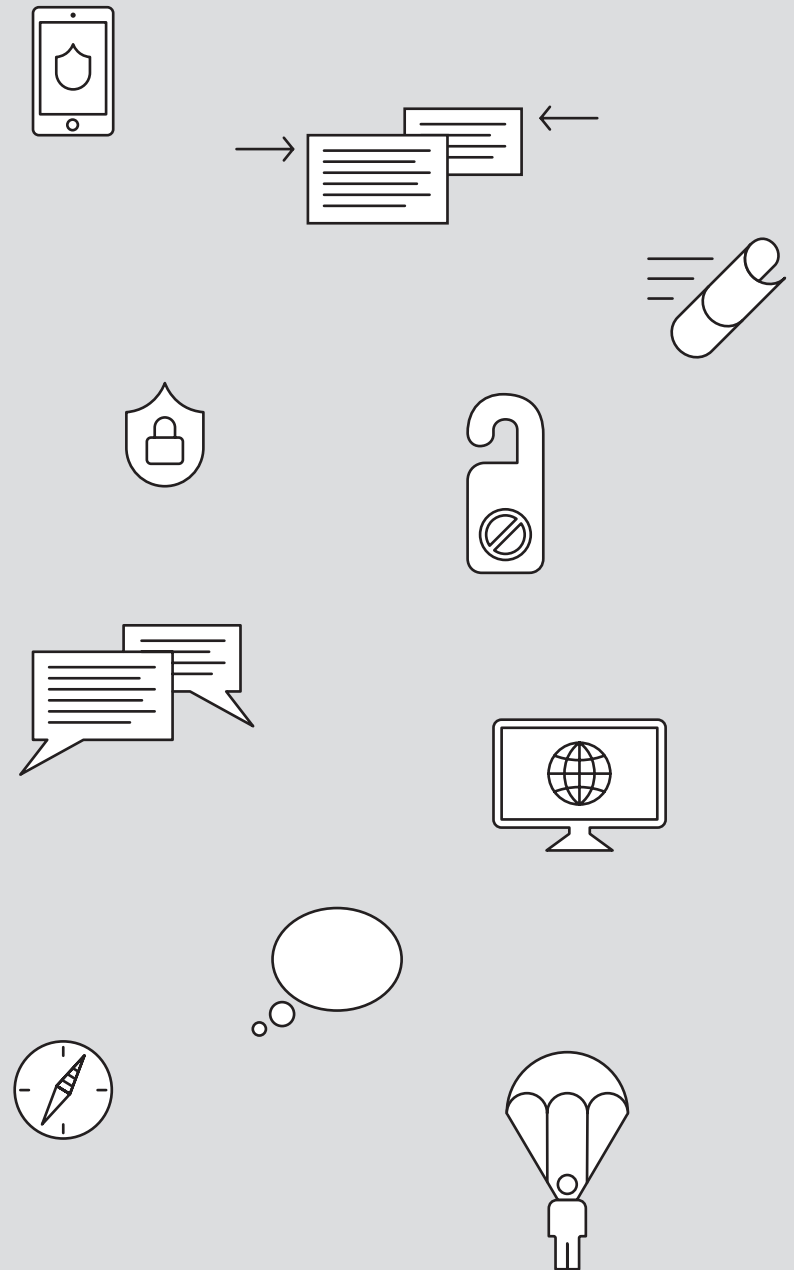
Although the GDPR has been applicable since 25 May 2018, no uniform case law has yet been established. Accordingly, developments here have to be pursued further. Moreover, the issue of religiously motivated extremism is so sensitive that it is particularly important for online counselling services to remain up-to-date. This is all the

more crucial because the introduction of the GDPR and the misconduct of large platforms have increased society's awareness of data security and the protection of one's own data. That is why online counselling services cannot allow themselves to be in any doubt that the data of those seeking advice are not sufficiently protected. In order to increase the confidence of those seeking advice and to sensitise them with regard to the topic of the protection of their own data, embedding the video explanation on the subject of data protection on the home page and/or referring to the gate browser and/or making other offers to show how those seeking advice can guarantee their anonymity are being considered.

Case reflection

Since online counselling is still new with regard to this topic and there are still few comparable offers available, further focus lies on case reflection. The counsellors are confronted with previously little-known situations, so it is vital to reflect, in detail, on how they proceeded, what alternatives might have been possible and what went wrong if anything did.

At the same time, during the case reflection in the (group) chat, one should examine whether this is possibly a procedure that can be extended and also offered to external parties. Smaller counselling centres in the field of extremism prevention in particular cannot supervise their counsellors regularly. By means of a (free) online service within the framework of online counselling, case reflection can improve the quality of counselling nationwide and also make online counselling better known. This leads directly to the third central topic.



10. Imprint

publisher Türkische Gemeinde in Deutschland e.V. (TGD)
Obentrautstraße 72
10963 Berlin
www.tgd.de
info@tgd.de

&

Türkische Gemeinde in Schleswig-Holstein e.V.
(TGS-H)
Elisabethstraße 59
24143 Kiel
www.tgsh.de
info@tgsh.de

design Jan Henrik Arnold, Henry Hajdu

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V.I.S.D.P. Gökay Sofuoğlu, Atila Karabörklü

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