

An indictment provides an unusually detailed account of how Ismail Issa, 24, ended up under arrest on suspicion of supporting jihadists.

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German Shopping Spree Brings Terrorism Charge

By MELISSA EDDY OCT. 29, 2014

BERLIN — The authorities were watching Ismail Issa when he returned to Germany last year for an unusual shopping spree: four sports watches from the discounter Aldi for 28 euros; 10 pairs of ranger pants in various sizes from an online United States Army supply shop for €189.90; a night-vision device from a Stuttgart hunting shop for €4,018, or about \$5,118.

The items, among others, were found in bags and backpacks in a red Ford station wagon that Mr. Issa and a friend were driving to Syria when the police stopped them at a rest area on suspicion of supporting a terrorist group.

In an 81-page sealed indictment, obtained by The New York Times, prosecutors present an unusually detailed account of what brought Mr. Issa, 24, to that rest stop on Nov. 13. The document, which prosecutors said rested heavily on information that Mr. Issa gave to the police after his arrest, serves as a road map to radicalization, tracing a young man's evolution from an alienated immigrant in Germany to a trusted supplier for an Islamic extremist group in Syria.

The indictment describes the way in which jihadist volunteers are smuggled into Syria from Turkey, their preparation for battle in training camps and their use in the militant cause. Although Mr. Issa's path is "pretty typical" of that taken by many foreigners heading to Syria, according to Peter Neumann, director of the International Center for the Study of

Radicalization at King's College London, the case nevertheless provides the kind of information that the authorities hope they can use to keep others from following a similar course.

Like hundreds of other young men, the indictment says, Mr. Issa was enticed by the message of jihad to abandon the decadence of Western society and fight in Syria.

“Wait until you know how badly one wants to be part of it, and then you will know how hard it is when you are not,” he said in a phone message to his friend while trying to get back to Syria to join a raging battle, the indictment says.

Smuggled into Syria from Turkey, Mr. Issa was trained for combat and found himself in the ranks of a group believed to have since joined with the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL. But he was wounded, and his path took an unplanned turn.

His commanders ordered him back to Germany, not to commit mayhem or to recruit other fighters, but to shop.

According to the indictment, the police found a small notebook in Mr. Issa's belongings that included handwritten shopping lists: the names of 10 men with their jacket and pant sizes; medical items; night-vision devices; books; and sweets. Receipts were also found, the police said.

Mr. Issa's trial is set to open in Stuttgart on Nov. 5. The case comes amid heightened fears about security threats from returning jihadists. In Germany, more than 450 people have left the country for Syria since the fighting began, and about 130 have returned, security officials said. About 25 are believed to have battlefield experience. Prosecutors said they had begun more than 140 investigations related to Islamic extremism, often involving more than one suspect.

In a closed hearing after Mr. Issa's arrest, he acknowledged his involvement and later gave the police details of his movements, prosecutors said. Under German law, no pleas are entered until trial. His lawyers declined requests for interviews.

Mr. Issa has been held in a state prison since his arrest. If convicted, he

faces up to 10 years in prison, the maximum under German law.

The indictment by federal prosecutors depicts Mr. Issa's life from his childhood as an immigrant in Germany through Aug. 22, 2013, when he boarded a plane in Düsseldorf for Gaziantep, Turkey, to join the jihadist cause.

Raised with five siblings by his mother, he barely knew his father, who stayed in Lebanon and died in 2000, the indictment says.

He left school at 17; held temporary jobs; married his girlfriend, who was pregnant; and moved to Sweden. The couple split when the pregnancy failed, and by 2010, Mr. Issa was back with his mother in Stuttgart, working at a KFC and a bakery.

The indictment says he tried to return to school, but instead turned to drugs. Around then, the indictment says, he started attending the Khalid Bin Walid Mosque in Stuttgart, falling in thrall to preachers of a radical form of Islam that rejects Western society and praises holy war.

German security officials who monitor Islamic extremist activity say young Muslim men, many of them underemployed or out of work, are particularly vulnerable to recruitment, now done primarily through the Internet or social media. More than half of those leaving to fight in Syria are 15 to 30 years old. Barely a quarter have finished school.

“Radical Islamic networks serve as a substitute family,” said Götz Nordbruch, who works with Ufuq.de, an outreach group for Muslim youth in Berlin.

By late 2012, the indictment says, Mr. Issa felt duty bound to fight in Syria. He made a pilgrimage to Mecca along with several extremists and, soon after his return to Germany, flew to Turkey. A contact arranged by his pilgrimage companions instructed him to take a bus to Kilis, a border town about an hour away.

There, the indictment says, another contact picked him up and took him to a house in a nearby village. The document describes Mr. Issa as telling the police that he had to hand over his passport to rebels for background and identity checks.

Two weeks later, two men smuggled him into Syria. He was again questioned at a checkpoint run by the Free Syrian Army, an insurgent group, near Azaz, which fell to the Islamic State around the time of his arrival. When a commander gave the go-ahead, he moved to a training camp in the hills near Atman.

The camp was led by a Chechen commander of the Muhajireen Brigade, a group now believed to have joined with the Islamic State. Volunteers train for about a month before they join in battles, Mr. Issa told the police.

“It is not like you think,” Mr. Issa told a friend who asked him about fighting in Syria in a phone call recorded by German investigators. “Before you are allowed to take part, you first have to undergo instruction and training.”

Mr. Issa learned how to handle weapons, underwent physical training and studied a radical form of Islam. Graduates were allowed to work at checkpoints around the camp.

Mr. Issa said he moved on to a camp near Anadan, where he joined 40 to 60 others. Prosecutors say he took part in several house-to-house battles on the outskirts of Aleppo before he injured his left wrist so severely that he could not handle a gun. Details of the injury were not provided.

Using recruits considered “a little bit useless” to make a run for supplies available only in Europe is not uncommon, said Mr. Neumann of King’s College London. But winter was coming, and the unit needed supplies. Mr. Issa’s commander ordered him to return to Germany to shop.

Exchanges of chat messages with his brother and friends, obtained by German intelligence officials and cited in the indictment, indicate that Mr. Issa had been disappointed to leave the fighting. Nevertheless, on Oct. 21 he flew to Amsterdam from Istanbul and then transferred to a flight to Stuttgart. Soon after, the authorities, following a tip, began investigating him.

Records of his phone messages show that Mr. Issa remained in constant touch with his contacts in Syria during his weeks in Germany. He sent them pictures of camouflage clothing over the messaging service WhatsApp. They

urged him to hurry back.

“How’s it going, brother, when are you coming back, inshallah?” Mr. Issa’s contact in Syria wrote in a message found by investigators. On Nov. 6, Mr. Issa messaged that he would return in 10 days. He had persuaded Mohammad Ayubi, 38, a German born in Afghanistan whom he met during the pilgrimage, to join him.

According to court documents, Mr. Ayubi has denied the charge of supporting a terrorist organization, which carries a possible sentence of five years. His lawyer did not respond to calls seeking comment.

In one of their final exchanges before their departure, as the battle between insurgents and government forces raged in and around Aleppo, Mr. Ayubi sent Mr. Issa a coded message, the indictment says. He was ready, he said, to “sing in the choir.”

“There is a mega concert today and I’m here” in Germany, Mr. Issa replied. He added, “I could cry.”

A few hours into their ride, at a rest area on the highway near Gruibingen, 33 miles southeast of Stuttgart, they were stopped by the German police.

Eric Schmitt contributed reporting from Washington.

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