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KINSHIP AND CRIME

ARABIC-SPEAKING CRIMINAL
NETWORKS IN GERMANY

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This report draws on ethnographic research conducted between 2015 and 2025 as well as extensive interviews and conversations. It examines two overlapping fields: established actors associated with Mardin-origin clans, whose activities are often labelled 'clan crime' in Germany, and newer actors within Syrian criminal groups that gained visibility after 2015. The aim is to trace how these actors develop within criminal markets and how their networks link Germany to the Middle East, particularly Türkiye and Syria.

The term 'clan' is used as a practical translation of the Arabic term '*ashira*', which carries a more specific social meaning in its original context and is discussed in greater detail in this report. Pseudonyms are used for confidential interlocutors, and identifying details have been altered where necessary. Individuals identified in public reporting or official sources are named where relevant.

I am grateful to the interlocutors who shared their experiences and to colleagues for their critical feedback. Any errors are my own.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

'ashira (pl. 'asha'ir)	Clan; a patrilineal kin unit that organizes protection, mediation and access to resources. Several 'asha'ir often form a <i>qabila</i> .
'ayb	Social shame.
bayt (pl. buyut)	Extended family/household; a multigenerational family lineage in which norms, support and discipline are reproduced.
BJA	Germany's Federal Criminal Police Office (Bundeskriminalamt).
'clan crime'/Clankriminalität	A contested public/police label that risks conflating kinship with criminality; used here only when referring to official discourse.
Duldung	'Tolerated stay': a suspension of deportation under German law. It does not entitle residence and often comes with restrictions on work and mobility.
Friedensrichter	German term for an informal community mediator who brokers settlements outside courts; not a judicial office in Germany. See also <i>sulha</i> .
haram	Religiously forbidden; used to describe behaviour or income considered impermissible in Islamic terms.
hawala	Informal value-transfer system based on trusted intermediaries; settlement typically occurs outside the banking system.
Kusawiyya	A regional self-designation used by some people from the <i>Jabal al-Kusa</i> area in the Mardin region, particularly in the Savur district. It denotes geographical origin and collective belonging rather than a single clan or clearly bounded ethnic category.
Lagebilder	Annual police situation reports that synthesize recorded trends, actors, methods and hotspots, and inform policing strategy and public communication.
LKA	A state criminal police office (Landeskriminalamt).
madafa	Guesthouse or 'clan salon' used for hosting, mediation and collective decisions (including in diaspora settings).
Mhallami	Label used in Germany for some Arabic-speaking groups with roots in the Mardin–Beirut context; its origins and categorizations are disputed and usage can conflate distinct identities.
qabila	Tribal confederation or tribe; an umbrella identity that may encompass several clans and sometimes acting as a political or military actor.
sulha	Arabic term for reconciliation or settlement through informal community-based mediation.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report maps two interconnected fields of transnational crime linking Germany to the Middle East: long-established Mardin-origin clans and newer Syrian formations that gained visibility after 2015. It shows how kinship and regional ties enable collaboration across Germany, Türkiye, Lebanon and Syria. The report provides an overview of the phenomenon in Germany and is accompanied by two subsequent studies on drug markets and migrant smuggling involving Mardin-origin actors and Syrian organized crime networks.

The focus is not on entire communities or ethnic groups, but on specific actors and subgroups who use kinship and regional ties to organize criminal cooperation. The analysis does not seek to portray Arab groups or pockets of Arabic-speaking communities in Germany as criminal ethnic groups. Instead, it focuses on kinship structures and the principal criminal activities and networks rather than attributing criminality to ethnicity, nationality or language. The analysis rests on a simple premise: differentiation is not minimization, but is essential to effective, rights-based practice.

Two structurally distinct forms of transnational crime are examined: long-established Mardin-origin clans with roots in south-eastern Türkiye, and emerging Syrian criminal networks organized around kinship and regional ties. The report analyzes how these actors sustain and expand illicit operations across European and Middle Eastern contexts, drawing on strong internal cohesion, kinship-based trust and shared geographic identities. It provides an empirically grounded analysis of their operational dynamics, internal organization and transnational reach.

Over several decades, specific segments of Mardin-origin kinship networks in Germany have become associated with drug trafficking, fraud, property crime and informal value-transfer arrangements (systems for moving money or other assets outside formal financial channels). In this report, 'Mardin-origin clans' refers to kinship-based networks originating from Mardin Province in south-eastern Türkiye – particularly from the village of al-Rashidiya (Turkish: Üçkavak). These kinship groups are Arabic-speaking and shaped by overlapping – often contested – Arab and Kurdish identities.

More recently, certain Syrian formations have become associated with migrant smuggling, local drug retail, theft and regional support networks. For both the Mardin and Syrian actors, the key issue is the operational linkage between local activity in Germany, and partners and facilitators in Türkiye, Lebanon and Syria. Mardin-origin networks also operate elsewhere in Europe, particularly in Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark, while links elsewhere in Europe are less clearly documented.

Public debate around these actors in Germany has been shaped by police reporting and criminal cases that have achieved a certain notoriety involving individuals publicly linked to Mardin-origin clan milieus. The theft of the 'Big Maple Leaf', a large gold coin, from Berlin's Bode Museum in 2017 and the Green Vault burglary in Dresden in 2019 became emblematic examples. Together with drug trafficking, fraud, extortion and informal value-transfer arrangements, such cases fuelled a public and policing narrative around 'Mardin-origin clans' as highly adaptive criminal actors with local roots and transnational reach. That reach is apparent not only in Germany, but also in the operational links some actors maintain with Sweden, Türkiye, Lebanon and other parts of the Middle East. One example is call-centre fraud of the so-called 'false police officer' type (more of which below), in which operations targeting victims in Germany were, in certain instances, organized from Türkiye by actors connected to Mardin-origin networks. Such cases illustrate how these networks can extend beyond local criminal activity through cross-border family ties, logistical support and safe havens linking Germany to the Middle East.

The report addresses four core questions:

1. What is meant by 'clan' in this study, and how does it operate in diasporic contexts – membership, authority, obligation, reciprocity and boundary-making?
2. How can kinship structures and other social networks facilitate, shape or give rise to criminal activities?
3. How are criminal activities organized and coordinated within and across these networks?
4. What combinations of kinship and non-kin ties – online and offline – enable collaboration across Germany, Türkiye, Lebanon and Syria?

The report sets out the conceptual framework, kinship structures and cross-border networking patterns relevant to both the Mardin-origin and Syrian groups, and concludes with evidence-based recommendations for German and European stakeholders. The migrant-smuggling market study that follows will map facilitators, corridors and protection economies, with guidance for rights-compliant practice. The drug-trafficking market study will detail market organization, routes, money flows and leverage points for prevention and enforcement.

Methodology

This report draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Germany (2015–2026), complemented by interdisciplinary projects at several academic institutions.¹ Methods combined participant observation in social and religious settings with confidential interviews involving members of extended families, law-enforcement officials and other stakeholders. All interviews were conducted under conditions of anonymity; identifying details have been altered or omitted to protect participants.

The study incorporates online ethnography with a specific focus on social media. This included observation of public and semi-public channels (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Telegram and WhatsApp groups) and analysis of digital traces such as announcements, reputation signalling and informal market information. Online findings were triangulated with interviews and offline observations.

The report also draws on secondary sources, including media reporting, police publications and international assessments. Access to police investigation materials was limited to four selected cases involving Syrian-origin networks. Systematic access to police files and full court records was unavailable, as data-protection rules and institutional caution can limit access to information.

Given these constraints, the report does not claim to be exhaustive. Rather, it offers a grounded account of clan dynamics, organizational logics, digital communication practices and transnational infrastructures.

Key points

- Activities and markets: Primary activities include drug trafficking (cocaine, cannabis, Captagon), migrant smuggling and call-centre fraud. Value is frequently moved using *hawala*; laundering typically occurs through cash-based channels rather than the formal banking system.
- Mardin-origin trajectories: These actors are multigenerational and locally anchored in Berlin, North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony and Bremen. A younger cohort is increasingly involved in transactional, cross-ethnic networks.
- Syrian formations: More dispersed and adaptive, they operate through reconstituted clan structures and, in parallel, regional non-kin networks that enable rapid coordination and cross-border logistics.
- Tools and governance: Both fields rely on encrypted platforms and informal mediation (*Friedensrichter*) that can de-escalate disputes across borders but operate outside court processes. Social gatherings such as weddings and funerals function as hubs for information exchange and alliance-building.
- Framing: Public debate often summarizes these dynamics under the label 'clan crime'. The evidence, however, points to specific segments and networks that engage in organized crime, not entire communities.



KINSHIP, ETHNICITY AND THE 'CLAN CRIME' DEBATE

Crime embedded in kinship structures is not new.² Family ties can provide trust, loyalty, protection and access to resources, forming a social infrastructure that supports everyday social and economic life. The same networks can also be mobilized for criminal purposes, helping to organize and sustain illicit business.

Contrary to common depictions of migrant communities as passive and primarily oriented towards preserving cultural ties and memories, clan-based networks can develop into socially active, spatially dispersed and highly coordinated formations. While anchored in kinship ties, they operate across borders and both within and beyond nation-state frameworks. In migration studies, these are described as transnational social fields: dense webs of relationships, obligations and exchanges that connect individuals across jurisdictions and are governed by multiple – at times competing – systems of authority. Within these fields, German law and institutions form only one axis of regulation; alternative normative orders – anchored in cities such as Beirut, Istanbul, or Mersin – often shape expectations, enforce obligations and mediate conflicts.

In Europe, debate over kinship-based criminality has moved from academic journals into policy and media. In Germany, the term 'clan crime' (*Clankriminalität*) gained public and political traction in the late 2010s, building on police monitoring practices established in the early 2000s. State criminal police offices (LKAs) in the states of North Rhine-Westphalia, Bremen, Lower Saxony and Berlin created joint working groups and lists of selected 'clan names' to track patterns associated with extended families from the Mardin region of Türkiye. These practices informed the development of targeted policing strategies,³ and from 2018, the category 'clan crime' was increasingly institutionalized through annual situation reports (*Lagebilder*)⁴ issued by police authorities in these states.⁵ In 2020, the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) added 'clan crime' to its national organized-crime reporting,⁶ moving the debate into federal politics and drawing increasing public and media attention. The term remains contested⁷ and is defined inconsistently across agencies and Germany's federal states.

Public visibility was heightened by spectacular cases such as the 'Big Maple Leaf' theft from Berlin's Bode Museum and the Green Vault burglary in Dresden, in which prosecutors linked suspects to members of the Berlin-based Remmo family, an Arab family network.⁸ Media coverage and popular culture, notably the series *4 Blocks*, further entrenched 'clan crime' in the public imagination, often in stylized and simplified form.



A 2026 election poster in Berlin reads: 'Expropriate criminal clans – villas, cars, bank accounts – gone'. In Germany, the term 'clan crime' emerged from police strategies targeting immigrant extended families from Türkiye. The term is contested. © Frank Hoensch via Getty Images

A parallel discourse has developed in Sweden, where authorities use the label 'family-based criminal networks'.⁹ A national police intelligence report on these networks was completed in January 2020,¹⁰ and subsequent cross-agency assessments have continued to refer to such structures in analyses of organized crime and unlawful influence.¹¹ Compared with most other European countries, Germany and Sweden, in somewhat different forms, have developed a particularly explicit public and policing discourse around 'clan crime' and family-based criminal networks as distinct security categories. While terminology differs, both countries recognize that kinship ties can shape the organization, resilience and reach of criminal groups.¹²

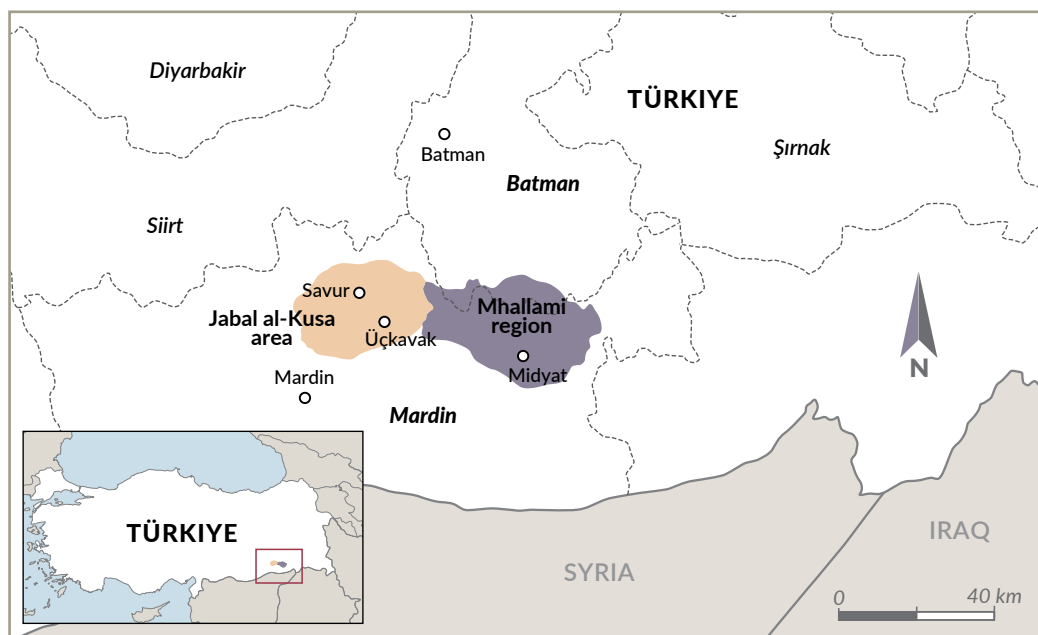


FIGURE 1 Approximate location of the Mahallami and Kusawiyya areas within Mardin Province, south-eastern Türkiye.

NOTE: The Mahallami area is mainly in and around Midyat, while the Kusawiyya area is mainly in and around Savur.

Mardin Province

Mardin Province lies in south-eastern Türkiye, along the Syrian border. The wider region includes Mardin city, Midyat, Nusaybin and Kızıltepe, and is linguistically and religiously diverse. Kurmanji Kurdish, Arabic and Turkish are widely spoken, while Syriac/Aramaic remains in use in Tur Abdin.¹³ The region has long been connected to Syria and Lebanon through migration,¹⁴ and from the 1960s increasingly to Europe, particularly Germany, as well as Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark.¹⁵ These migration histories have produced extensive diasporic networks linking communities across the region and Europe. ■

The term 'clan' is itself contested and can imply a bounded, hierarchical organization where kinship affiliations may in practice be more fluid and diverse. The use of broad labels can obscure important internal differences. Officials, police analysts and elements in the German media have grouped diverse communities originating from the Mardin region of south-eastern Türkiye under the label 'Mhallami', even though some of these communities identify as Kusawiyya (see Figure 1).¹⁶ The category 'clan crime' can make kinship, surname or place of origin appear to be indicators of criminality, even where there is no evidence of criminal involvement. Its application has focused particularly on Arab, Turkish and Kurdish-origin communities,¹⁷ while comparable kinship structures among other groups have received less attention. The term 'kinship-based networks' is therefore used in this report as a more neutral description, distinguishing between kinship as social infrastructure, its instrumentalization for criminal purposes, and the much larger number of relatives who are not involved in crime.

The 'ashira

In Arab and broader Middle Eastern contexts, 'clan' is best understood through the institution of the 'ashira: a kinship-based formation that organizes social life beyond genealogy. Such formations can provide solidarity, mediation, protection and access to resources, while also exercising forms of informal authority through reputation and reciprocity. These relationships can also function as political capital, facilitating alliances, influence and informal enforcement.

An 'ashira may comprise smaller kin units, including the bayt (an extended family lineage), while multiple 'asha'ir may form part of a larger qabila or tribal confederation. These structures do not necessarily constitute fixed or hierarchical organizations; their form varies across communities and contexts.

Criminal subgroups have become visible within these social formations in some contexts. In contemporary diaspora settings, kinship ties continue to serve important social functions, but can also, in particular circumstances, facilitate criminal cooperation.¹⁸ This does not, however, mean the 'ashira should be equated with a criminal organization or taken as evidence of criminal involvement among its members. ■



KINSHIP STRUCTURES IN GERMANY

The development of kinship-based groups in Germany reflects distinct migration histories and patterns of adaptation among Mardin-origin families and Syrian groups. Mardin-origin families generally have a longer intergenerational presence in the country, while Syrian groups are more recent and heterogeneous, with varying trajectories of integration and criminal professionalization. Distinguishing these trajectories is important for a nuanced analysis of so-called 'clan crime', and also for shaping proportionate responses to it.

Mardin-origin networks

Following the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, many Mardin-origin families experienced marginalization, including language repression and exclusion from civic life. From the 1920s to the 1960s, many migrated first to Syria and then to Lebanon, where limited access to education and public services and unresolved legal status left many socially and economically vulnerable.¹⁹

The Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) prompted a further wave of migration to Europe, particularly Germany.²⁰ There, restrictive asylum policies and unresolved nationality and residency status left many families in prolonged legal and socioeconomic uncertainty, including years or decades under *Duldung* ('tolerated stay'), with restrictions on employment and education. Community estimates suggest that 10–30 per cent, including second and third generations, remain in this situation today.²¹

Within this context of exclusion and uncertainty, signs of criminal activity began to emerge gradually in the early 1980s: petty theft; trade in untaxed cigarettes or counterfeit goods; small-scale drug dealing; and breaches of residency rules.²² A man born in Berlin in the early 1990s into a family involved in criminal activity described this phase in retrospect, based on accounts he heard within his family: 'We did not think about it. People took whatever they could. Not to become rich – just to have something.'²³ Economic responsibility fell largely on men, including for remittances to relatives in Mardin or Beirut. When lawful avenues were blocked, some turned to illegal activities. What began as occasional infractions became routine over time within loose, informal networks, without a master plan or centralized coordination.²⁴

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was a turning point. Borders opened, informal trade expanded, and law enforcement struggled to keep pace. For actors already involved in low-level offences, market

opportunities escalated.²⁵ As one interviewee recalled, 'There were markets, drugs, and huge demand. Young people came to Berlin for freedom, nightlife, and drugs. There was a need – and if we didn't do it, others would.'²⁶

From the 1990s²⁷ into the early 2000s, criminal activities became more established within the '*ashira*'s substructures, the *buyut*. These kin units provided trust, discipline and mutual obligation, while some became hubs for coordination, recruitment and distribution. Roles followed lines of loyalty, generation and competence. As one interlocutor described: 'You did not work with just anyone. First came your brothers and cousins; only after that came outsiders. Loyalty was the currency, because one weak link could bring police to the whole house.'²⁸ This loyalty structured cooperation not only within Berlin but also beyond it. It also helped extend criminal activities to other parts of Germany where relatives were already present, especially North Rhine-Westphalia, but also Bremen and Lower Saxony. Family members in these locations could offer accommodation, introductions, logistical support and a trusted local base. In that sense, the *bayt* did not function as a rigid command structure, but as a trusted social core from which specific criminal ventures could be organized. Some segments could mobilize dozens of members to defend market access against rivals. While many branches remained uninvolved, others came to dominate informal markets in specific districts, laying the groundwork for what media and authorities later generalized as 'clan crime'.²⁹

During this period, crime also took on generational and symbolic dimensions. In practice, these segments were concentrated mainly in Berlin, Bremen, parts of North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony the same spaces that later became central in German police and media discussions of so-called 'clan crime'. Children in affected segments grew up with illicit economies as visible, sometimes normalized, features of everyday life. Traditional boundaries – *haram* (religiously forbidden) and '*ayb* (social shame) – weakened amid the anonymity of city life. Respect increasingly came to be associated with wealth, force and visibility rather than with mediation and wisdom. Many interviewees described slow court proceedings, limited immediate consequences and uneven enforcement as signs of institutional weakness; the justice system became something to bypass or manipulate. For some, crime became a pathway to recognition, power and capital.³⁰

Over the past decade, a new generation – born and raised in Germany – has diversified its strategies. While kinship still provides cultural framing and occasional access, its organizational function has weakened. Some younger actors no longer feel bound by elders' authority or traditional notions of honour. They pursue markets beyond family structures and across ethnic lines, building transactional networks that blend online logistics with offline operations. This shift reflects a broader entrepreneurial turn in illicit markets, in which access, speed, information and profit increasingly outweigh older expectations of exclusive loyalty to kin.³¹

These actors prioritize access to information and leverage public institutions, cultural capital and digital tools. Interviewees described how co-optation and personal ties are used to obtain advance notice of police tactics and administrative measures – a practice that is now central to certain operations.³² As one participant explained:

This new generation was born here. They know the language and are well connected. With their money, they build relationships with the middle and upper middle class. They value connections and information and invest in both. Information and contacts – that's what they need, and they have access to it.³³



The gold coin known as the Big Maple Leaf on display at Berlin's Bode Museum, from where it was stolen in March 2017. Two cousins from the Remmo family were each sentenced to four and a half years' imprisonment for the theft in 2020; a museum security guard was also convicted. © Marcel Mettelsiefen/dpa/AFP

High-visibility operations, such as bold thefts and public displays, persist and continue to shape public debate. At the same time, some actors increasingly seek quieter forms of leverage, cultivating insiders, exploiting bureaucratic vulnerabilities and investing in access to information. A public example is the 2017 theft of the 'Big Maple Leaf' from Berlin's Bode Museum. According to prosecutors, the heist was planned as an inside job: two cousins allegedly worked with a childhood friend who had been hired as a security guard at the museum shortly before the break-in, providing crucial information for the operation.³⁴ The case illustrates how insider access can facilitate criminal operations. This is not unique to clan-based actors; other organized-crime formations in Germany also seek insider access and institutional blind spots. What is significant here is how such strategies can be combined with kin-based trust, dense family and regional networks and cross-border fallback options. The more conspicuous exercise of criminal power is increasingly accompanied – and in some cases partly replaced – by quieter strategies centred on access, brokerage and selective infiltration.

Syrian communities

The emergence of Syrian clans in Germany is a more recent development. Until the mid-2010s, the Syrian community was relatively small and inconspicuous, and the notion of 'Syrian clans' did not feature in public or policy debates. The picture shifted with the arrival of large numbers of Syrian refugees from 2015 onward. By 2025, 1.281 million people with Syrian migration history were living in Germany, according to Destatis, Germany's Federal Statistical Office.³⁵ Unlike earlier migrants, many newcomers arrived as families or extended families, often from rural, clan-based regions where kinship authority can carry more weight than state institutions.³⁶

The criminal relevance of this development should be framed carefully. German police assessments themselves remain cautious: the North Rhine-Westphalia State Criminal Police Office and the

Sicherheitskooperation Ruhr, a regional police cooperation body, found in their 'Euphrat' project that 'clan crime' and organized crime among Syrian suspects had, at the time, been identified only in individual cases, although it noted a serious increase in violent crime involving Syrian suspects, especially young people.³⁷ The concern is therefore not the emergence of a fully consolidated Syrian 'clan crime' phenomenon comparable to older Mardin-origin structures, but the formation of specific criminal subgroups, loose youth formations and more organized smuggling networks that may expand if left unchecked.

Since 2021, a renewed wave of onward movement has emerged. Administrative figures reflect this uptick: in 2023, 102 930 arrivals were registered in Germany, compared with 36 433 in 2020 and 266 250 at the 2016 peak.³⁸ Syrian community members interviewed for this research described deteriorating conditions in Syria and growing pressures in neighbouring host countries, including insecure legal status, rising living costs and shrinking access to employment. Interviewees described Germany as offering more reliable prospects for legal status, livelihoods and long-term security.³⁹

As Syrians have resettled across Germany – in major cities such as Berlin, Hamburg, Essen, Dortmund, Leipzig and Halle, as well as in smaller towns and rural areas – new patterns of social organization have taken shape. Two distinct but overlapping forms of affiliation are notable. The first is clan-based identity, rooted in kinship ties and sometimes linked to wider tribal structures, with families seeking proximity and mutual support in exile. The second is regional identity, based on shared origin from the same town or district rather than direct kinship, and expressed through common dialects, customs and experiences.⁴⁰ Many Syrians in Germany do not belong to either category.

Over time, clan-based groups in several cities have established *madafa* (guesthouses or 'clan salons') and local networks as venues for social gatherings, regular meetings, conflict mediation and collective decision-making. In practice, these spaces may take the form of community meeting rooms, rented halls, café back rooms or private residences used for communal gatherings. Such spaces provide social and practical support, particularly for families navigating displacement and integration, and are not inherently criminal. However, by bringing people together and fostering trust and information-sharing, they can also provide opportunities for criminal cooperation and coordination.

The clearest areas of criminal activity are migrant smuggling and related facilitation, informal value transfer, local street-level crime and youth-group activity. Migrant smuggling involves recruitment, route information, payments, staging, handovers, document misuse and communication with facilitators along the Balkan route. *Hawala*-like systems, in which money is transferred through trusted intermediaries outside formal banking channels, are commonly used for informal value transfer and ordinary remittances and can also facilitate smuggling payments or the movement of criminal proceeds. Local street-level crime and youth-group activity include theft, drug retail, violent confrontations and the use of social media to build reputations.⁴¹ These patterns do not amount to one unified Syrian 'clan crime' structure in Germany. They show, however, how specific actors can use migration-route knowledge, regional familiarity, kinship trust and digital communication to support criminal activity.

A recent case involving the 'Al-Sarawi' smuggling network illustrates the more structured forms of criminal activity. In November 2025, the Traunstein Regional Court (Landgericht Traunstein), a district-level court in Bavaria, convicted four defendants in proceedings concerning members of this network. According to the court, this network was responsible for a large share of smuggling along the

Balkan route from Syria to Germany. Its main organizer, operating largely from Germany, was convicted of gang and commercial smuggling, including life-endangering treatment and one case resulting in death. The proceedings also covered offences beyond smuggling, including attempted honour-related murder, extortionate kidnapping and dangerous bodily harm.⁴² The case shows that some Syrian-origin formations have moved beyond loose facilitation towards more structured, profit-oriented and violent forms of criminal organization. It is, however, an example of a specific network, not a general statement about Syrians or Syrian clans in Germany.

A second example concerns facilitation through document fraud. In April 2026, the Federal Police conducted a large-scale operation against around 50 Syrian nationals suspected of having sent their genuine German residence permits to Syria so that similar-looking compatriots could use them for unauthorized entry into Germany or the Schengen area. According to the report, investigators were also examining whether elements of the scheme were connected to a Syrian clan milieu; the Clan Task Force of the Saxony State Criminal Police Office was involved in pursuing these indications.⁴³ The case is relevant because it shows how everyday social resources – genuine documents, trusted intermediaries and kin- or region-based ties – can be repurposed to facilitate smuggling and unauthorized entry.

Mardin and Syrian networks: Continuities and differences

Both Mardin-origin and Syrian clans in Germany rely on kinship structures to navigate social, economic and criminal arenas. Yet their scale, timing and organizational dynamics differ, reflecting distinct migration trajectories and political histories. Mardin-origin clans are estimated by many informants to comprise 35 000–50 000 people in Germany, concentrated in specific areas.⁴⁴ By contrast, roughly 1.28 million people of Syrian origin now live in Germany.⁴⁵ The latter is a demographic figure, not an estimate of Syrian clan membership; no comparable estimate is available.

Unlike the more fragmented kinship structures among parts of the Mardin-origin diaspora where third- and fourth-generation members have been reshaping family dynamics, Syrian networks often retain stronger internal cohesion, hierarchical leadership and a living collective memory. Characteristics that once structured Mardin-origin clans have, over time, attenuated through generational change.

Territorial anchoring also differs. Mardin-origin clans remain regionally concentrated, whereas Syrian-origin groups are more dispersed, with members spread across Berlin, the Ruhr, Saxony, Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg and beyond (see Figures 2 and 3). Rather than relying primarily on territorial concentration, Syrian networks draw on digitally reinforced ties that enable mobile, multi-node organization. Social media platforms and diaspora forums sustain transnational links and allow rapid coordination and resource sharing across cities and countries.

Beyond Germany, both networks also extend across Europe, but in different ways. Mardin-origin networks remain tied to a smaller number of dense, long-settled hubs in Germany and Sweden, and to a lesser extent in Denmark (especially Copenhagen) and the Netherlands, whereas Syrian networks are more dispersed and coordinated across multiple states through kinship, regional ties and digital communication (see Figure 4). From the perspective of criminal organization, this reflects a contrast between more localized strongholds and more mobile, multi-node formations.



FIGURE 2 Approximate distribution of Syrian kinship networks in Germany.



FIGURE 3 Approximate distribution of Mardin-origin kinship networks in Germany.

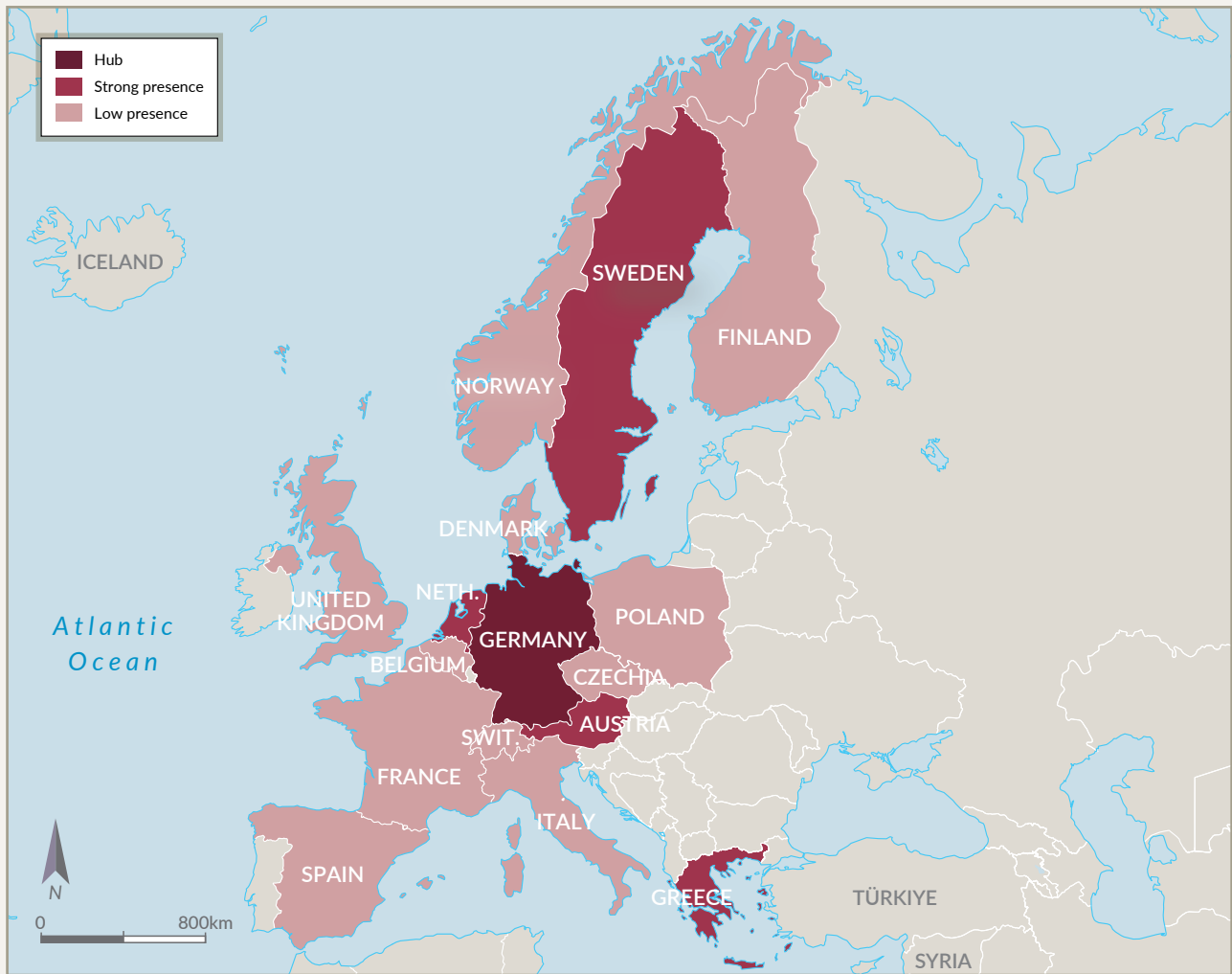


FIGURE 4 Relative intensity of Syrian presence in Europe.



FORMS OF CRIMINAL INVOLVEMENT

Although the Mardin-origin clans and Syrian-origin groups differ in historical depth, migration trajectories and internal structure, they share several forms of criminal engagement. These include youth gangs and public-space dynamics, flexible criminal networks and regional cooperation, and organized subgroups and reconstituted clan structures.⁴⁶

Youth gangs and public-space dynamics

In recent years, some Syrian-origin youths in Germany have become visible within wider public-space and youth-gang dynamics.⁴⁷ These gangs seek to dominate particular territories, and vary in composition: some are clearly dominated by one ethnic group, while others are mixed.⁴⁸

In urban centres such as Berlin, Hamburg, Stuttgart, Nuremberg and Essen, such groups of teenagers and young adults are increasingly visible at train stations, in parks and around shopping districts. Typically aged 14–25, they often operate outside traditional family structures. They are discussed in German- and Arabic-language media and on social media under gang pseudonyms such as Jamaat

Talahon ('come-here crew')⁴⁹ and Ajyan al-Bahnof ('railway-station boys'). Their activities include theft and coordinated shoplifting, street-level drug dealing, interpersonal and inter-gang violence,⁵⁰ and, in some cases, sexual harassment.⁵¹ While many groups remain fluid and short-lived, some have developed more structured forms with stable cores, role differentiation (e.g., spotters, runners, resellers) and the use of encrypted communication.

Comparable youth behaviours are also observed among some young people from Mardin-origin clan milieus. Younger offenders are more often embedded in extended kin networks, neighbourhood-based peer groups or loose friendship circles, and may act



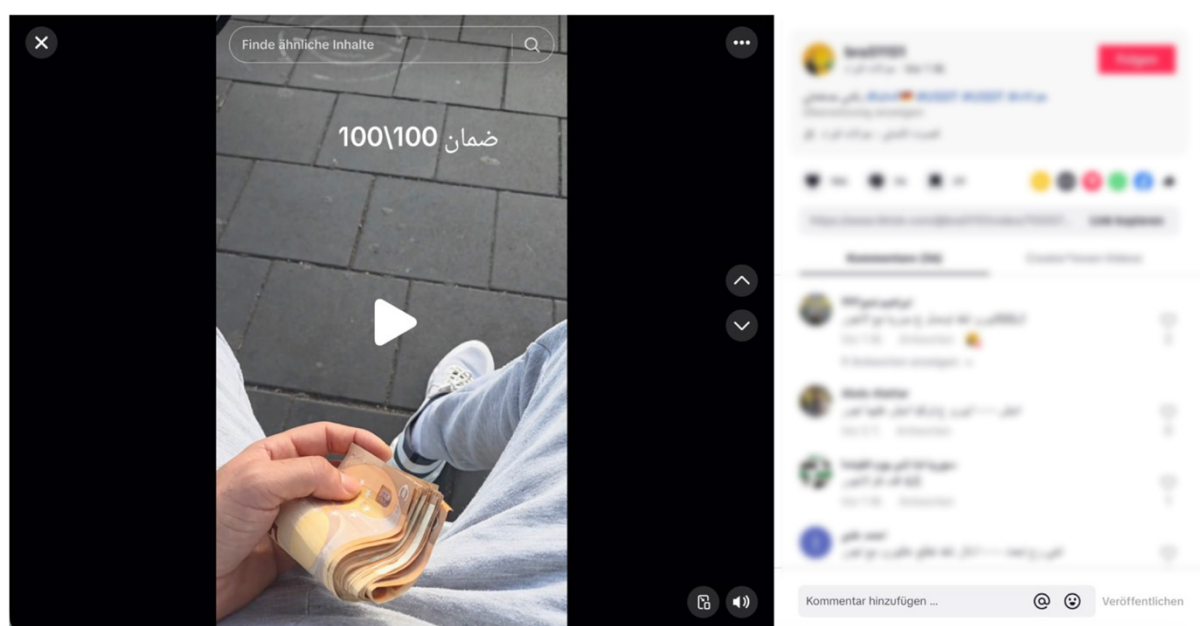
A man is escorted by police during a raid targeting so-called 'clan crime' in Berlin. © Christophe Gateau/picture alliance via Getty Images

under the informal direction of family-linked structures. At the same time, there are indications of a growing overlap with wider public-space youth formations: some young people from Mardin-origin backgrounds join external, non-kin or multi-ethnic groups, especially in settings shaped by street-level drug dealing, theft, territorial conflicts and status competition.

Flexible criminal networks and regional cooperation

More structured – although still loosely organized – forms of criminal collaboration can be observed within both Mardin-origin and Syrian-origin groups. Among Mardin-origin clans, small-scale networks often form around activities such as drug trafficking, low-level fraud, *hawala*-based transactions, untaxed cigarette and shisha tobacco trade and property crime. These alliances are typically grounded in trust among cousins, close friends or long-standing acquaintances, and may also include individuals from outside the immediate kinship circle. They operate without centralized leadership and are generally opportunistic, adjusting their strategies and roles based on shifting circumstances. Despite their informal nature, such networks are remarkably adaptable, often responding flexibly to law enforcement measures – particularly due to the ease with which members can withdraw or reorganize when pressure intensifies.⁵²

A comparable pattern is evident among Syrians, where individuals from the same region, city, or refugee camp form collaborative networks grounded in shared language, social familiarity and common migration trajectories.⁵³ In many cases, members knew one another prior to arrival in Germany, or are connected through overlapping social ties. These structures are typically regional rather than kinship-based, relying on reputational trust and informal reciprocity. They have been associated with migrant smuggling and *hawala*-based money transfers.⁵⁴ Social media platforms such as TikTok (see photo) and encrypted messaging services like Telegram play a central role in their organization, enabling cross-border communication, the display of status and identity, and rapid responses to changing conditions.



Hawala dealer in North Rhine-Westphalia advertising his services on TikTok. Photo: Social media

Using *hawala* through regional networks

Hawala is an informal value-transfer system built on trust, which may derive from family ties, shared regional connections (hometown, dialect, reputation) or, in some cases, bonds within organized criminal groups. For example, a man from Deir ez-Zor living in Berlin hands €400 to a local broker from the same hometown. The broker provides a code, which the sender relays to a relative or friend in Deir ez-Zor, who presents it (with a name) to a counterpart broker and collects the cash. The two brokers settle the amount later, through trade, cash couriers

or other means outside the formal banking system. *Hawala* is used because it is fast and can operate where access to banking identification documents is limited or risky. Shared regional connections can provide a basis for trust even in the absence of kinship. Typical uses include remittances, small-business payments and urgent financial support. These same features can be exploited to move criminal proceeds, which is why associated networks may be monitored by authorities, although *hawala* itself is not inherently illegal. ■

Organized subgroups and reconstituted clan structures

Among clans of Mardin origin, the most structured criminal activity is typically anchored in extended family subunits (*buyut*). These groups – often comprising dozens of relatives – can sustain intergenerational operations. Core activities include drug trafficking, theft, welfare fraud, document forgery, extortion and money laundering.⁵⁵ Several *buyut* maintain ties to networks in Türkiye and Lebanon, giving them transnational reach and access to broader logistical and financial networks.

A comparable level of organization has emerged among some Syrian-origin groups through reconstituted clan structures.⁵⁶ In recent years, kinship-based formations have become visible in which criminal activity plays a central role, particularly in migrant smuggling. While not all members are involved, some extended family groups have developed coordinated networks that echo traditional clan hierarchies, combining strong social cohesion with illicit enterprise.⁵⁷



TRANSNATIONAL LINKAGES

Of these formations, flexible criminal networks and organized subgroups embedded in reconstituted clan structures are among the most complex, resilient and transnationally connected criminal networks within kinship-based communities in Germany. Their significance lies not only in the scale and persistence of their activities, but in their capacity to link local criminal fields in Europe with networks and resources rooted in the Middle East, particularly in Türkiye and Syria.

For actors engaged in drug trafficking, *hawala* transfers, migrant smuggling, document forgery or welfare fraud, these kinship structures provide a functional basis for criminal operations.⁵⁸ They enable mobility, discretion, risk mitigation, and a form of legitimacy grounded not in legality but in familial loyalty and internal honour codes.⁵⁹ Transactions are regulated through memory, trust, and reputation rather than contracts or legal mechanisms. A debt incurred in Berlin may be honoured years later in Malmö; a criminal dispute that begins in Essen may be resolved through mediation in Beirut. Where formal institutions are perceived by some members of Mardin-origin and Syrian-origin communities as slow, opaque or discriminatory, such informal systems can provide alternative mechanisms for enforcing obligations and resolving disputes.⁶⁰

Transnational conflict and settlement

In December 2020, Saleh Omeirat was killed in Sweden. According to an interlocutor, his clan accused one Ahmad Fakro of the killing following a dispute over money related to drug trading. Ahmad Fakro fled to Lebanon seeking safety, but was killed in Beirut in January 2022. Clan Fakro then accused Clan Omeirat of responsibility. Both clans have their roots in the village of al-Rashidiya (Mardin). In April 2022, Idris Omeirat, Saleh's father, travelled to the village of al-Rashidiya for a funeral and was killed there by members of Clan Fakro; that same day, Clan Omeirat retaliated by killing Mohamad Fakro in the village (see photo). To prevent further escalation, clan members from Germany, Sweden, Lebanon, and Türkiye met regularly in various locations to seek a settlement.

In September 2024, a reconciliation was reached in the village. While details were not disclosed, several interlocutors reported that the agreement acknowledged two killings on each side and committed both parties to refrain from further retaliation.⁶¹ ■



Media image showing the aftermath of the killings of Idris Omeirat (Turkish: Sidar) and Mohamad Fakro (Turkish: Genç), with Turkish security forces deployed to prevent further reprisals. Photo: Mardin Life, <https://www.mardinlife.com/gundem/video-2-kisinin-oldugu-silahl-kavga-tazyede-baslamis>.

The operational scale of these networks is pan-European and transregional. Families report maintaining active ties with close relatives in Berlin, Antwerp, Gothenburg, Marseille, Vienna, Copenhagen and beyond. Social events such as weddings and funerals can provide opportunities to renew alliances, coordinate logistics and exchange information, facilitating the movement of people, goods and capital through kinship-based trust.⁶² In practical terms, a person facing legal charges in Berlin may relocate to Lebanon or Türkiye, while criminal proceeds or stolen goods may be moved towards Türkiye through informal transfer systems or overland routes.⁶³

Sulha and conflict settlement

Sulha is the Arabic term commonly used within some Mardin-origin and Syrian-origin communities for reconciliation or settlement. In German public, media and policing discourse, the mediators involved in such processes are often described as Friedensrichter ('peace judges'). This is, however, a German label, not the community's own term, and it does not refer to a formal judicial office. Sulha may be used to resolve serious disputes involving injury, homicide, debt or honour outside the formal court system, but within a recognized social framework. The authority of mediators

depends on reputation, lineage and perceived neutrality. Participation is formally voluntary, but the outcome can be socially binding. Such processes often involve guarantors from each side, the presentation of accounts and evidence and a negotiated settlement. This may include compensation, a public apology or agreed future conduct. Compliance is enforced not by the state, but through social pressure, reputational costs, loss of support or the suspension of cooperation.⁶⁴ ■

These transnational connections are reinforced by digital technology. Encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Signal serve as spaces for planning, decision-making and dispute resolution. Access is typically limited to trusted family members or close associates, ensuring operational confidentiality and limiting external access. While younger generations often manage these tools due to their digital fluency, authority remains grounded in traditional hierarchies based on family name, loyalty and seniority. Digital technology therefore extends the reach of kinship-based networks, enabling communication and coordination across national boundaries and legal jurisdictions.

A key element that sustains the resilience of these networks is the expectation of confidentiality, which is not merely tactical but can be morally enforced. Breaches of internal confidentiality are seen as serious violations that may result in ostracism, reputational damage, or even violent retribution. This reinforced expectation of silence can make law enforcement penetration extremely difficult and help sustain illicit operations over time.

Transnational fraud network: Halit D

Another case is that of Halit D. After being deported from Germany to Türkiye, he and his two brothers were accused of operating an İzmir-based call-centre network that targeted elderly people in Germany on a large scale. Media reports at the time claimed that the operation allegedly used the ‘false police officer’ scheme, in which callers posed as police officers and pressured victims into handing over cash, jewellery or gold to intermediaries in Germany.⁶⁵ German media described D as cultivating a public image of wealth and impunity on social media, displaying luxury goods and other status symbols.⁶⁶

In December 2020, Turkish authorities, in cooperation with German investigators, raided call-centre premises in İzmir. Reports stated that dozens of suspects were detained and assets worth millions were seized, including cash, valuables and real estate.⁶⁷ In September 2022, a Turkish court delivered verdicts against 67 defendants in the wider call-centre fraud case. Turkish reporting named Halit D as one of the defendants and described him as an alleged organization manager.⁶⁸

He was released after a Turkish appeals court set aside the 2022 İzmir verdict and ordered further review, leaving him at

liberty pending retrial.⁶⁹ He subsequently returned to social media, where he continued to project an image of wealth and defiance, while denying the accusations against him. ■



Halit D (known as ‘Papa Kralle’) in a social-media post. Photo: Social media

Transnational criminal activity: Heisem M

The case of Heisem M offers a striking example of how criminal actors can continue their activities across jurisdictions and adapt to changing legal environments.⁷⁰ After German investigators linked him to the killing of Hussein El-Zein and the serious injury of his fiancée in Schwanewede near Bremen in January 2009,⁷¹ M left Germany for Türkiye.⁷²

In Türkiye, he was later accused of involvement in a large-scale call-centre fraud network targeting elderly people in Germany. According to the Mersin Provincial Police Directorate, suspects allegedly operated a call centre in Mersin, posing as public officials and defrauding elderly victims of €1.58 million. The operation targeted 41 suspects and involved simultaneous searches in Mersin, Istanbul, İzmir, Antalya, Denizli and Trabzon. German reporting identified one of those arrested as Heisem M. Later, Turkish court reporting referred to the same person as Heisem C. and described him as accused of leading the group. The proceedings were ongoing at the time of those reports, and he denied the accusations.⁷³ ■



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The relationship between kinship and organized crime is neither straightforward nor uniform. Kinship, regional belonging and migration histories can provide powerful infrastructures of trust, mobility and informal governance. In most cases, these infrastructures serve ordinary social purposes such as protection, solidarity, mediation and support in conditions of displacement or marginalization. In some segments, however, these same connections can be mobilized for organized criminal activity.

The comparison between Mardin-origin and Syrian formations also shows that these networks are not static. Older, locally anchored structures coexist with more flexible, digital and cross-ethnic forms of cooperation. Their development is shaped by migration routes, legal insecurity, social exclusion, market demand and transnational contacts. Understanding these dynamics requires attention to concrete criminal actors and activities without treating family names, ethnic origin or community membership as indicators of criminality. This makes the phenomenon both social and criminal: it cannot be reduced to culture, but it also cannot be understood without attention to social organization, authority and belonging.

The findings of the report should be considered in light of the empirical limits of the analysis. Systematic data remain limited, particularly across European countries and the regions of origin of these kinship-based networks. The findings are grounded in long-term fieldwork, interviews and selected open sources, but do not provide a complete picture of Mardin-origin or Syrian criminal formations in Europe. More comparative and multi-sited research is needed to examine how these networks change in different national contexts, how criminal and non-criminal kinship structures overlap, and how migration histories, legal status, social exclusion and market opportunities shape their formation and organization. Such research should extend beyond Germany to other European countries and relevant origin and transit regions, in order to capture the phenomenon from social, historical, criminological and transnational perspectives.

Understanding the social structures in which criminal cooperation takes root can help public authorities disrupt illicit networks without reinforcing the conditions that contribute to their resilience.

Recommendations

The findings point to the need for a more differentiated response. Kinship should not be treated as evidence of criminality, nor should entire families or communities be profiled as criminal groups. At the same time, authorities should not underestimate the role that family, regional and social ties can play when they are used to support criminal activity. The focus should therefore be placed on identifiable

*Kinship should not be treated
as evidence of criminality.*

actors and markets, and seek to target those who organize violence, provide finance, move drugs or people, supply documents, launder proceeds and provide logistical or social protection.

The response also requires closer cooperation beyond Germany. The networks examined in this report do not stop at state or national borders. Mardin-origin actors maintain links with Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Türkiye and Lebanon, while Syrian-origin networks are dispersed across several European countries and remain closely connected to Syria and neighbouring states. Information is still too often held within individual police forces, and state or national jurisdictions. German authorities should therefore deepen operational cooperation with European partners, including through joint investigations, exchange of intelligence on offenders and facilitators, and through closer coordination between police, prosecutors, customs, financial-intelligence units and immigration authorities. The same applies within Germany, where cases that appear local may form part of activities across several regions.

Particular attention should be given to criminal structures that are still developing. This is especially relevant to Syrian-origin networks. The research does not indicate the existence of a consolidated Syrian 'clan crime' structure comparable to older Mardin-origin networks. Rather, it points to a phenomenon that is still taking shape: loose regional networks, youth formations, smuggling groups and, in some cases, more organized kinship-based structures. This distinction matters. The experience of older criminal networks shows that intervention becomes more difficult once relationships, markets, reputations and financial infrastructures have been established over several generations. Before this happens, disruption strategies should therefore concentrate on the small number of actors who organize violence, recruit younger participants, control criminal markets or connect local groups to wider smuggling, drug and financial networks.

Immigration law can form part of this response, particularly in cases involving serious or persistent offending by non-citizens. The fall of the Assad regime has changed the context in Syria. This does not, however, mean that Syria can simply be treated as safe for every individual. In cases where a Syrian national convicted of serious or repeated criminal offences no longer qualifies for protection and removal is lawful and safe, deportation to Syria should be considered as one element of a broader disruption strategy. This should target serious offenders rather than Syrian communities as a whole and must remain subject to German, European and international law, including the principle of non-refoulement.

The financial side of these networks deserves greater attention. Arresting visible street-level offenders will have limited effect if the financial and logistical infrastructure around them remains intact. Investigations should follow money alongside people, including the misuse of *hawala*, cash-intensive businesses, real estate, vehicles, luxury goods and cross-border transfers. Financial investigations and asset recovery should begin at an early stage of organized-crime cases rather than being treated as an additional measure once the main investigation is complete. The aim should be to make participation

in criminal markets less profitable and to weaken the resources through which established actors sustain influence and recruit others.

The same principle applies to criminal brokers. This research repeatedly points to individuals whose role lies less in committing offences than in connecting different parts of a network. Brokers arrange transport, provide introductions, move money, locate accommodation, supply documents, mediate disputes or connect actors in Germany with contacts abroad. These intermediaries can be more important to the resilience of a network than individual drug dealers or couriers. Investigations should therefore place greater emphasis on identifying these linking roles and on understanding how kinship, regional familiarity and non-kin relationships overlap.

The youth component needs to become a more central part of the response. Fieldwork points to younger actors who operate in different ways from previous generations: some remain embedded in family networks, while others join neighbourhood-based, non-kin or multi-ethnic groups. Drug retail, theft, violence, territorial competition and online status increasingly overlap in these settings. Police action is critical where violence and organized crime are involved, but it will not be sufficient on its own. Schools, youth services, social workers and local prevention programmes need sustained resources in the neighbourhoods where these groups emerge. Reducing such support while expecting policing alone to contain the problem risks allowing loose groups to develop into more resilient criminal networks.

Greater attention should also be paid to weapons and retaliatory violence. Conflicts that once might have been managed through family mediation can escalate rapidly when firearms are easily available. Enforcement should therefore target illegal weapons supply alongside drug and organized-crime investigations. Shootings, protection demands and retaliatory attacks should be treated not simply as isolated violent incidents but, where evidence supports it, as possible indicators of an emerging criminal structure.

Digital spaces require the same attention as physical ones. Social media is used for reputation-building, displays of wealth, intimidation, recruitment and the advertising of services, while encrypted communication enables criminal coordination across cities and countries. The report shows that these technologies do not replace kinship and personal trust: they extend their reach. Authorities should therefore strengthen their digital investigative capacity to respond to the growing use of social media and AI in criminal activity, particularly in recruitment, communication and the targeting of young people.

Finally, enforcement needs credible community partners. Mardin-origin and Syrian-origin communities contain people who are themselves concerned about violence, recruitment and the damage caused by a small number of criminal actors. Community mediation, including *sulha*, can sometimes prevent retaliation, but it should not replace criminal proceedings or be allowed to pressure victims and witnesses into silence. Cooperation with credible community figures should be used to prevent escalation, improve access to authorities and create alternatives for younger people seeking to distance themselves from criminal environments.

The underlying objective of a coordinated response should be to intervene early as criminal structures first emerge, disrupt established networks where they already exist, and avoid turning family origin or ethnicity into a proxy for criminality. Better European coordination, financial investigation, targeted immigration measures, youth prevention and sustained engagement with communities are not competing approaches. The evidence in this report suggests that they need to work together.



NOTES

- 1 Parts of this report draw on research conducted within the framework of the project KIN-COOPERATIONS: *illegal cooperation and kinship dynamics—an anthropological analysis of al-Rāṣhīdiya in Germany*, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (grant no. JA 2471/2–1).
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