

# When Foreign Fighters Come Home: The Story of Six Danish Returnees

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## Abstract

*This article explores the question of how six Danish former foreign fighters experienced their return to Denmark after having fought with jihadist militias in the Middle East. Based on an investigation of their struggle to overcome the rejection with which they were met in almost every corner of their social world, the author argues that returning home presented them with an existential crisis. During the crisis of returning, participants actively re-interpret and create meaning not only around their journeys, but also with regard to their standing with their closer and broader relations. In other words, they have to rediscover and redefine their place in the world. The article concludes with some recommendations for rehabilitation efforts.*

**Keywords:** Denmark, Syria, jihadism, foreign fighters, rehabilitation

## Introduction

In recent years, thousands of Europeans have left to fight alongside jihadist movements, including approximately 150 individuals from Denmark.<sup>[1]</sup> Particularly since the Islamic State's loss of territorial control, Turkey closing its southern borders, and President Bashar al-Assad recapturing control over most of Syria, the flow of foreign fighters has stalled. Consequently, the analytical interest in questions of why individuals were leaving has been replaced by an immediate policy focus on questions that have to do with how to handle those foreign fighters that make their way back home.<sup>[2]</sup> Europe as well as other regions 'braced themselves'<sup>[3]</sup> for the return of 'floods of foreign fighters'.<sup>[4]</sup> Of the approx. 150 individuals that left from Denmark, the Danish intelligence service estimates that about one third has returned, while another third is assumed dead, with one third still being in the conflict zone or elsewhere abroad. <sup>[5]</sup>

The security services' worries primarily focus on the question whether the returning fighters now possess an enhanced capacity to carry out terrorist attacks because of their battlefield experience, their network connections and a presumed motivation to do so – in short, whether they may 'bring terrorism with them'.<sup>[6]</sup> This question has also given rise to academic debates.<sup>[7]</sup> Returning foreign fighters are deemed by some to be the greatest security threat to Europe,<sup>[8]</sup> while strategy analysts assess the immediate and long-term threats<sup>[9]</sup> from what has been termed a 'terrorist diaspora'.<sup>[10]</sup>

This debate centres mainly around the question of whether to prosecute and jail or reintegrate and rehabilitate returning foreign fighters.<sup>[11]</sup> Challenges regarding how to handle returnees have proven to be complex and responses vary across Europe. On the one hand, we see risk assessments and arrests, and, on the other hand, there is a more recent development of models for rehabilitation as well as policies for receiving back children born in, or brought to, IS territory.

The situation is further complicated by the paucity of empirical data in the study field to support the development of research-based initiatives. However, some historical case studies can provide insights from previous conflicts involving foreign fighters.<sup>[12]</sup> Nevertheless, the current case is unique in its near-global scope, its startling high numbers, and the heterogeneous composition of foreign fighters. As a result, the direct benefits from studying previous experiences appear limited. At the same time, generating data with returnees carries practical difficulties that limit most efforts to interviews with incarcerated individuals, and therefore, represent only one particular type of experience of returnees.<sup>[13]</sup>

In this article, the question of how six Danish former foreign fighters experienced their return to Denmark is explored after having fought with jihadist militias in the Middle East.[14] It is argued that returning represented a form of existential crisis for the returnees. As they actively re-interpret their situation and create meaning not only around their journeys, but also with regard to their relationship with their closer and broader relations; broadly speaking, they have to figure out their place in the world.

The present analysis is based on an interview process and on fieldwork that took place between 2013 and 2017. The author followed and spent time with a group of individuals who had fought in Libya, Syria, and Iraq with various Sunni and Shia militant movements in conflicts that emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring. All participants have since returned to Denmark. Interviews took place over extended periods of time between and after their journeys. The criteria for participant inclusion were these: each participant had to be born or raised in Denmark and had a) travelled to a foreign conflict, b) had joined a militant movement that justified its fighting with reference to the concept of jihad, c) had eventually returned to Denmark, and d) was willing to be interviewed extensively about the experience. Participants were approached discreetly via personal connections and were informed that participation was voluntary, anonymous and that they could withdraw their cooperation at any point. For this article, names and some details have been anonymised/adapted to lessen the risk of harm for those who agreed to be interviewed. Interviews took place in informal settings and were loosely structured as conversations. The author sought to gain a general impression of their perspectives and did not aim to uncover any facts that could be potentially lead to criminal proceedings against the participants.

The study was guided by ethnographic methods of inductive analysis, allowing theory construction to grow out of the fieldwork process.[15] As themes emerged relating to questions of human existence, as well as issues linked to moral relations with the world, divinity and, ultimately, life and death, the interviewer chose the notion of an existential crisis to make sense of, and communicate, the collected interview and fieldwork material in an empirical way. In the context of this study, an existential crisis is understood as the overwhelming situation an individual may find himself in, when events lead him to question if his life has meaning, purpose, or value, and find it difficult to find ways to make choices for himself or is unable to choose between conflicting paths.[16] It is a moment which may both represent a catalyst for finding new meaning in life, when the individual is able to remerge with an intact psyche from the abyss. As such, the interviews offered a perspective on the crisis of returning, as well as opening opportunities for rehabilitation.

## ***Leaving Jihad***

From the moment those interviewed set out on their journeys, placing their all-weather backpacks in the airplane's overhead compartment or driving their disposable car onto the Scandlines ferry to cross from Gedser to Germany, all participants were already planning to return to their lives in Denmark after having fought in the Middle East.[17] The six individuals interviewed for this study were not belonging to those emigrating jihadists who would post anti-Western video manifestos on the Internet and issue threats on YouTube [18]. Nor did they give *bay'ah* (an oath of allegiance) to any leader or movement.

For them, the journey was temporary, a moment or an event, but not a life-long emigration project. Although they may have been ready to sacrifice their life in the sense of being prepared to risk dying while fighting for their cause, they did not intend to spend the rest of their lives fighting – their immediate aim was to survive the journey and return to Denmark. Hence, no participant of these interviews put himself on a list of fighters willing to undertake a 'martyrdom mission' (suicide attack). In order to uphold their chances for a smooth return, they largely conducted themselves discreetly on social media while away, waiting to post selfies or information about their activities abroad on social media until their safe homecoming.

While they were active travellers, those participating in the interviews indicated to this author before setting off how long they expected to be away and when they expected to return. Their journeys were sometimes shorter but never longer than they had stated in advance. Having to bear the cost for their arms and stay also limited the length of their stay as they had to return to Denmark for interim periods in order to save again money

to cover the costs for their next stay. They were more likely to have made arrangements to stay in the theatre of conflict for a period of months rather than years. Four out of six participating in the interviews fitted their travel plans into Danish exam schedules or pre-registered a leave of absence with their employer. Some were enrolled in educational or trainee programmes at the time of their leaving Denmark and returned to complete these. The oldest participant had children and promised them to come back alive, while younger participants seemed genuinely keen to meet someone at home with whom to start their own families.

Furthermore, several interview participants expressed a conflicting sense of responsibility towards their mothers, who were urging them to come home. Each had to evaluate whether what he saw as his sacred duty to fight on behalf of the *ummah*, outweighed the consequences the decision would have for himself and his immediate family. Within a hierarchy of religious moral duties, the duty to obey one's parents could, according to one school of Islamic thought, take precedence over the duty to participate in jihad, in which case one is obliged to return if one's parents request it.[19] A participant stated wryly that there exists no stronger force of persuasion than that of an Arab mother 'guilt tripping' on you. Those with family ties to the countries in which they fought, were acutely aware of the risks and difficulties their parents had gone through to leave those countries and raise them in Denmark. Reversing that effort seemed disrespectful.

As five of the six participants travelled back to the conflict zone several times, it was not necessarily clear to them when they left the conflict zone whether their departure would be temporary or final. Still, some suspected at a certain point in time that the authorities were unlikely to allow them to return to the Middle East after having returned to Denmark. Security measures around foreign fighters were tightening; measures were implemented to restrict travelling and to broaden the possibilities to prosecute returnees beyond the already existing restrictions of the anti-terrorism laws.[20] Returned foreign fighters who were deemed likely by the police to repeat their travel had been placed under a travel ban and their passports had been confiscated. [21] One person received a nine-month prison sentence for disobeying the travel ban.[22] For participants who had left for Syria, the conflict only escalated in brutality and complexity over time, and they left behind an unresolved conflict with little to show for their personal efforts.

As all six interviewees subscribed to the idea of jihad as a local rather than a global endeavour, it follows that once they went back to Denmark, they would be leaving jihad behind them, shedding their recent identity as *mujahid*.[23] The European jihadists who follow the Islamic State's interpretation of jihad could follow the advice of the former IS spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani: that it could be seen as equally valuable to attack in the West as joining the caliphate where IS held territory.[24] However, the six interview participants had no such view as they only considered themselves active *mujahideen* while fighting in the Middle East and therefore gave up such a status upon leaving.

On the one hand, they saw themselves as having a role to play in the Middle Eastern conflicts and an obligation to do so, because they saw those conflicts as universally Muslim in nature. If the global Muslim faith community, the *ummah*, is understood as 'one body', then all of the world's Muslims are equally responsible for its wellbeing. Such a pan-Islamic position does not recognise national borders, and if that is the case, one does not fight as a 'foreigner', but rather holds direct moral responsibility on a par with the Muslims born in the area.

Yet, the participants considered themselves as acting out of *solidarity with*, rather than *belonging to*, the local population in the conflict zones. Even participants who claimed to be fighting to defend the Muslim *ummah* still talked of doing so *through* fighting for 'the Syrians' or 'the Libyans', whom they saw as separate from themselves. At no point did a 'we' or 'us' in their sentences include the local civilian population. Instead, linguistic in-group signifiers most often related to foreign fighters or the militant group; while 'we' signified those who fought. Placing themselves once removed from the conflicts in which they fought, helped to support the premise of understanding their own actions as heroic and pious: that fighting was a voluntary choice they had made, based on their own ethics and sense of agency. To the local fighters, defeat meant that a catastrophic violence might be visited upon everyone they loved. In that context, fighting to the death might have seemed less of a choice, whereas the interview participants connected their own choice to fight to an altruistic willingness to self-sacrifice for the *ummah*. They saw themselves as fighting for God, not out of self-interest, but out of choice,

not necessity.

Although it helped them to maintain such an understanding to see themselves as volunteers who would return to Denmark after ending their 'stationing', it also highlighted their privileged situation compared to the local population, who had no opportunity to make such a choice. This disparity in terms of consequence meant that when the time came to leave the Middle East and return to Denmark, it was not a straightforward choice for any of the participants. Indeed, for some, leaving was a more complicated decision than to go.

### **Landing on Familiar Ground**

All participants returned home to the same disappointing material reality they had left behind. One returned to find a pile of bills waiting for him, another had lost his job and had to take up temporary work at a warehouse. One participant who had belonged to the criminal gang environment found that he had to work hard to re-establish his authority and earn back trust in his loyalty, which had been compromised by his absence. All struggled to realign with their normal lives back in Denmark – something that stood in stark contrast to the instinctive intensity of the drama in the war zone.

Being relieved to make it through the experience alive has a sadness attached to it that some other fellow fighters did not experience. One participant regretted how ineffective his presence seemed to have been in preventing civilian deaths, lamenting, 'Children died, and I could not save them.' There is a connection here to the ideals they and others had given as reasons for going – that they were the brave who were going to protect the innocents. At stake was the duty to the *ummah*, the imperative to hold intact the religious community as a kind of 'sacred unity'. To fall short of being able to provide unconditional protection was experienced as a failure to the idea of being faithful. If fighting to protect was a form of worship, then what was *failing* to protect? It seemed that some participants forced the pain of such thoughts on themselves as a way of sharing some of the fate of those left behind – a form of self-flagellation or *tatbir*, as it is known in the Shiite tradition to which some participants belong to – as if their guilty emotions had a redemptive effect. One participant recalled that only the five daily prayers signalled a break from his frustrated state of mind, representing purification. Each time he washed before prayer, he says, he imagined his ego and his sins washing off him.

For this reason, transitioning out of the conflict setting and into the home setting was not a full break. While some of those interviewed worked through complex emotions such as survivors' guilt or shame about having left the battle zone behind, some others enrolled in charity functions to compensate, packing clothes collected for refugees, raising money for ambulances, or wiring cash to civilian relief organisations connected to the movements with which they had fought.

Some found that their bodies were similarly slow to adapt to home, and continued to be alert and on edge, pumped with adrenalin. One participant described swinging between extremes of craving risk and seeking thrills or collapsing into apathy, drifting about aimlessly. Several participants contrasted the intense and overpowering experience of feeling 'truly alive' while fighting with returning to the dull routine of living in Denmark. They struggled with feeling unneeded by Danish society and found themselves excluded and emotionally detached from their old surroundings.

One participant described how everyday occurrences and banalities such as someone jumping the queue in the supermarket or the sense that someone looked at him the 'wrong' way easily annoyed him. He claimed, with a sense for drama, that he would rather have died in combat than suffer the routine life of Denmark. Another participant seemed to grow increasingly restless during the interviews after his return; his discourse developed increasingly towards elaborate anti-Western conspiracy theories. He said he easily becomes impatient and resentful when listening to individual people or to public debates complaining about situations and issues that he felt were petty – such as the reluctance to give asylum to refugees.

Those who were accepted back into the criminal environments they originally came from seemed to adjust best to the return situation. Although their loyalty to the gang was questioned and they needed in some way to re-confirm their allegiance to the gang over the *ummah*, they were eventually received back into a closely

knit social environment of belonging. No participant from the criminal environments appeared to maintain connections to religious environments once returned to Denmark. In some cases, they feel not welcomed in the mosque due to their criminal activities, and in one case, the participant seemed to have lost all interest in spiritual affairs when the exigencies of a turf conflict with a rival gang demanded his full attention upon returning.[25]

Other participants imagined taking on a unique religious status and authority in the Muslim community upon return as veteran *mujahedeen*, an expectation modelled upon the return of those who fought the Soviet army in Afghanistan in the 1980s. With the exception of few small, closed groups of friends, this expectation of enhanced status and respect stood in stark contrast to the reality the participants encountered once they were back home. Instead, they found themselves being objects of suspicion, not only from the Danish authorities who regarded them as potential or *de facto* terrorists, but also from their local Muslim communities where scepticism regarding certain modern conceptualisations of jihad run deep. Participants struggled with accepting their chilly reception; one likened it to the traumatising reception that Danish national army soldiers received upon returning from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – wars about which the Danish people had become disillusioned. The only section of society that appeared to show appreciation for the returning foreign fighters were groups of youngsters (*shabaab*) who shared their attraction to excitement and action. *Shabaabs* hovered around them, probing for gory war stories, and giggling at the thought of the virgins said to await a *mujahid* in heaven – hardly the accolade of the *mujahedeen* they were looking for.

One participant who fought with Shia militias in what was established as an official jihad by Shia religious authorities, described the humiliating and painful experience of being the only person not greeted by one of the elders who came to the local Danish mosque, both blushing with embarrassment and fuming with anger. The elder, who was a much-respected man in the congregation, would most often be welcomed before Friday prayer by fellow worshippers near the shoe rack in the foyer of the mosque, and accompanied into the prayer hall, shaking hands and greeting everyone on his way. Yet, since his travels, the elder would find ways to avoid this participant, either diverting himself or looking straight past him as if he was thin air, extending his hand to the person next to or behind him in such a deliberate way that no one around them could avoid noticing the disrespect.

This interview participant had a particularly bitter reaction, as he saw himself as having acted upon a religious call uttered by the very same authorities that he would assume the elder in the mosque would be loyal to. Though only one participant relayed notions of rebellion against his parents and their Westernised complacency he felt they represented – exemplifying the generational revolt that Olivier Roy suggests underpins the most recent wave of European jihadism – several others also recalled feeling painfully rejected by the older generation. This suggests that rather than having rejected them as sources of authority, as Roy thought, they value their opinion. [26] Several of their parents had fled areas of conflict and violence in order to give their children a life free from such concerns. They therefore tended to view their sons' involvement in conflict as vulgar and flippant.

The fathers and uncles of those interviewed for this study had urged them upon their return to focus on getting an education and finding a good, well-paying, steady job. Their mothers, in turn, instructed them to look after their families and find themselves a nice wife instead of going around 'acting the hero' or 'pretending they are an 'action man' on foreign battlefields. Such accusations were particularly painful, because of the implication that the participants' fighting in the Middle East was unauthentic and disingenuous, i.e., 'acting' or 'pretending'. While such descriptions may reflect a natural way for a parent to reconcile with, or distance themselves from, the violence of their offspring, the six interview participants were frustrated by how this reaction downplays the 'realness' and moral weight that they attributed to their actions. In their minds, they had acted in a way that made them not only 'real men', but 'men of honour'. Nevertheless, they were received back by their families as disobedient children. There was an anxiety around whether their families would 'know' them – an expression which in the original Danish word holds the same duality as in its English translation: both to be familiar to someone, but also to be acknowledged.[27]

The social stigmatisation also became explicit in the challenge it posed to finding a wife after returning home, as was the ambition of several of those interviewed. Potential spouses and not least their parents, who in religious families are often required to approve the engagement, were looking for settled men with steady jobs who would not suddenly leave their family to go and fight in the Middle East, risking a conviction for terrorism and being sent to prison, or ending up being killed in a far-away conflict. Such men were not in demand on the local marriage market.

When this author asked the interview participants about their experiences abroad, they recounted a reluctance, even amongst their closest friends – fellow gang members and workout buddies – to ask them about their journeys. They felt tainted by the invisible filter of violence they worried their parents, fellow mosque-goers, prospective in-laws, and others from their local community might view them through. Furthermore, the particularity of the violence with which they were associated holds the potential of being condemned as potential or *de facto* terrorists in the eyes of others.

One participant chose to shave off his beard when he started a new work placement, out of concern that his appearance may inadvertently disclose his new identity as jihadist, or in more vague terms, as an ‘extremist’. He weighed his words carefully, mindful never to come off as aggressive. Yet, he gradually disclosed a nagging resistance to changing his appearance in order to better ‘fit in’ according to logic and values that condemned him and with which he fundamentally disagreed.

He increasingly thought of the Western lifestyle as repulsive – he felt that the ‘realness’ of his experiences in ‘the land of jihad’ allowed him to better realise the vanities of mundane life back home. Initially, he talked about how he had partied alongside his high school classmates although he abstained from alcohol as if to demonstrate to this interviewer his ability to participate in mainstream culture. Eventually, he spoke more of the ambivalence that he felt – that ‘fitting in’ in such ways came at a cost to his integrity. Eventually, he described Danish society as selfish and egocentric, spoiled and immoral. Although he felt conflicted upon his return about the pragmatism with which he sought to divert suspicion, such as shaving his beard, as time wears on, he eventually began to take some form of subversive enjoyment in ‘posing’ as ‘normal’, in knowing something about himself that most others did not know. It made him feel like an ‘insider’ rather than the ‘outsider’, even if he was an insider only to his own reality. He had a mocking tone of voice as he said, ‘Let them see what they want to see’. When asked if he meant that ‘they’ see a terrorist or that ‘they’ do not know that he has fought in Syria he replied, ‘I will never be anything but a terrorist in their eyes’.

Yet in some instances, it was the interview participants who distanced themselves from individuals they had once had positive relationships with, because they themselves acquired new perspectives after returning, rather than the other way around. Several of them described certain people as ‘hypocrites’ if they passed judgement on them for having been a foreign fighter, yet openly supported the *cause* they fought for (e.g., they condemned President Bashar al-Assad’s air strikes on civilians). Or, those interviewed described them as ‘cowards’, if someone supported the cause and the fighting (i.e., accepted Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani’s call for jihad against Islamic State), but were not willing to join the fight themselves. They felt unjustly positioned as ‘baddies’, as a backdrop against which pious individuals – the ‘beardies’ (referring to the large beards worn particularly by Salafists or religious scholars) – could pose themselves as morally superior. Participants identified a self-serving purpose in how such people would publicly condemn injustices with reference to principles of non-violence in order to legitimise their own cowardice. In the view of those interviewed for this study, the ‘beardies’ sought to reinforce their façade as pious persons, while they were in fact unwilling to risk their lives the way those interviewed had done. The interview participants thus distinguished those who ‘acted’ against the rest, who remained passive and condemned those who acted. Through such ‘holier than thou’ reasoning, the participants were, in their own mind, able to dethrone people held in high regard within their religious and local communities, and who had dared to judge them for fighting. They claimed a more privileged and authentic access to ‘knowing’ about the spiritual ethics of violence from having been the ones who ‘acted’.

By depicting fighting as a claim to moral authenticity and visceral authority, the participants challenged traditional sources of authority within Islam. They did so by placing emphasis on the embodied experience of

war over intellectual or theological musings, as well as over merely ‘eye-witnessing’ the conflict from a distance via news or social media. They appeared to see themselves as what Yuval Harari has called ‘flesh-witnesses’: ‘They are neither thinkers nor mere eyewitnesses. Rather, they are men who have learned their wisdom with their flesh’.[28] Emphasising experiential authority simultaneously served the dual purpose of undermining the scepticism that they were experiencing and valuing their agency. In other words, the interview participants were the ones who acted when others were passive or ‘merely’ contributed to charity efforts. Claiming to be a ‘flesh-witness’ became a way for those with little or no status within the religious community to challenge the established religious leaders and claim moral authority by virtue of their martial experiences. In their view, only they had the privileged authority to speak about, and pass judgement on, what they witnessed as jihad.[29]

### ***Claiming Visceral Authority***

However, the participants’ embodied knowledge was not only a private matter but a public security concern. Participants worried about being put under surveillance by the security services; they were afraid of imprisonment and of having a terrorism conviction ruin their future life prospects. They had a more strained relationship with their local communities. They also had grounds to fear that their activities could have serious repercussions for their families and lessen or at least complicate their chances to get married. They were dealing with feelings of rejection, abandonment, and hopelessness about the future, feeling angry, nervous, and disillusioned. Their own meaning formation, therefore, became something of a struggle between societal attitudes towards them, and their defiance and insistence that their fighting jihad represented a righteous and pious activity. Because their activities were controversial to the extent that these had to be hidden from society, such meanings were largely kept isolated at the individual level. In the case of the interview participants, it may be that one replaced the other, so that when societal recognition seems unattainable, a defiance is emphasised in response. ‘How am I the bad guy?’ one participant asked rhetorically.

‘There is no knowing how great it is unless you were a part of it’, another participant offered. ‘If just one child was saved, then it is all worth it, because the people called for us, and we rallied’. Yet another participant recounted the thrilling experience when he as part of the militia rode into town and how they were praised by the crowds running alongside their vehicles. This sense of real appreciation made him feel needed in a more profound way than anything else in his life. They found a sense of purpose in the communal struggle, in the lives of lost civilians and fellow fighters, they found a cause that filled their spiritual void. And they all insisted that, in principle, they would not hesitate to do it again.

Jarrett Zigon’s description of narratives as ‘articulations of the embodied struggle to morally be with oneself and others in the social world’ points to the tension of feeling condemned exactly for having followed ones’ own ethical principles.[30] Feeling bitter and feeling proud intersect, as one cements the other when confronted with rejection. Before this chance to join the jihad arose, there was no redemption. Giving themselves up to serve a greater cause offered them an opportunity to view themselves as dignified. The conflicts in the Middle East presented them with the opportunity to no longer see themselves as sinners but as heroes – by defending the *ummah* they became ‘glorified mujahedeen’. However, upon return to Denmark they were on their own when it came to upholding this self-image.

The rejection those interviewed faced upon return meant that the meanings they ascribed to fighting remains fragile and ‘up in the air’. Stabilising meanings around their journeys into the jihad is therefore an ongoing effort in which they run the risk that returning home, in contrast to the intensity of the moral drama of jihad, would simply be an experience devoid of purpose and meaning, leading to feelings of not being needed, being excluded, and being emotionally detached. Cheryl Mattingly argues that in an existential crisis when it is ‘uncertain what kind of self one ought to become’, the construction of moral selves does not arise from available fixed positions but rather from an exploration of open-ended potentialities.[31] In the case of foreign fighters, the ‘dignified self’ of a *mujahid* represented one such a potentiality. However, as this ‘process of becoming’ took place in a highly charged atmosphere upon return, being labelled a ‘potential terrorist’ is another attribute that

might be assigned to each of them.

The interview participants remained defiantly attached to the meanings they had ascribed to their journeys upon return. To repent their actions and throw those meanings, as it were, into the fire would escalate an existential crisis. One interview participant was cautious when I asked him whether he felt like a hero, and answered that he does not feel fundamentally changed, but adding that he had gained for himself a point of pride which he could use to distance himself from the more negative projections of his self, a kind of buffer between the fault lines in his self-perception.

By means of fighting jihad, those six men interviewed for this study sought to rise above their previous lives and thereby render that part of their past irrelevant – in other words, to overwrite their previous script. Fighting a cause that connected notions of being rebellious, radical, and non-conformist with notions of being honourable and ethical appears to be particularly conducive to such an effect. This is what Eric Hoffer described as particularly attractive ‘not to those intent on bolstering and advancing a cherished self, but to those who crave to be rid of an unwanted self’.[31]

Yet these men did not necessarily seek to do so by breaking with their former violent practices, but rather by situating that violence in a new context that resonates with their ethics. As such, radical and violent sentiments may resonate with certain subjectivities exactly because they speak directly to the *dissonant* feeling with which they move in mainstream society. These men negotiated their identities in a context that demanded allegiance to, and alignment with, ‘Danish values’ while simultaneously being constructed as a suspect population and as a potential ‘enemy within’.

The interactive nature of resonance is illustrated in the work of Zehra F. K. Arat and Abdullah Hasan, who argue that not only have Western media and political discourse cast Muslim men as terrorists, but various jihadist groups have further sought to cement this stereotype.[33] These stereotypes do not exist in parallel but rather in dialogue, as they both draw on each other to emphasise the violence inherent in the masculine myth. Yet in the jihadist form, violence was claimed as an empowerment of Muslim masculinity – one that promised to resolve its problematisation as suspect. Hence it relies on the emasculating experience of normative marginalisation that makes its emancipatory narrative resonate. When participants talked of a need to ‘straighten their back’, they did so from a position of being bent.

The compelling idea of ‘a sudden political and social revolution whereby the humiliated and excluded of today are to become the omnipotent rulers of tomorrow’, as Manni Crone puts it, ‘proposes a form of empowerment, whereby social and political impotence can be exchanged for a position of action and power’.[34] This is exactly what Islamic State promised when it came to recruiting foreign fighters, and this is also the reason why it has been so hard to counter.

This notion also helps to unlock the question of why so many foreign fighters as well as European sympathisers of al-Qaeda or Islamic State seemed to live outwardly secular and in some cases in fact delinquent lifestyles immediately before leaving for the Middle East (or before committing a terrorist attack in the West). From the perspective of ‘cross over’ between criminal and jihadist environments, it is exactly the nature of the criminal and secular lives that the participants have led that makes it credible that a jihad narrative of redemption resonates with them – precisely because of, rather than in spite of, the contrast. To become foreign fighters and leave for the Middle East offered them a way to do ‘good’ in a concrete and realised form through a practice that was previously the cause of their condemnation. There is undeniably more at stake by joining jihadist movements than being part of criminal environments, such as the promise of an otherwise unlikely spiritual absolution. Religion provides an opportunity for salvation more relevant to the sinner than to the saint, and such relevance is connected to moral emotions: ‘The more poignant the sense of sin, the more urgent the desire to escape it’.[35] The desire for salvation is reliant on the pre-existence of sin, but also on the intervention of a search for a moral modality of being.

Those interviewed were proud of having been foreign fighters; several of them considered it the most honourable thing they had ever done. For some it was perhaps the *only* dignifying act they could claim. The controversial

nature of the path they chose, in some cases only worked to strengthen their resolve. It facilitated a narrative of perseverance in the face of obstacles through which they proved their faith and gave them a ground to stand on. Fighting may represent a transgression, but the radicalism of their activities was not merely an incidental by-product of their activities, but rather speaks to the specific configurations of their becoming. Challenging societal norms around violence seeks to challenge the authority society claims over them. By standing up in outright defiance of the boundaries of what is perceived as permissible violence, their transgression apparently also served to transcend such norms and place them beyond the reach of such norms.

### **Conclusions**

Few central insights from these six foreign fighters' experiences of returning to Denmark after having fought alongside jihadist militant groups in the Middle East, that relate to European policy initiatives will be highlighted here.

Because their activities were (and are) controversial and necessitated a degree of secrecy, all six participants struggled to align their own understanding of their journeys as foreign fighters with the rejection and negative judgement coming from their surroundings. Consequently, some meanings became isolated and entrenched at the individual level. The six interview participants remain defiantly attached to those meanings they ascribed to their journeys. In some cases, these meanings were their only claim to a sense of moral dignity. To repent their actions would be to throw the meanings they attach to them as it were into the dustbin and thereby deepen an existential crisis. This explains why some European prospective returnees have refused to offer public repentance for what they did – even when it may cost them their chance to return. In relation to rehabilitation initiatives, this defiance often represents an obstacle to engaging in programs that presuppose and demand ideological disengagement and repentance prior to joining and benefitting from such a program. It may therefore be fruitful not to make such demands for rehabilitation initiatives.

One observed effect of the entrenchment of meaning, was how some interview participants reacted to social rejection. They did so by a reinterpretation of the spiritual authority located in the embodied experience of jihad. In relation to rehabilitation initiatives, this is worth noting when involving religious authorities into such initiatives. Returnees do not necessarily relate in a dogmatic way to matters of theology and religious authorities, but actively interpret religious creeds in relation to their own situations and select authorities that support those interpretations. As the interview participants placed emphasis on masculine ideals of embodiment and action, a theological discussion with them may miss the target.

Several participants noted how feeling disconnected from their local environments was the most difficult experience upon returning. This points to the sensitivity with which such relations should be drawn into the workings of state programmes, as the trust between returnees and their surroundings is crucial for successful reintegration – although it remains fragile.

While away, participants were doused with enormous amounts of adrenaline and praise, two things that one can thrive on. But both experiences – excitement and recognition – were denied them upon return as they felt isolated from the broader society. Not only did they miss the intensity and drama of their wartime experiences, they also missed the profound sense of purpose, meaning, and worthiness that they had felt abroad. In relation to rehabilitation initiatives, but also with regard to prevention programs, it could be helpful to better understand the potential invigorating effects of these experiences on the individuals. It also explains why the idea of 'a normal good life' does not necessarily sound attractive to the returnee nor to the potential jihadist traveller. This may well be the reason why initiatives that focus on the level of ideology struggle to resonate in a way that presents credible and attractive alternatives to 'the glamor, energy, and sheer badassery' of jihad as an ideal. [36] Rehabilitation initiatives may need to accept that for some the most disillusioning and traumatising thing about fighting, may have been giving it up.

Finally, policy questions along the lines of ‘how can we help these people adapt back into society’ miss their target, if these returnees see nothing comforting in European societies. Consequently, it would be helpful to move on from the perspective of radicalisation as an event that *changes* a person, and instead focus on how people *choose* extremist projects that, however limited and potentially problematic, may pose a ‘solution’ to their frustrations, and offer them a strategy for generating vindication and (self-)esteem. The Middle Eastern conflicts represented not just a unique opportunity to ‘become’ somebody radically different from the subjectivities available to the participants in the West, but also an easily attainable one. The belief that violence redeems morality may be so appealing simply because it is so achievable. This contrasts with the search for societal recognition and grounding that the participants find unattainable. For this reason, questions around rehabilitation may in fact relate closely to those of prevention. If we do not take seriously the reasons why young men like those interviewed for this study left in the first place, we may wrongly assume they wish to return to that very situation. If their position within society was exactly what they sought to escape by becoming foreign fighters, then rehabilitation promises of readjusting back into it will not sound particularly attractive.

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### Notes

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[2] Cf. CTED (2018), *The Challenge of Returning and Relocating Foreign Terrorist Fighters*. URL: <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/CTED-Trends-Report-March-2018.pdf>

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[12] Cf. Tammikko, Teemu (2018). 'The Threat of Returning Foreign Fighters: Finnish State Responses to the Volunteers in the Spanish and Syria-Iraq Civil Wars', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 30:5, pp. 844-861; Nilsson, Marco (2015), "Foreign Fighters and the Radicalization of Local Jihad: Interview Evidence from Swedish Jihadists", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38 (5), pp. 343-358; Zuijdewijn and Bakker, op. cit.

[13] Cf. Kristiansen, Siri, & Marte Feiring (2018), "Monster og Mann: Utfordringer ved Rehabilitering av Returnerte Fremmedkrigere"; in: *Fremmedkrigere: forebygging, straffeførfølgn og rehabilitering i Skandinavia*, Anna Andersson, Sofie A. E. Høgestøl & Anne Christine Lie (Eds.); Gyldendal Juridisk; UNOCT (2017), *Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria*; URL: [http://www.un.org/en/counterterrorism/assets/img/Report\\_Final\\_20170727.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/counterterrorism/assets/img/Report_Final_20170727.pdf); TERR (2018), *How to handle returning foreign fighters: policies and challenges*; URL: [www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2018/04/Testimony\\_EP\\_RENARD\\_042018.pdf?type=pdf](http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2018/04/Testimony_EP_RENARD_042018.pdf?type=pdf).

[14] A jihadist group is here taken to mean a militant group justifying its use of violence with reference to the concept of jihad.

[15] Swedberg, Richard (2012), "Theorizing in Sociology and Social Science: Turning to the Context of Discovery". *Theory and Society* 41 (1), pp. 1-40; Yanow, Dvora, and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (2015), *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*. Taylor & Francis, p. 141.

[16] Van Deurzen, Emmy, and Claire Arnold-Baker (2005), *Existential Perspectives on Human Issues*. London: Macmillan International Higher Education, pp. 269-270; Bennett, Michael (2012), "Camus' Unbeknownst Legacy: Or, 'I'm Having an Existential Crisis!', Chapter 4, pp. 53-63, in: Emmanuelle Vanborre (Ed.), *The Originality and Complexity of Albert Camus's Writings*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 53-63.

[17] There exists little indication to the effect that the idea of a life-long commitment and emigration was common among Danish foreign fighters until after the Islamic State established the idea of the caliphate in June 2014. Until then, fighting was generally conceived of as a temporary endeavor. When it did become the case that most foreign fighters were leaving with the deliberate intent of emigrating to the caliphate permanently, the numbers seemed to drop rather than increase – in part due to frustrations over the internal strife between Islamic State and other jihadist groups (only approximately 25 people left Denmark in 2015-2016, while 110 had left before end of 2014 according to CTA Threat Analyses of 2014 and 2016. – CTA, (2016), *Threat Assessment*; URL: <https://www.pet.dk/Publikationer/~/media/VTD%202016/20160428VTDpdf.ashx>.

CTA (2014), *Threat Assessment*; URL: <https://www.pet.dk/Publikationer/~/media/CTA/20141212VTDendeligpdf.ashx>. It may therefore well be that many of the other Danish foreign fighters, like the six interview participants, left with the intent to return.

[18] Chor, Jakob, Mette Dahlgaard, and Lena Masri (2013), "Trusler Mod Danskere Vækker Vrede." *Berlingske Tidende*, August 26.

[19] There is a key theological difference between whether jihad is regarded as a collective duty of the entire *ummah* to supply enough men to fight so that as long as there is a sufficient number fighting, it is not a duty for each individual to join the fight (*fard al-kifayah*), or whether it is an individual duty for *all* able-bodied Muslims, so that one's personal salvation depends upon carrying out this duty (*fard al-ayn*). The fact that the six interview participants predominantly interpret jihad as a collective duty does not necessarily mean that they disavow the idea that jihad could ever be an individual duty; they just did not see the present circumstances as living up to the criteria for such jihad.

[20] Ministry of Justice (2016), *Regeringen Indfører Indrejseforbud i Kamp Mod Terror*; URL: <http://www.justitsministeriet.dk/nyt-og-presse/pressemeddelelser/2016/regeringen-indfoerer-indrejseforbud-i-kamp-mod-terror>.

[21] Hvilsom, Frank (2016), "Opsigtvækkende Kendelse: Landsretten Vil Ikke Give 19-Årig Hans Pas Tilbage." *Politiken*, November 2; Jyllands-Posten (2016), *Politi fastholder krav om at tage pas fra udlandskriger*. December 1; Sørensen, Allan, and Jens Anton Bjørnager. "Hun Kæmpede Mod IS: Joanna Palani Får Ikke Sit Pas Tilbage." *Jyllands-Posten*, 2016.

[22] TV2. 2017, *Kæmpede Mod IS - Får Ni Måneders Fængsel for at Bryde Udrejseforbud*. November 22.

[23] Crucial as to whether or not foreign fighters are viewed as potential threats by the security services when returning home is how these foreign fighters conceptualise the conflicts in the Middle East in a global context. What is particularly important to know is whether they regard Western countries as legitimate targets for attack. In recent years, rebel troops have moved across country lines: veterans from the civil war in Libya have moved to Syria to continue the fight there, while fighters have moved across the border between Syria and Iraq. Some consider these fights to be local offshoots of a cosmic war. Such interpretations are not always stable but may be flexible, according to an individual fighter's experiences. One interview participant who fought against Colonel Muammar Ghaddafi's regime, began, in an interview, to describe a local engagement that had as much to do with his own family history as it did with religious ideals about future Islamic rule in Libya. In an interview he observed that had he been a couple of years younger and had he been coming of age after Colonel Muammar Ghaddafi's fall and when the Syrian civil war broke out, it would have been entirely possible that he would have joined that conflict instead.

[24] Reuters (2016), "Islamic State Calls for Attacks on the West during Ramadan in Audio Message." May 21.

[25] While the interview participants in this study did not maintain connections with religious environments upon return, some other research points to the fact that belonging to criminal and jihadist environments may in some instances co-exist comfortably. Cf. Basra, Rajan and Peter R. Neumann (2016), "Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus". *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10 (6); Conti, Uliano. (2017), "Between rap and jihad: spectacular subcultures, terrorism and visuality". *Contemporary Social Science* 12(3-4), 272-284; Ilan, Jonathan and Sandberg, Sveinung (2018), "How 'gangsters' become jihadists: Bourdieu, criminology and the crime-terrorism nexus". *European Journal of Criminology*; Neumann, Peter R. and Rajan Basra (2018). *The Crime-Terror Nexus in Denmark and Sweden*. Panta Rhei Research.

[26] Roy, Olivier (2017), *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[27] Originally in Danish: 'at kende/at kendes ved'.

[28] Harari, Yuval (2008), *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000*. New York: Springer, p. 7.

[29] This term also covers the theological implications of 'witnessing'. According to some interpretations, the act of fighting, being injured, or dying for a religious cause constitutes a way of 'bearing witness' (*shuhada*) to one's faith (aligned with pronouncing the declaration of faith, the *shahada*) that makes the person a *shahid* (witness, but it also means martyr), granting him spiritual immortality. Cf. Asad, Talal (2007), *On Suicide Bombing*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 48.

[30] Zigon, Jarrett (2012), "Narratives"; in: Didier Fassin (Ed.), *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, Hoboken, N.J: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 204-205.

[31] Mattingly, Cheryl (2013), "Moral Selves and Moral Scenes: Narrative Experiments in Everyday Life." *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 78 (3), pp. 301-327.

[32] Hoffer, Eric (1966), *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*. New York: Harper Collins, pp. 12-13.

[33] Zehra F. Kabasakal Arat & Abdullah Hasan (2018), "Muslim masculinities: what is the prescription of the Qur'an?" *Journal of Gender Studies* 27(7), pp. 780-788.

[34] Crone, Manni (2016), "Radicalization revisited: violence, politics and the skills of the body". *International Affairs* 92(3), p. 595.

[35] Cottee, Simon (2016), "The Salvation of Sinners and the Suicide Bomb". *Foreign Policy*, August 11; cf. also Hoffer, op.cit., p. 57.

[36] Cottee, Simon (2015), *The Challenge of Jihadi Cool*, *The Atlantic*. December 24.