

## **BECOMING A FOREIGN FIGHTER: THE ETHICS AND AGENCY OF FIGHTING JIHAD**

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Two young men are showing me a picture of themselves in mismatched camouflage on an Iraqi battlefield. Their arms are around a clerical militia commander. Elwan and Yosef may look relaxed in the photos, but at the same time, they look out of place. Their tank tops reveal their biceps and their sports shoes stand out against the official-looking uniform of the stern-faced commander.

Back home in Denmark now, they're telling me about their battle experiences on a worn-out leather sofa in a cold room with half-torn Real Madrid posters on the concrete walls. They flick past 'selfies' taken on the airplane that show them with large Beats headphones around their necks, and images of them posing on hilltops with the desert landscape stretching out behind them. They're sunburned in shades of dark red with sunglasses on their foreheads, looking as much the cliché of European tourists as the foreign fighters their story would reveal them to be.

Elwan and Yosef are two of the six Danish foreign fighters I followed for several years, to come closer to an understanding of what happened when more than 150 Danes and 4000 Europeans went to the Middle East to join Islamist militant movements fighting in the conflicts that followed the 'Arab Spring'. These foreign fighters appear to come from all strata of society and represent a broad spectrum – from young idealists to pious Salafi-jihadists and hardened criminals. Some sought a completely new life fighting jihad, while others simply went for the duration of their semester holidays.

### **A very puzzling thing**

Journalists, policy makers and academics alike were taken aback by this phenomenon - why would young men who were born or brought up in the Danish welfare state choose to replace its comforts with the violent realities of far-removed conflicts? It seems to go against the liberal democratic logic of striving for 'the good life' – as it is generally understood, as one of stability, safety and possibility for economic advancement. At the heart of this puzzle are also immediate concerns over how such motivations could reflect a desire to engage in terrorism 'at home'.

Debates on this issue have revolved around whether the ‘root cause’ is religious/ideological radicalisation, or the consequence of socio-economic marginalisation. Although these two branches of the literature are not mutually exclusive, and many studies consider both factors, they appear to bite each other’s tail. Are such violent actions a consequence of dogma inherent in a particular religious ideology, or does the religious ideology merely provide a legitimising narrative for violent actions that grow out of frustrations caused by social marginalisation?

### **What do they think about going?**

Although ‘Why do they go’ is an important question, it may not be the best one to ask as a researcher, because of its in-built orientation towards simple answers to a difficult problem. In my PhD project, I sought instead to answer the related question of how becoming a fighting came to seem meaningful and purposeful to each of the foreign fighters I got to know. This meant taking their religious ideology seriously while also remaining sensitive to their social reality. Through my fieldwork and interviews, I broadened the focus to include their life stories prior to leaving, their experiences on the battlefield and their experiences of returning. This meant I needed to pay close attention to ethical questions such as safeguarding their anonymity and for that reason all names (apart from Abde’s, which was already publicized) and identifying details have been changed.

The people I encountered in my study were neither brainwashed cult members nor bloodthirsty terrorists. Instead, I came to learn a far more human story about young men seeking a chance at glory by fighting what they thought of as jihad. Rather than being mindlessly radicalized, these individuals actively sought out jihad as a vindication of the frustrations and anxieties of their lives. Therefore, their choice to fight jihad related as much to their position within Danish society as it did to religious creeds or Middle Eastern politics.

### **Moral Crossroads**

Now, let me introduce you properly to Elwan and Yosef, as well as the other participants. Elwan and Yosef are friends and grew up together in the concrete surroundings where we met. Their faces carry old scars, and when they roll up their sleeves, their tattoos tell their own story. They’ve led chaotic lives on the fringes of society and appear as if they’re not trying to succeed in life so much as avoid major tragedy. They were both kicked out of school, have criminal records and are estranged from their families. They spend most of their time lifting weights in the local gym. When

I first meet them, they're looking to travel out to Iraq again soon, and going to the gym has taken on a whole new meaning for them. Working out is no longer just about body image and vanity. Instead it's a form of worship; they're improving their bodies to use them as fighting tools for God. Elwan and Yosef have started to see gym activities that were previously ordinary and mundane as holy since their travels as foreign fighters.

A similar transformation happens in how they see themselves. Whereas before they were merely 'thugs' hustling to get by, they now see themselves as the soldiers of God. Elwan was not exactly looking forward to standing before God on judgement day and welcomes fighting jihad as an unexpected chance to redeem himself of his former sins. As well as forgiving all sins in the afterlife by the first drop of blood, Elwan explains, fighting jihad also levels him with society's high achievers; efforts towards earning status through education or employment are insignificant compared to jihad in his eyes.

The Nørrebro gang leader, Abde, puts it bluntly, that "*Some people have died of my hands, and that is a big problem when I meet Allah ... It's not good enough just praying with all the shit I have done*", hinting at several interrelated levels of his upcoming journey to fight in Syria. It relates at once back in time to his former sinful deeds, to the near future when he will do 'more' than praying (i.e., fighting jihad), and into the eternal life beyond when he meets his maker. By fighting jihad in Syria, Abde seeks to be absolved of his past sins and live and die with a less problematic relationship to God and his own conscience. Fighting thereby works on several levels, relating to a political reality in the Middle East as well as to Abde's own life.

### **A chance at vindication**

Yet, only half of the foreign fighters I follow have criminal backgrounds; many have led rather unremarkable and 'straight' lives before going. They are enrolled in education or hold stable jobs. Their frustrations were more indirect, yet a very real presence in their lives prior to going to fight.

A telling example is how Ameer relays missing study group sessions at the main public library, because of his fear of being profiled according to Omar el-Hussein's stereotype by the heavily armed guards permanently installed by the synagogue entrance since el-Hussein's attack. If he knew in advance of these study groups, he would carefully consider what to wear, foregoing a 'hoodie' or other street wear. On the days when the library visit was planned spontaneously, he would start to

feel queasy as he turned down the narrow side street across from the Copenhagen Round Tower. His palms would get sweatier with each heartbeat pumping adrenaline around his body, but he is also focused on seeming calm, as he is worried that nervousness could be seen as displaying suspicious behaviour. Sometimes he would simply turn around and miss the study group session.

These experiences are mirrored by Samir who tells of having been stopped on the street as a teenager while walking with his friends ordered to take turns opening each other's jackets and patting down each other's trousers, the police officer remarking 'Better you do it, if one of you is wearing a suicide vest'. 'How do you look each other in the eyes after that?' Samir asks rhetorically. He adds that he and his friends stopped spending time at playgrounds after police had approached them there and asked if they were selling drugs to minors – when they themselves were barely teenagers. His tone of voice turns dark as he tells about being stopped along with his younger brothers on the way home from the grocery shop, bags of vegetables in hand, to be quizzed about being a gang.

To bring out their nuances, let's contrast Abde's statement about absolution for murder against Imran saying, "I thought that if I did this [fighting in Syria] I would come back with a straightened back [...] To be, like, proud, shake whatever they think of me off my shoulders." Like Abde, Imran also expects to relate differently to himself after having gone to Syria, as having achieved something he could be proud of. Yet this change is not related to any crimes he has done previously in his life, but to how the way he feels perceived in society weighs him down.

### **Jihad as violent self-realisation**

I found that for participants, becoming a foreign fighter offered the promise of a solution, however partial and ultimately self-contradictory, to feelings of frustration regarding one's moral place in the world. They attach to the trip a chance to '*become good*' by '*doing good*'.

Yet, they are forced to actively reinterpret its meaning, as the reality on ground is less dramatic than they expected and, in fact, often awfully boring. They are given logistical tasks or placed at watchposts, passing long hours observing dust settling. After his first trip to Iraq, Elwan, like several others, is worried that he has not yet been wounded and bled. He complains that it is in fact unfair that it should come down to whether one was *literally* wounded over whether one was *willing* in his

heart to be wounded. He almost convinces himself of that relativity but still sets off on his second trip in search of a new chance to test his mettle and gain a battle wound.

### **Returning to rejection**

This study highlights how the promise of jihad related directly to these men's former lives in ways that served to make the experience meaningful to them as a moral transformation. Rather than having been radicalised into a certain dogmatism, these men were active interpreters and re-interpreters, shaping the purpose fighting abroad would serve for them.

Yet, their fighting represented an ambiguous redemption, because the meanings that the journeys have for these men are negated by the communities and wider society to which they return. They are not greeted as returning heroes by their families or local communities upon return, but rather shunned, an excluded from marriage opportunities or the local mosque. Yet, giving in to social judgment would for some mean giving up the only thing they ever felt proud about. Instead they cling to their view of having fought a moral fight and condemn the rest as hypocrites, separating them further from the social fabric they were already struggling to find their place in.

### **What can we learn from talking to people?**

This study offers a glimpse into the unique experience of becoming a foreign fighter. It shows how religious creeds, Middle Eastern conflicts and frustrations regarding their positions within Danish society came together in how these men were actively shaping the purpose they attached to their journeys. Furthermore, it shows that talking to people to understand the logics of their (violent) actions may prove concepts such as radicalisation lacking in their abilities to grasp the many facets of the human experience. Finally, it suggests that when researchers show willingness to adopt new perspectives, seeing our own society through different lenses may uncover uneasy positions within it otherwise not visible to us.