



# Research on Danish Salafi-jihadist foreign fighters

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In my PhD project, I explore the Salafi-jihadist milieu in Denmark from an empirical angle through qualitative interviews with relatives of non-returned foreign fighters, interviews with foreign fighter returnees and ethnographic fieldwork within the Danish Salafi-jihadist environment. By combining various criminological analytical frameworks, I cover different and contradictory aspects of my data. Moreover, I explore the neglected methodological obstacles of gaining access to the Salafi-jihadist environment, for example, by examining how my position as a non-Muslim female researcher influences the process of gaining access to the Salafi-jihadist environment.

Scandinavia (especially Denmark and Sweden) has housed a considerable number of individuals who left for the Syrian-Iraqi conflict zone since 2012 (Danish Security and Intelligence Service, 2020; Gustafsson & Ranstorp, 2017). In a Danish context, 161 persons have left Denmark to become affiliated with a terrorist organization in Syria or Iraq. Approximately one third have returned to Denmark or another European country, one third have died in the conflict zone, and 34 persons are still in Syria or a neighboring country (Danish Security and Intelligence Service, 2021). However, not much literature on foreign fighter trajectories and returnees' reintegration exists within a Scandinavian context. Additionally, few studies are empirically based (see e.g., Speckhard 2009; Aasgaard 2017; Greenwood 2018; Nilsson 2018; van San 2018). Yet, the fall of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria in 2018 marks a historical shift in terrorism studies, bringing with it new challenges for counter-terrorism, in which the defector and thus the potential returnee becomes an explicit object of study (cf. Coolsaet 2017).

In my research, I have explicitly focused on some of the methodological obstacles related to gaining access to the Salafi-jihadist milieu, which is both clandestine and hard-to-reach. As I commenced my empirical work, I soon realized that my position as woman and as non-Muslim both thwarted and facilitated the process of gaining access in various ways. Having been in a field where a large proportion of the scholars are males and where only few studies present new empirically-based insights (cf. Schuurman & Eijkman 2013; Lum, Kennedy, Sherley 2006), I found that there was a need for inquiring into how the female non-Muslim researcher is both challenged and supported in the process of gaining access to the milieu. My colleague Henriette Frees Esholdt



## ESSAY

has gained similar experiences from her research on Salafi-jihadist milieus in Sweden and together we wrote an article on this matter (see Jørgensen & Esholdt 2021). First, it is important to clarify that the process of gaining access involves more than simply opening a door. Thus, access implies 1) the initial stage of searching for and contacting potential informants; 2) gaining further access through building trusted interpersonal relations; and 3) accessing sensitive emotional insights in the interview situation (Jørgensen & Esholdt 2021, p. 1). We both experienced that female relatives of foreign fighters were more willing to talk with us than the firsthand sources were, and in our article, we conclude that an empathetic approach, as part of which emotional labor is often undertaken, facilitated continued access to relevant insights in the interview situation. That also implies that the female position may challenge the access process if one is not ready to play along with such stereotypical gender roles, including, for example, offering comfort. Furthermore, it became clear that somehow there was a natural limit to how far we could go when it came to male gatekeepers and sources due to our female and non-Muslim positionality. For example, we frequently encountered the argument that people from the milieu could be 'quite tough' (Jørgensen & Esholdt 2021). Such findings are important and contribute new perspectives on gendered obstacles and openings in the process of gaining access to a hard-to-reach gender-segregated milieu typically hostile towards non-Muslims.

Another methodological obstacle Esholdt and I soon faced through the process of gaining initial access were emotional trials that emerged when experiencing risks of physical dangers, emotional stressors and ethical issues. In another methodological paper (Esholdt & Jørgensen 2021), we explore how these emotional trials formed and influenced the initial access process. One of the conclusions we draw is that the process of gaining access is challenged by the lack of willingness from social workers to help act as gatekeepers in the process of establishing contact with sources.

Due to the political situation in Scandinavia, where women and children are beginning to be and some already have been repatriated from the prison camps in Northern Syria, such methodological issues and conclusions are even more important to disseminate among practitioners and within the political landscape. Not much has been written about the women and children who have returned to Denmark, and there is an essential need for ensuring that empirically-based research can be carried out among people being in close proximity to them and male foreign fighter returnees. Providing methodological transparency within a field that is characterized by few empirical studies and which is emotionally demanding is crucial in order to be able to collect solid data in the future. Furthermore, we conceptualize the ethnographic work within the field as a form of 'edgework' (Lyng 1990) as we did also experience the vivid pleasures of being at the edge, entering the field and sometimes even gaining data. We thus end our article by »passing on Ferrell and Hamm's invitation to undertake ethnographic research on crime and deviance and



## ESSAY

to be inspired by moments of edgework. In other words, to 'Push back the edges; kick out the jams; invent new sorts of field research, new dangers and pleasures, beyond what we can imagine (Hamm & Ferrell 1998)« (Esholdt & Jørgensen 2021, p. 19).

In 2020, the Danish Government launched the so-called »Fremmedkrigerpakke, a political initiative directed towards Danish jihadist foreign fighters.« Prohibition of sojourn and contact is part of the Government's eight initiatives and it gives the Police permission to search previously convicted individuals' houses and computers without a warrant. From substantiated research studies, we know that such prohibitions are not key factors in supporting extremists to exit the radical milieus. These people can easily establish new unions at new places-both physically and digitally. Concerning research, the Government's legislation proposals will consequently make it even more difficult to get access to the milieus in the future (cf. Jørgensen & Hayward 2020). The legislation proposals give incentive to the milieus to close themselves off even more from the surrounding society and any request from outsiders will most likely be met with even more suspicion. That is quite unfortunate for the field of terrorism studies in Scandinavia as the proposal might complicate the researcher's access process further (especially for those who are double-outsiders in the form of being both women and a non-Muslims) and make the field even more impenetrable.

Another strand of my research explores the relatives of non-returned, Danish male foreign fighters. Drawing on Sykes & Matza's (1957) theory on neutralization techniques I conclude that the relatives to a large extent do not construct exculpatory narratives in order to neutralize and legitimize their family members' affiliations with Salafi-jihadism. The article (Jørgensen, 2022 forthcoming) unravels and investigates pathways into Salafi-jihadism and factors explaining the reaffirmed commitment to the milieus. This should help inform future counter terrorism efforts.

Besides this, I have examined foreign fighter returnees' engagement with and disengagement from the Salafi-jihadist milieus by using and rethinking Matza's (1964) classic theory on drift. Through experiences of normative marginalization (cf. Greenwood, 2018) and discrimination the protagonists become open to engagement in Salafi-jihadist networks as a form of counter culture to mainstream society.

Another political initiative focusing on safety, the so-called »Tryghedspakke« (The Danish Ministry of Justice, 2020), aims at reducing the generation of insecure environments and is directed towards 'young men with non-Western background.' The initiative, which proposes specific restrictions for young males with ethnic minority background, has received criticism from experts for being discriminatory (see e.g., Gilliam et al. 2020; Whyte et al. 2021). This is another example of how new political initiatives in Denmark in some ways can be argued to keep young males especially those with ethnic minority backgrounds in normative marginalization and discrimination-in the worst case pushing them towards extremist milieus.



Besides studying Salafi-jihadism, I have previously studied people engaged in the activity of sharing intimate images online without consent from those portrayed. On the basis of this research I depicted two different sharing environments: an acquaintance-based sharing environment (where sharers usually know each other, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Dropboxes are used for sharing) and an organized sharing environment (where the sharers usually appear anonymous and sharing platforms-Web pages and Discords-are placed on the dark Web) (Jørgensen & Demant 2021). That is another hard-to-reach population that is extremely difficult to reach as a researcher and which, in some ways, is closely related with Incels and right-wing extremism. I have further conducted interviews with left-wing radicals who went to Syria to fight Islamic terrorist organizations representing, for example, YPG. There seems to be some overlap between the various forms of extremism and comparing the milieus seems to be an important task for future research (see e.g., Koch 2022).

The new geopolitical landscape, including, for example, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, is a reminder that there is an eminent need to explore various forms of extremism and how and why people choose to become affiliated with terror organizations and extremist milieus.

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My name is Kathrine Elmoose Jørgensen. I hold a BSc and MSc in Sociology from the University of Copenhagen. I submitted my PhD-dissertation on January 31<sup>st</sup> 2022, and I am currently employed as a research assistant at the Faculty of Law, University of Copenhagen.

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