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BECOMING A FOREIGN FIGHTER

The Ethics and Agency of Fighting Jihad

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MAJA TOUZARI GREENWOOD
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PhD dissertation

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CONTENTS

DANISH ABSTRACT	6
ENGLISH ABSTRACT	7
AKNOWLEDGEMENTS	8
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY AND DISSERTATION	13
The puzzle and research questions	14
Doing research in real-time	18
Research design overview	21
Argument structure	23
Relevance and contributions	25
Conceptual contribution to studies of radicalisation and religious violence	25
Empirical contribution to studies of European jihadism	43
Methodological contribution to Critical Security Studies	45
Considering benefice	46
Delineation	48
Anti Anti-apologeticism	50
CHAPTER TWO: AN INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH DESIGN	53
Research design as emergent	53
Situational ethics	55
Method	57
Fieldwork, interviewing and data	57
Empathetic immersion	66
Critical distance	69
Consent and anonymity	72
Analysis strategy	74
Theorising	74
Hermeneutic phenomenology	77
Validity and reliability	79
Analysis themes	80
Existentialism	81
Violence	84
Liminality	87
Resonance	91
Presentation of data and writing style	93

Embodied meanings	93
Drama	95
Reflexivity and positionality	99
CHAPTER THREE: BACKGROUND ON FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND JIHAD.....	103
Conceptualising foreign fighters	103
An overview of definitions	104
A suggested typology	108
Introduction to the concept of jihad.....	111
History of the concept of jihad	113
Tradition for redemption through jihad	118
Foreign fighters in the current jihad contexts.....	121
The Libyan revolution and its aftermath	122
Jihadist infrastructure and networks across the Syrian border	124
Jabhat al-Nusra and the dilemmas of al-Qaeda's presence in Syria	127
Ahrar al-Sham and the local jihad	130
Islamic State's caliphate and the practice of hijra	132
The Shiite jihad in Iraq and the threat of sectarianism	136
CHAPTER FOUR: PATHWAYS OF VIOLENCE	141
PART ONE: FINDING THE WAY	142
Elwan.....	142
Yosef	147
Abde	149
Ameer	151
Samir	154
Imran	157
Moral crossroads	159
Roads to redemption.....	163
Ways of the hero.....	167
Discussion: Being by doing.....	171
PART TWO: THE JOURNEY	175
Setting off.....	176
Getting in	180
Fitting in	184
Waiting	187
Fighting	193
Negotiating violence as morality-in-practice	201
Liminality and transformation	206

Discussion: The making of men	213
PART THREE: COMING HOME	216
Returning	216
Landing on familiar but unfriendly ground	221
Reuniting and clashing	224
Hating the haters	227
Meaning and dignity	231
Discussion: Prolonged liminality	234
DISCUSSION: THE RESONANCE OF JIHADISM	236
Marginalised resonance	238
Masculine resonance	240
Embodied resonance	242
Moral resonances	244
What resonance does (and does not)	247
CHAPTER FIVE: ARE FOREIGN FIGHTERS TROUBLEMAKERS, OR TROUBLED?	251
Outlining the study's conclusions and their implications	251
Normative marginalisation and the resonance of jihadism	252
Recognition, divinity and authenticity	255
Redemption	256
Embodied meanings of violence	258
Policy implications	260
Constructing suspect subjectivities	260
An existentialist perspective	263
Limitations and self-critical reflections	265
Future avenues for research	267
BIBLIOGRAPHY	271

DANISH ABSTRACT

Denne afhandling præsenterer seks mænds historie, som alle valgte at rejse fra Danmark til Mellem-østen for at kæmpe som fremmedkrigere med jihadistiske grupper i de konflikter som fulgte i kølvandet på det Arabiske Forår. Den baseres på et fireårigt interview- og feltarbejdestudie, og anlægger et eksistentielistisk perspektiv for at besvare spørgsmålet om hvilken mening deltagerne tilskriver at kæmpe jihad i udlandet. For at forstå disse meningers kontekst, breddes det analytiske blik ud til også at inkludere deres livssituationer inden rejserne og refleksioner imellem rejser, såvel som deres oplevelser med at kæmpe i udlandet og efterfølgende at vende tilbage til Danmark. Derved belyses hvordan idéen om jihad og oplevelsen af at kæmpe resonerede med deres livssituation på en måde der gjorde det eksistentielt meningsfyldt for dem, såsom vægten der tillægges handlekraft og etik, såvel som realiseringen af en ideal-maskulinitet. Der argumenteres for at det at kæmpe jihad gav fremmedkrigerne en chance for at transformere deres moralske selv gennem aflad og absolution. Det er dog en tvivlsom frelse, da den mening deres rejser havde for deltagerne afvises både af det bredere samfund og det nærmiljø de vender tilbage til. Dette studies bidrag til litteraturen består både i teoretiseringen af Europæisk jihadisme såvel som dets unikke empiri, i sammenhæng med metodologiske overvejelser over måder at generere denne type data på en etisk forsvarlig måde.

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents the story of six men who chose to leave Denmark to become foreign fighters on behalf of jihadist groups in the Middle East during the conflicts that followed in the wake of the revolts that have been termed the ‘Arab Spring’. It is based on a four-year interview and fieldwork study and takes an existentialist perspective to answer the question of what meanings these men ascribe to fighting jihad abroad. To understand the context of these meanings, the analytical view includes their life situations prior to travelling and reflections between journeys, as well as their experience fighting abroad and subsequently return to Denmark. The analysis highlights how the promise of jihad and the experience of fighting resonated with their life situations in ways that made their experience meaningful to them, and includes discussions of agency, ethics, and embodied ways of practicing masculinity. This dissertation argues that fighting jihad offered participants a chance for moral transformation and absolution. Yet, their fighting represented an ambiguous redemption, because the meanings that the journeys have for the participants were negated by the communities and wider society to which they return. This study offers an original contribution to conceptualisations of European jihadism, unique and rare empirical material, and a set of methodological reflections on ways to generate such data in ethically responsible ways.

For my Issa and Jose
And their generation of victims of war that lay buried under rubble and in the Mediterranean Sea.

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Finally, I want to include a note in defence of the welfare state, which seeks to secure equal opportunities for its citizens. The welfare state has been under threat for years; yet it made my education, research, and this dissertation possible. The right to free basic and higher education of good quality and independent university funding must be defended at all cost!

Copenhagen, June 2018

*

Imzewura iban-asen For the people of the past the way was clear

Ineggura iban-asen For those of tomorrow it will be so again

Ahlil ay ilemmasen Have compassion for those of the times in between

Mohand Ou Hocine (1836 - 1901), Kabyliaian poet

*

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

AND DISSERTATION

'How am I the bad guy?' asks Elwan, looking at me sideways. I am not sure if the question is rhetorical or genuine; whether he is wondering aloud or asking me.

Field notes, March 2017.

This dissertation presents the story of six men who chose to leave Denmark to become foreign fighters on behalf of jihadist groups in the Middle East and North Africa during the conflicts that followed the 'Arab Spring'.¹ It takes an existentialist perspective and employs in-depth interviewing, embedded in fieldwork, to answer the question of what meanings these men ascribe to fighting abroad, and what it 'offered' or 'solved' for them that staying at home would not have.

To understand such meanings, rather than focus narrowly on the journeys, the analysis in this dissertation takes a broader view that includes the participants' life situations and reflections prior to and between travelling, as well as their experience of returning. This shows how, although violence was a central feature of their journeys, it resonated with their previous experiences of violence in either direct or subtle forms. Such a perspective allows us to better understand the ethics that define these different experiences of violence. It highlights how some forms of violence are understood by the perpetrators as being moral to the extent that they have the ability to absolve the sins of other forms of violence. It also shows how such meanings can arise from these experiences as well as inform them. I argue that fighting abroad represented a way to take control over the role of violence in the participants' lives in a way that allowed them to reclaim agency and open up the possibility of redemption and of considering themselves as 'good'. Yet, the choice to become a foreign fighter is an ambiguous way to do so, as the meanings the journeys have for the fighters were negated by society and the communities to which they return.

¹ For simplicity, I will in this dissertation employ the broad use of 'the Middle East' to also cover the conflict in Libya.