

Danish “Syria-warriors” and Their Motivations

Mehmet Ümit Necef

News

A group of Danish investigative journalists published in September 2016 the results of a survey on 77 Danish citizens and denizens who have allegedly gone to Syria to fight for an extremist Islamist group. The investigation presented important demographic details and thus a more nuanced picture of the warriors.

Summary

The article introduces in detail the investigation on 77 of the estimated 138 Danish citizens and residents, called “Syria warriors” in the Danish media, who have gone to Syria and/or Iraq to fight for Islamic State or another violent Islamist group. Moreover, the considerations of the Danish-Pakistani investigative journalist and author Jakob Sheikh’s on the motivations of the Muslim young men to join extremist groups are summarized. Sheikh’s criticism of the allegedly dominant public discourse in Denmark on the factors behind the fascination of violent Islamism is presented.

Key Words

Danish foreign fighters in Syria, Syria warriors, radicalization, Islamic State, Jakob Sheikh

About the Author

M. Ümit Necef is an associate professor. He works on a 4-year project financed by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life (FORTE) on the motivations of young Swedish and Danish Muslims to join Islamic State (IS) and other jihadist groups.

Analysis:

In September 2016 journalist Jakob Sheikh and the Danish Broadcasting Corporation’s (DR) Investigative Database Editorial Team published the results of an investigation on 77 Danish “Syria-warriors”. “Syria-warriors” is the term which is widely used in the Danish media for citizens and denizens who allegedly have gone to Syria and/or Iraq to fight for Islamic State or another jihadist organization. The results, which have been made public through a number of informative articles both on DR’s homepage and in the Danish daily Politiken, tv-documentaries and radio programs, brought a number of nuances to the picture of the “typical Syria-warrior”.¹

Jakob Sheikh is a multi-award-winning investigative reporter with Politiken, a leading Danish newspaper with social, liberal and centre-left stance. Since 2012, Sheikh has focused on radicalization and foreign fighters. In 2015, he released his book on Danish Islamic State fighters based on numerous interviews with returned and current jihadists as well as key figures in the militant Islamist environment in Scandinavia.² DR is Denmark’s public-service radio and television broadcaster, and its investigative journalism is generally seen as serious and highly trustworthy.

The purpose of the survey was on the basis of the identified Danes to give a fairly detailed portrait of the group. Since the decision to join a violent jihadist group and to travel to Syria or Iraq is done in secretive and conspiratorial circumstances, it is difficult to carry out representative surveys on the demographic characteristics of the warriors. However, the journalists at DR and Politiken managed to carry out the first demographic survey on persons who are citizens or denizens of Denmark and who have allegedly gone to Syria or Iraq to fight for IS or another similar group. Their journey to Syria has been confirmed by themselves or several independent sources. All the 77 persons were identified with the help of social media, geolocation, public registers and sources in the militant Islamist milieu.

The Centre for Terror Analysis (CTA), which works under the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET), calculates that at least 135 persons - primarily young Sunni-Muslim men - have gone to the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq from Denmark to join IS or another jihadi group. Around half of the individuals have reportedly returned to Denmark, while around 35 have been killed.³ The journalists behind the survey assume that at least 27 of the 77 identified persons are dead. One of them died of natural causes

¹ See for example: Sheikh, Jakob 2016: ”Storbydanskere med kriminel fortid” (Metropolitan Danes with a criminal past). *Politiken*, 15 September; Sheikh, Jakob 2016: Syrienskrigere (Danish Kurds top the list). *Politiken*, 15 September.

² Sheikh, Jakob 2015: *Danmarks børn i hellig krig* (Denmark’s Children in Holy War). Copenhagen: Lindhardt og Ringhof.

³ Centre for Terror Analysis (CTA) 2016: ”Vurdering af terrortruslen mod Danmark” (Assessment of Terror Threat to Denmark). <http://www.pet.dk>, April 28.

after returning to Denmark, and another was stabbed to death during a fight in Copenhagen, most probably for non-political reasons.

The estimated 135 persons who have gone to Syria and/or Iraq, are a part of a larger group of individuals actively supporting a militant Islamist ideology in Denmark. CTA's approximation in May 2014 was "some hundred".⁴

Since the 77 persons covered by the survey constitute 57 pct. of the total number, the result cannot consequently be considered as representative. However, the survey results still imply a number of noteworthy characteristics of the Syria-warriors.

A large part of the warriors come from metropolitan areas such as the cities of Copenhagen and Århus and their suburbs and have been involved especially in gang-related criminality before going to Syria. The vast majority are young men under 30 years, a few as young as 16-17 years. However, the survey also brings a lot of nuances to this picture. For example, among the 77 individuals at least 15 are women. Another noteworthy and not so known fact about the warriors, which the investigation has exposed, is that 11 out of the 77, corresponding to slightly over 15 pct., are ethnic Danes who have converted to Islam. Thus, the Danes are the second biggest ethnic group in the investigation. Hence, concerning the percentage of converts among the foreign warriors, Denmark lies in the middle, taking into account that estimates for Germany, France and The Netherlands are respectively 12-16 pct., 23 pct. and 12-18 pct.⁵

The investigation also shed light on the socio-economic background of the 77 persons in question and discovered that, though a significant part of the group is gang-related young men, several of them have a relatively high level of education, for example at a university or an engineering college. Several have interrupted their education at, among others, an engineering college or a high school to travel to Syria or to Iraq, and some of them still continue their education. Others have their own firms, for example in pizzeria-business, in transportation, in import and sale of foodstuffs, in cleaning companies or in technological consultancy. Moreover, some of the warriors are active in volunteerism, partly in charity, which is directed towards Syria, but also for example in sport clubs.⁶

⁴ Centre for Terror Analysis (CTA) 2014: "Danske islamistiske miljøer med betydning for terrortruslen mod Danmark" (Danish Islamist milieus with impact on terror threat against Denmark), www.pet.dk, May 28.

⁵ Schuurman, Bart & Grol, Peter & Flower, Scott 2016: Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction. Policy Brief. The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT).

⁶ Elkjær, Bo & Mikkelsen, Natascha Ree 2016: De danske syrienkrigere (The Danish Syria-Warriors). 15. sep. 2016. DR.dk
<http://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/grafik-her-er-de-danske-syrienkrigere-0>

The investigation also charted the ethnic background of the warriors and reached a surprising result: The biggest ethnic group is the Kurds with 15 persons.⁷ 13 of them are from Turkey, and two are from Iraqi Kurdistan.⁸ This result is astonishing, since the soldiers of the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq (the *peshmerga*) and the PKK-associated Syrian group PYD/YPG have been fighting a bloody war against IS in the last years, and the Kurds as such are often seen in the Western public opinion as a secular and pro-Western people fighting against IS.⁹

To finish the top-5 list, it has to be added that the other ethnic groups are Somalians, Jordanians and Pakistanis with respectively 7, 6 and 6 persons. The articles on the investigation in the media do not state whether the Jordanians in question are Jordanians of Palestinian origin or Transjordanians.

Pull and push factors

Jakob Sheikh supplemented the quantitative dataset presented above with 16 interviews with individuals that have fought or are currently fighting for militant Islamist groups in Syria and/or Iraq between 2011 and 2016.¹⁰ These interviews, presented and elaborated in a scientific article, are uniquely valuable in the Danish as well as international context, since Sheikh is one of the few researchers who have conducted face-to-face or internet-mediated interviews with “Syria warriors”.

With the help of these interviews he seeks to identify individual motivations in order to understand why and how some young European Muslims become attracted to jihadi organizations. He wants to find out what drives and motivates them.

Among the factors which affect the young Muslims decision to travel to Syria and/or Iraq to join a jihadist organization, Sheikh differentiates between “pull” and “push factors”. The “push factors” are the structural socio-economic factors such as political

⁷ In Jakob Sheikh’s article in Politiken under the heading “Top-5 ethnicities”, the number of persons from “Kurdistan” is given as 14. The DR-journalist Natascha Rée Mikkelsen informed me that the number is actually 15 (personal communication 8.12.2016).

⁸ Personal communication with Natascha Rée Mikkelsen.

⁹ Elkjær, Bo & Mikkelsen, Natascha Rée 2016: *Kurdere fra Danmark kæmper på begge sider i Syrien*. DR.dk <http://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/kurdere-fra-danmark-kaemper-paa-begge-sider-i-syrien> According to Deniz Serinci, the Danish-Kurdish journalist, who published the book ... on IS, put forward that there is a considerable overrepresentation in Denmark in relation to other European countries. Out of the total of IS’s warriors the Kurds constitute only 5 pct., but in Denmark they come to between 10-15 pct.

¹⁰ Sheikh, Jakob 2016: “I Just Said It. The State’: Examining the Motivations for Danish Foreign Fighting in Syria”. *Perspectives on Terrorism*. Vo. 10, Issue 6, pp. 59-67. In this article published some months after the initial articles in the media, Sheikh speaks about “a quantitative dataset consisting of background data on 82 foreign fighters from Denmark”. I am aware of the fact that DR and Sheikh gained access to information on five more fighters in the meantime.

stigmatization, social marginalization, or other factors usually suffered by disadvantaged individuals (p. 66). The pull factors are, on the other hand, related to identity, self-respect, dignity and sentiments. As the first pull factor, Sheikh counts the resentment and anger at the participation of Danish military troops in the invasions and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. A second factor is that the IS-affiliated respondents see IS partly as a state-building project, aimed at restoring Islamic pride. Sheikh states that several respondents spoke of the struggle of jihadist organizations against Western and local state military powers as a fight “to regain pride after crusades, colonialism, and other historical defeats” (p. 65). A third factor, which Sheikh reports as a recurrent argument during the interviews, is the conception of IS’s khalifat-state as “a sign of Islamic revanchism”. He has observed that a remarkable number of the interviewees highlighted “revenge as a driving force” (p. 64).

The Danish discourse on radicalization and its problems

Sheikh observes – rightfully in my eyes – that it is commonly assumed in the Danish discourse that the decision to leave Denmark and join jihadi groups can be explained largely by push factors. He concedes that this assumption has found some support in previous studies on foreign fighting motivations. However, he levels criticism against the Danish authorities that they base their counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization measures almost entirely on this theory.¹¹

After interviewing 16 foreign fighters from Denmark, he found out that some of the things that motivate them are “counter-intuitive” and that “they pursue different aims than we think they do” (p 66). He believes his study suggests that the mobilization of foreign fighters may often have been fueled not primarily by push factors. Sheikh is careful to underline that he does not deny the correlation between individual socio-economic deprivation and risk of radicalization. However, he still believes that many counter-radicalization measures may be missing an important point: The identity-related pull factors such as the joy and excitement of being a part of a state project, religious pride and revanchism in the name of one’s religion can be the most important motivations. Therefore, he proposes that his findings raise a fundamental question: “Are Danish authorities using too many resources on counter-measures that will probably have little or no effect on these individuals who seem driven to a large extent by a utopian ideological project far beyond Denmark?”

¹¹ I have personally seen a blatant example of this at a lecture arranged by Judicial Association at The University of Southern Denmark, where the head of the secretariat of Cooperation Between School, Social Services and Police (SSP-Samarbejde) in the Municipality of Odense, had a strong tendency to reduce anti-radicalization to anti-racism. The mentioned secretariat is responsible for the anti-radicalization programs in Odense.

Sheikh's book *Denmark's Children in Holy War* (2015) was criticized for presenting the Syria warriors as victims of the society, the social system and family problems (see for example Blüdnikow 2015, Rose 2015, Aagaard 2015)¹². Sheikh's considerations based on his qualitative research show that he has taken this critique seriously and begun to listen carefully to what his interviewees say and thus to focus on the pull factors for the fascination of violent Islamist extremism. Thus, he has shown a good example of an undogmatic approach to the theoretical framework one is used to employing in the analysis of one's empirical data.

Sheik's skeptical approach towards the apparently deep-rooted theories seems well-founded, and his criticism of the authorities appears justified. Where an issue as serious as developing measures against terrorism and radicalization is concerned, intellectual sloth and bureaucratic inertia can be deadly.

¹² Blüdnikow, Bent 2015: "Ny bog gør Syrien-krigere til ofre". *Berlingske Tidende*. 17 October; Rose, Flemming 2015: "Ingen dansk journalist har været tættere på radikaliserede muslimer end Jakob Sheikh" *Politiken*, 25 October; Aagaard; Charlotte 2015: "Hjernevask i Heimdalsgade". *Information*, 27 October.