



# Denmark's Foreign Fighters: An Interview with Jakob Sheikh

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## **Award-winning reporter Jakob Sheikh talks about his work interviewing the Danes who travelled to Iraq and Syria to join the jihad.**

**Q. Since 2001, there has been much written on terrorism and more specifically the global jihadi movement, and this trend has continued with the rise of Islamic State. Your research is quite unique as it has involved interviewing those who have joined the Jihad. Why did you decide to take this approach to understanding jihadism and what did you hope to learn from talking to jihadis?**

When I started covering militant Islamism in 2012, I noticed that the great bulk of articles written on this topic dealt with jihadists quite superficially. Most often, reporters were talking *about* jihadists; not *with* jihadists. So I began building trustful relations with Danish militant Islamists. I put a lot of time and effort in meeting consistently with figures—even rather unimportant ones—in the Danish militant Islamists milieu, enabling me to get access to otherwise unavailable sources and interview foreign fighters in Denmark, in Syria during their time with the Islamic State, and even back in Denmark when some of them had returned.

The goal of my reporting is quite simple. In order to deal with a challenge that is generally considered a threat to national security in most Western countries, we need to understand the very nature of this challenge.

Sadly, we often tend to simplify or generalize when it comes to foreign fighters. We alienate radical Islamists from ourselves as if they have nothing to do with our society. However, the fact is that most European foreign fighters are born—

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or at least raised—in Europe. They are shaped by upbringings in European societies; they attend public schools, play in the local football club and so forth. By many measures, they are products of modern Europe.

This leads to a very important question: How does modern Europe deal with this ever-evolving problem? I hope that my reporting has shed light on the backdrop of this question.

**Q. In your research, have you noticed any common traits in the backgrounds of Denmark's foreign fighters (age, gender, profession, geographical location) and their pathways into joining the Jihad?**

This is an interesting question as some of the foreign fighter traits are in fact quite counter intuitive. It's easy to state the obvious: most foreign fighters are young men and the vast majority have family roots outside the European continent.

But there are other interesting traits to mention. When I started collecting socioeconomic background data on Danish foreign fighters, I was expecting to find individuals from poor families who were economically and educationally marginalised. However, while the main part had struggled with social challenges of some sort—their parents' divorce, a mental diagnosis, deaths in the near family, etc.—I discovered that a great number of Danish foreign fighters were average middle class kids, not raised at the bottom of society (one even played the cello and lived in a sumptuous villa with his well-educated parents).

Also, I would have assumed that most foreign fighters would come from strictly conservative Muslim families. But in fact, a significant number of Danish

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foreign fighters with non-Western backgrounds came from families that were remarkably secular and liberal. I find this particularly interesting as it says something important about the way we deal with the notion of converts. We generally consider converts to be ethnic Danes or ethnic Swedes or ethnic Brits who suddenly converts to Islam and get radicalised—as opposed to individuals with Muslim family backgrounds. But what we see now is that most foreign fighters are in fact converts—some may just have Muslim family roots. In many ways, these converts from Muslim families share their pathway into the jihadist milieu with that of “regular” ethnic Danish converts; they do not feel strongly about religion, something happens along the way, they are socially marginalized, perhaps they enter a criminal environment, and at a certain point in time they are intrigued by Islam as a way out of their problems. Often, the radicalisation process that follows completely changes their approach to Islam—just as with the Danish converts who have no previous experience with Islam whatsoever.

To me, this shows that we need to study the inner motivations of jihadists. Common socioeconomic traits simply doesn't do the job when it comes to explaining why foreign fighters decide to wage jihad. Despite many so-called experts' attempts to tell you otherwise.

**Q. In terms of the motivations of Denmark's foreign fighters, you've previously stated that grievance over Denmark's activist foreign policy has been an important driver. Yet one of the things that stands out in your interviews with foreign fighters is this idea of “the state” as a cause. What does this concept of “the state” mean to the foreign fighters you spoke to and why is it such a powerful idea that it is worth travelling many miles across the world to fight and die for?**

As mentioned, many of the things the foreign fighters told me during interview ran counter to common assumptions. My own, at least.

The very idea of a state was a recurrent narrative among IS fighters. In fact, several fighters consider this notion a direct motivation for joining the battlefield.

They stress the fact that they are not just joining an insurgency; they are joining a state. As much as they see themselves as fighters, they see themselves as immigrants who want to settle down and build a future.

As I have pointed out before, when jihadists use the term “dawla” [“state” or “nation”] they are often not referring to the group, but rather to the so-called caliphate itself. They speak of a place that represents a home to them. This also explains why foreign fighters usually are more likely to refer to propaganda videos released by IS about the daily life in IS held areas rather than brutal executions and so on.

A Danish born Salafi with Pakistani roots named Shiraz Tariq, who is perhaps the most prominent jihadi figure in Denmark, often spoke of the state as a goal in itself.

“My goal is to fight the infidels until the state is implemented,” he told me in an interview from Syria.

To at least some parts of Danish foreign fighters, institutional aspects such as economic systems, schools, and legal systems are key in their justification of violent jihad. They talk about “protecting the state” rather than protecting Islam, or protecting the group.

That said, the fall of Raqqa completely changes this motivation. In many ways, I see the fall of Raqqa as way more decisive than the fall of Mosul. It is a major blow to IS' ability to mobilize and recruit soldiers to the local war in Syria and Iraq. Not just because of the military defeat but even more so because the defeat destroyed the notion of state building that IS offers to its followers.

**Q. How did the fighters you interviewed describe life inside the state and what sort of roles did they undertake?**

Like in many other countries, Denmark has foreign fighters in the upper ranks of IS and regular foot soldiers in the fields. I spoke to jihadists who were very close to the local “emir” or “wali” and to jihadists who were not even taking part in the fighting.

I've met with returnees who've returned further radicalized in terms of both ideology and fighting skills. But—and this is important—I've also met several jihadists who've returned to Denmark deeply disillusioned about what they experienced in Syria and Iraq. A prominent 28 year old jihadist told me upon his return to Denmark that he'd “never seen anything that un-Islamic”. The notion of “takfir” is taken to a level where some jihadists—despite the official IS narrative about jihadists having no scruples killing non-IS-fighters—are left in deep disagreement with the strategy.

To me, this disillusion upon return may be the best chance in terms of aiding counter-radicalisation efforts.

Another important aspect we need to be aware of is the mindset of foreign fighters. Before and after our talks, several jihadists would often send me pictures and videos that would somewhat glorify the daily life in the caliphate.

Here, we're talking about videos of children fooling around and playing in a fountain, women shopping in the bazaar, pictures of toyshops, and so on.

What's striking about these pictures and videos is that they often ran counter to the actual situation and reality of life inside the IS-held territories. While IS as a group were losing ground and were severely hit by drone strikes, the propaganda spoke of harmony and almost heavenly peace.

The question, then, is: Were the jihadists I interviewed consciously neglecting the fact that they were on the verge of losing their war? Or were they simply not aware of what was going on?

In my opinion, the answer is none of the two. In fact, it seemed to me—though psychiatrists may need to study this further—that the “real” world and the “imaginary” world of peace and harmony existed side by side, next to each other. In the mind of a jihadist, it is not necessarily contradictory to live in a real world of fighting and a virtual world that enables you to dream about how a perfect caliphate should look like or how a new Islamic golden age should look like. These two perceptions actually seem to complement each other. The frightening thing, however, is that when the border between these two perceptions gets blurred, some jihadists don't seem to be able to separate the two.

**Q. There has been a lot of discussion about the role of religion as a driver of the foreign fighters, including the role played by mosques. How influential have Danish mosques been in the radicalisation of foreign fighters?**

Interestingly, very few militants mention that they get their religious inspiration from the mosques. In fact, militant Islamists—at least in Denmark—are quite

skeptical towards the mosques, especially mosques that are considered to be “moderate” by mainstream society. I would assume this goes for other European countries as well. This is due to widespread conspiracies that the mosques are in fact right-hand men for the Danish government or the intelligence service.

Rather than trusting what is preached in the mosque, many Danish foreign fighters rely almost exclusively on their close friends—and certainly not open communities such as mosques where rumors are spread quickly.

That said, I think it would be a huge mistake to underestimate the role of religion when it comes to foreign fighter mobilization. While you can argue that the social and political dimension were more prevalent driving factors during the first years of the Syria civil war, I find religion—or at least arguments rooted in Islamic texts—to play a quite decisive role today and even since early 2015.

The fundamental ideology of IS is deeply Islamic.

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**Jakob Sheikh is a multi-award-winning investigative reporter who worked as staff writer with Danish daily Politiken, one of Scandinavia’s leading newspapers. Since 2012, he 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. In February 2017, he joined the Danish Ministry of Justice as a special advisor to the minister.**

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