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Viewing jihadism as a counterculture: potential and limitations

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Studies of jihadism mostly focus on the violent and religio-political aspects of the phenomenon. By adding to these a countercultural perspective, we may become able to better grasp and make sense of jihadism, not least because we can begin to see its violent and political aspects in their immediate social context. The present paper is based on lengthy fieldwork in Denmark and presents a first attempt at applying a combination of theories on cultic milieus and countercultures to the gallery of characters in and around three Danish terrorism cases.

Keywords: counterculture; jihadism; militant Islamism; terrorism; identity; rational choice


Such studies are invaluable, but there are aspects of contemporary jihadism, which they do not grasp. Jihadism has become something that attracts individuals for various reasons and is used for various purposes. In addition to being a political project, a religious interpretation and something justifying the use of violence, it is a social phenomenon, an identity, a subculture, a rebellion against restricting traditions and norms, and much more. I argue that also understanding jihadism as a counterculture allows us to grasp and make sense of aspects that may appear illogical if viewed solely through other prisms, and that this can help us understand the violent, political and religious aspects within their immediate social context. The claim in this article is not that understanding jihadism as a counterculture is the answer to all questions, but rather that it can add another piece to the puzzle.

The article is based on fieldwork in Denmark, spanning three years and carried out in cooperation with my colleague, Manni Crone. The point of departure for this was five trials under Danish terrorism legislation related to three terrorism cases. Attending the trials, we gradually made contacts, which granted us access to the social environment in which the individuals on trial had travelled.

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In the following, I will first introduce the data generated and the methods on which I relied. The second part of the article introduces and applies a tentative countercultural framework, whereas the third part sheds light on the rewards that individuals gain from identifying with the jihadism counterculture – rewards that may outweigh the costs.

Methods

In early January 2008, I entered a courtroom in central Copenhagen to observe one of the first trials under Danish terrorism legislation after a thorough revision of the latter in 2005. This marked the beginning of a three-year period in which I generated data, relying on methods strongly inspired by Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Initially, my ambition was to collect data on Danish terrorism cases by observing trials in order to shed new light on why individuals engage in terrorism. Relatively soon, however, observations led me to conclude that this was a narrow and limiting way of approaching the field.

Rather than narrowly focusing on spectacular terrorism cases, I began to include the more mundane every day to gain insights into the rewards that individuals stand to gain from identifying with a phenomenon associated with terrorism and therefore despised by most – and on how these rewards may outweigh the costs and risks. Rather than focusing on questions of what is so wrong in this world that it can push individuals into jihadism – based on the underlying assumption that jihadism is an abnormality, which can only exist if something has gone horribly wrong – I was drawn to the question of what attracts individuals. This resonates well with the reasoning found in Pisoiu (2012):

If “normal” people are not pushed into action by some personality or socio-economic factors, but usually make their decisions with the perspective of a certain gain, material or immaterial, why should this also not be the case for Islamist radicals? (p. 3)

This line of inquiry is based on the assumption that individuals drawn to jihadism make rational choices – as rational as any choice made by any individual with emotions, desires and flaws – and that these choices are not solely forced upon them by unfortunate circumstances, be they political or personal. It therefore differs from the work of Cottee (2011) in which jihadism is also viewed through a subcultural perspective. Cottee’s analysis revolves around social and structural strain as the decisive factor when individuals make the rational choice to identify with jihadism, thus defining jihadism as a “Subcultural Response” (Cottee, 2011, p. 730) and subsequently a result of external factors pushing individuals into jihadism. It does not exclude social and structural strain as factors influencing rational choices, but it includes other factors as equally important.

In addition to these realisations, I discovered that it would in fact be possible to generate data by engaging with individuals who were on trial, had been on trial or had been under investigation, as well as individuals who inhabited the same social environment as the aforementioned. To my surprise, such individuals approached my colleague and me during the trials, showing an interest in gaining our attention.

The first trial I attended was related to the so-called Glostrup-case, which began in October 2005 when four men were arrested in Bosnia suspected of planning a terrorist attack in an unknown location. The arrests in Bosnia triggered arrests in other countries, including Denmark where more than 30 individuals were arrested. Of these many individuals, four were eventually prosecuted and one – Abdul Basit Abu Lifa – was convicted in...
February 2007. One year later, one of the remaining three was once again prosecuted only to be acquitted in March 2008. This was the first trial I attended, in early 2008.

The second trial, I attended began a few months later. This was the so-called *Glasvej-case*, which began in September 2007 when eight men were arrested in and around Copenhagen. They were suspected of having planned terrorism and in one of the men’s apartment, a small amount of the explosive Triacetone Triperoxide was found. Of the eight men who were arrested, two – Hammad Khurshid and Abdulghani Tokhi – were eventually charged with and convicted of having planned terrorism. The case was appealed and in June 2009, the two men were once again found guilty.

The third case was the so-called *SÜ-case*, which began when SÜ was arrested in Copenhagen on 11 November 2007 and accused of having planned a terrorist attack. In November 2007 – after the arrests of Khurshid and Tokhi – SÜ engaged in a chat with an individual in Turkey. The chat was intercepted by the police who had SÜ under surveillance because of his close relationship with Khurshid and Tokhi, and was interpreted as an attempt to plan terrorism with the purpose of forcing Danish authorities to release Khurshid and Tokhi. In November 2008, SÜ was acquitted. The case was appealed and SÜ was once again acquitted in August 2009.

Only a few days into the second trial, my colleague and I were approached by different individuals who recognised us from the first trial. They were eager to find out who we were and what our agenda was, having concluded that we were neither from the authorities nor the media. When we identified ourselves as researchers, the interest grew and over the following days, they began to introduce us to others in the courtrooms and soon conversations continued outside the courtrooms, on stations and in trains. We then began to receive invitations to meet in public places such as cafés and later in private homes and mosques where we would often be introduced to new individuals. Occasionally, we also met in my office or in meeting rooms at the place where my colleague and I worked.

As mentioned above, the methodology was inspired by Grounded Theory primarily in the sense that I inductively allowed the generation and collection of different types of data to guide the discovery of theory. All in all, some 50 individuals who could be counted as inhabitants of the social environment or related to inhabitants of it, as friends or family members, contributed in various ways. Some were merely objects of observation in courtrooms, whereas others made themselves available for long and numerous conversations, provided me with written and audiovisual material, which they found inspiring and facilitated contact with other informants. There is no doubt that there was self-selection involved and that informants selected other informants for us, wherefore it would not make any sense to claim representativeness.

The data generated therefore included observations of the proceedings in courtrooms and of interactions between spectators and individuals directly involved in the proceedings, court transcripts, the media’s coverage of the trials and conversations in the courtrooms with spectators as well as individuals directly involved in the proceedings. As the generation of data moved beyond the courtrooms, data also came to include written and audiovisual material, which my informants found inspiring, and observations, interactions and conversations in other settings such as trains, parks, cafes, private homes, meeting rooms and mosques. One of the more memorable interactions was when my colleague and I were interviewed on camera about terrorism by one of our informants who had been most helpful with putting us in contact with others. The interview was intended for educational purposes, but we were later told that something had gone wrong with the recordings and we never got to see them.4
Cooperation with another researcher was rewarding and a methodological advantage. It allowed us access to situations that would have been problematic for one woman alone, such as meetings with male informants. At the same time, however, the cooperation also limited our access. There were informants who shied away from us when we were together, but were willing to engage with only one of us. We then accommodated for this, but still, very likely there were potential informants who we were both cut off from because of our cooperation.

All in all, the benefits of cooperation, however, outweighed the costs, not least because it allowed us to compare our observations and analyses and thereby qualify our individual work. Moreover, it helped us become aware of our own subjectivity. I therefore fully agree with Smyth in recommending “the use of co-researchers and inter-subjective analysis to interrogate their own subjectivity more effectively” (2007, p. 16).

**Beginning to see the contours**

Over the course of the trials attended, it became evident that the defendants were far from isolated individuals or groups. The defendants in all three cases – the Glasvej-case, the Glostrup-case and the SÜ-case – knew each other and they shared several acquaintances. This could be seen when the same individuals reappeared in the galleries during different trials making no attempts to conceal their relations to the defendants, when former defendants appeared in the galleries during subsequent trials and when these individuals were called as witnesses.

It also became evident that the individuals who were prosecuted in the trials and some of their acquaintances who attended the trials did not perceive themselves as merely acquaintances or friends – they perceived themselves as part of a “shared we”. During conversations, I regularly encountered statements including words such as *we* and *us*, revealing the presence of this perceived collective identity. A few examples include: “We are the *Ahl us-Sunnah* [people of the Sunnah]” (25 and 9, author’s interview Copenhagen, 28 March 2009). “When we walk in the streets, people look at us like we are terrorists, people are afraid of us” (20, author’s interview Copenhagen, 10 December 2008). “We are not terrorists, we are the just ones” (2, author’s interview Copenhagen, 22 January 2009). “When some of my friends get on the bus the *kuffars* [infidels] get off [....] They must be able to see that we are Muslims and they will flee in awe” (SÜ in chat, 4 November 2007, documented during SÜ-trial, 11 August 2008). “We wear what is called Sunnah-clothes” (14, author’s interview Copenhagen, 17 June 2009).

This shared “we” indicated that the individuals who had ended up on trial and some of their acquaintances perceived themselves as part of something exclusive; something that included worldviews, norms, dress codes, language and insights.

Through the generation of data, it became clear to me that this could best be understood as a counterculture, and for this purpose, I combine Kaplan and Lööw’s (2002) theorising on cultic mileus with Roszak’s (1995) theorising on countercultures in an attempt to return to the roots of this perspective.

**The conceptual inspiration**

A cultic milieu is primarily a social environment where seekers meet other seekers and where seeking is accepted and appreciated. It is a minority position – in contrast to a
majority, which holds the power to define normality – and it is something, which most likely exists at all times in all modern societies. A cultic milieu is very much defined by being in opposition to the mainstream and deviant in the sense that the inhabitants perceive themselves as challengers to the majority-defined culture and normality:

The cultic milieu can be regarded as the cultural underground of society [...] it includes all deviant belief systems and their associated practices [...] Lastly, the cultic milieu is manifestly united by a common ideology of seekership which both arises from and in turn reinforces the consciousness of deviant status. (Kaplan & Lööw, 2002, pp. 14–15)

The potential size of a cultic milieu is closely related to the majority’s definition of normality; the narrower the definition, the more individuals will potentially feel excluded and search elsewhere for a normality within which they can see themselves. What is shared in a cultic milieu is the sense that the status quo is not optimal, and consequently, they search for better alternatives. This does not mean that all individuals inhabiting the cultic milieu agree on what is wrong with the status quo, but they agree that something is wrong with it.

It is, in other words, a mosaic of individuals who do not (wish to) see themselves in the mainstream and who are in search of something, which can be justified as an alternative and is conducive to what Kaplan and Lööw (2002) refer to as the forming of cults or cultic groups:

Given that cultic groups have a tendency to be ephemeral and highly unstable, it is a fact that new ones are being born just as fast as the old ones die. There is a continual process of cult formation and collapse, which parallels the high turnover of membership at the individual level. Clearly, therefore, cults must exist within a milieu which, if not conducive to the maintenance of individual cults, is clearly highly conducive to the spawning of cults in general. Such a generally supportive cultic milieu is continually giving birth to new cults, absorbing the debris of the dead ones and creating new generations of cult-prone individuals to maintain the high levels of membership turnover. (p. 14)

Within the broad and accommodating social environment, some individuals may, in other words, associate with each other through shared definitions of what is wrong with the status quo and where to look for a better alternative.

Roszak’s study of a counterculture – the movement born in the 1960’s and known by several names today, including: “beatniks”, “hippies” and “flower-power” – offers an interesting addition to Kaplan and Lööw. Roszak describes a generation of young people who viewed their parents as a “laughingstock” (1995, p. xxiii) because they had “sold their souls to General Motors” (Roszak, 1995, p. xxiii) and therefore some young people in this generation searched for other role models. The youth were yearning for “an entirely different quality of life” (Roszak, 1995, p. xxv) and questioning all aspects of contemporary culture and tradition. They were, indeed, questioning “the very sanity of that culture” (Roszak, 1995, p. xxvi).

The counterculture of the 1960s, as described by Roszak, to some extent resembles contemporary jihadism insofar as they are both characterised by a deep-felt distrust of authority and leadership, including the parents’ generation, which is regarded with contempt. They both oppose tradition and rules made by those in power, viewing the former as tools to ensure the latter sustain power. Further, they both criticise capitalism and the established world order and imagine an entirely different future society (although the imagined futures of the two could hardly be farther apart). Finally, both groups include violent extremists. This is certainly not to claim that the two are
in some essence the same or to ignore obvious differences, such as the fact that the counterculture of the 1960s was secular and morally permissive, whereas jihadism is the complete opposite.

By combining Kaplan and Lööw’s *cultic milieu* with Roszak’s *counterculture*, I add to the latter a context that allows me to address the counterculture’s relationship with not only mainstream culture but also other countercultures and to make sense of individuals who move between seemingly contradictory countercultures. At the same time, by replacing Kaplan and Lööw’s *cults* and *cultic groups* with Roszak’s *countercultures*, I am able to free myself from the inherent focus on religion as the framework, a result of the conceptualisation being derived from “Troeltsch’s tripartite division of religious phenomena” (Kaplan & Lööw, 2002, p. 12), and instead view religion as part of the framework. I therefore use the concept of a broad accommodating cultic milieu within which various more or less well-defined countercultures may emerge. Based on data indicating that individuals travel between different countercultures, I understand the Danish cultic milieu to include different countercultures such as various right-wing, left-wing and Islamist ones.

The definition of what is wrong with the status quo may be shared by several different – even seemingly contradictory – countercultures. What is distinct for the individual countercultures is the definition of the better alternative – or rather, the solution. In a counterculture, the individuals are required to subscribe to the counterculture’s shared vision of Utopia, but they are also required to subscribe to its shared culture and normality, which may include language, dress code, norms, narratives, and so on. Subscription to these is a requirement for gaining access to the counterculture and its resources.

The jihadism counterculture

Within the jihadism counterculture, the shared definition of what is wrong with the status quo is the perception that society is regulated illegitimately by man-made laws and rules. Because man is in essence flawed, selfish and self-serving, man’s laws are too. This leads to a society in which materialism, hedonism, greed, exploitation and capitalism rule, and in which the stronger use and take advantage of the weaker.

The shared definition of what is the better alternative is the establishment of a Caliphate, an Islamic state ruled by Sharia, in which everybody – including those in power – fear Allah so much that they are never tempted to serve their own interests.

The shared culture and normality includes the view that engagement in the lesser jihad – violent defence of Islam – is a central aspect of being a practising Muslim, which means inhabitants are required to at least rhetorically support the use of violence. This counterculture would therefore fall under Wiktorowicz’s (2006) category of Salafi jihadism. In addition to this, it revolves around a (perceived) literal imitation of the prophet, which guides the behaviour, language and physical appearances of the inhabitants.

When it comes to clothing and other aspects of physical appearance, men have several different styles to choose from. They can opt for very baggy sweatpants and a hoodie or the combination of baggy military pants with numerous pockets, sometimes tucked into the socks, and a baggy sweatshirt or hoodie or a T-shirt and a shirt. Both styles allow for big watches and are often combined with big parkas and occasionally a crochet hat. A third style also relies on a sweatshirt or a hoodie, but combines this with ordinary pants or jeans, which have been altered in order to stop just short of the ankles.
The uncovered ankles, which are achieved by either tucking the trousers into the socks or by shortening them, are a style shared by others who belong to the creed known as Salafism.6

Less subtle styles revolve around garments from South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula. These can roughly be divided into three categories. Either the combination of an ankle-length white shirt and a camouflage vest often combined with a scarf, a darker coloured ankle-length shirt occasionally combined with a vest and a crochet hat or a pakol, which is the type of hat worn by men in Afghanistan, or the combination of loosely fitted pants and a knee-length shirt often worn by men in Pakistan.

All of these styles may be combined with various lengths of beards with or without moustache and with either very short or long hair.

For the women, the choices are fewer. As a minimum, they wear clothes that cover everything except their hands and face, such as what they themselves call Somali-style clothes, which is a very big piece of fabric with three holes for hands and face. Preferably, however, they wear niqab, which covers everything except the eyes, but this style is apparently only for the fortunate ones. As one woman explained:

I prefer to wear niqab because it makes me feel so much better. I have worn one in the past and hope to be able to do so again, but for now I need a job to support myself and that is difficult if you wear a niqab. (14, author’s interview Copenhagen, 25 June 2009)

The women are not the only ones conscious of how and when these clothes are used. I observed one individual appearing clean-shaven and with his long hair rolled into a bun during his own trial, but as a spectator during later trials, he wore his beard and hair long. Another individual had a full beard when summoned to give testimony in a trial when he himself was in pre-trial detention, but was clean-shaven during his own trial a few months later. A third individual wore clothes resembling the dress code known as business casual when summoned to give testimony during a trial, but chose the combination inspired by clothes worn by men in Pakistan for the later verdict of that trial. It is obvious that dress codes are important not least as a way to easily separate peers from others, but there is also a strong awareness of the costs of standing out.

Women and men alike wear functional footwear such as sneakers or trainers and most often the men travel with big pockets or bags in which they carry accessories that may come in handy, such as a copy of the Quran and various texts in which they may find documentation for arguments made in discussions, a compass to allow them to identify the correct direction for performing prayer, a printed calendar or an app helping them to remember the correct points in time for prayers, fasting and the like, water and a little food, a teeth cleaning twig and at least one phone.

Sharing and generosity are very important in this counterculture. The inhabitants will go to great lengths for each other. They share whatever they have, prepare meals for each other, provide each other with housing, transportation and care, collect money and clothing for each other, show affection by speaking softly to each other in a respectful manner and by massaging and caressing each other. This behaviour is also extended to invited guests who are catered to in every way, showered with food and offered transportation or whatever is needed. This is sharply contrasted by the rude, aggressive and mocking attitudes towards representatives of authorities, which I often observed in and around courtrooms.
The culture also includes a shared language infused with Arabic and Islamic terms, but also with Danish terms, used in distinct ways differing from mainstream language, or newly constructed. An example of a Danish term, used in a distinct way, which differs from mainstream language, is “modernistisk”, which translates into “modernistic”. This is used to describe individuals or groups who attempt to adapt Islam to modern life.

In addition to the spoken language, the culture includes non-verbal communication including signs and gestures such as pointing one’s index finger to the sky to indicate one’s belief in the oneness of God or adding small movements of the hands when performing prayer.

There is little doubt that religion plays a crucial role in the counterculture and in the lives of its inhabitants. Religious rituals such as performing prayer five times a day and fasting regularly shape and regulate the everyday lives of inhabitants. In addition to during the Ramadan, one should fast:

Thursdays, Mondays and three days when there is a full moon. One fasts from one and a half hour prior to sunset. Then all of one’s acts are for Allah alone. Otherwise one’s actions – prayer, dawah, etc. – are always for oneself but when you are fasting Allah judges you. It is not a duty but a good extra act. When you are fasting it is not just about food and water – you also abstain from desire, jealousy, evil speech, etc. This is very joyful because then you are good. (2, author’s interview Copenhagen, 22 January 2009)

These rituals provide structure and routine, but also the comfort of knowing you are on the right path. As prayers are preferably to be performed collectively, they additionally ensure regular contact and social interaction.

Doing dawah, inviting others to join Islam, is very important and interactions with outsiders are often framed as such. Activities such as producing and disseminating written or audiovisual material, arranging seminars and inviting speakers for this purpose take up much of the inhabitants’ lives. But dawah is also viewed as a source of rewards and part of an elaborate “scoring system”, which will determine whether the individual is placed in Paradise or Hell on the Day of Judgment. As one informant explained, “Everything has an amount attached to it – a reward” (3, author’s interview Copenhagen, 1 July 2009). Being the decisive factor in someone’s decision to convert to Islam can become a source of many rewards:

The herald [who convinced an individual to convert] and the convert receive the same reward. And the convert’s good deeds bring both rewards. If the convert does a wrong deed, the one who convinced him will still get his rewards. (4, author’s interview Copenhagen, 1 July 2009)

Religion also plays an important role in a powerful narrative about the End of Days,7 which the inhabitants of the counterculture see themselves as part of. In this narrative, an area called Khorasan is to be the scene of a battle symbolising the beginning of the end. In this area, a small group of men with long hair and long beards, wearing white clothes and carrying banners with the Islamic creed will defeat an overwhelming foreign occupation. This area covers what is today known as Afghanistan, and the Taliban’s resistance to the presence of NATO and ISAF troops is perceived as part of the battle. Following the success in Khorasan, battles will erupt in an area called al-Sham and in this area al-Mahdi, a saviour will be found and a Caliphate established, which will eventually spread to the entire world
and bring together all Muslims. This area covers what is today known as Syria. In the narrative, this will all be a sign that the final clash between good and evil has begun and that all human beings will have to take sides.

Part of the narrative is that only a small minority will understand this and join the battles by engaging in violent activities and that these are the chosen few who are not only destined for greatness and ensured a place in Paradise, but also endowed with the ability to see everything else clearly. Becoming part of the counterculture is in itself seen as proof of being among the chosen few and is consequently a great source of self-confidence.

It is important to stress that the narration of oneself and one’s own group as the privileged few who understand what is really going on and what has to be done is in no way unique to religious groups. According to della Porta (1995), something similar was found among European left-wing militants:

The militants further justified their activities by invoking quasi-existentialist explanations that emphasized the “extraordinary” role of a small minority. Like other political sects, the underground groups idealized the value of living outside normal standards, the idea of courage as a duty of the true believer, and the idea of sacrifice as shared suffering (Kanter, 1968, 1972). The more isolated the militants felt from the external world, the more firmly they came to see themselves as a few embattled heroes. (p. 172)

But the narrative is likely to contribute to the appeal of jihadism and possibly also to its resilience and potential life span. As Cronin (2006) argues, “the remarkable staying power of early religious terrorist groups such as the Hindu Thugs, in existence for at least 600 years, would seem to indicate the inherent staying power of sacred or spiritually based motivations” (p. 13).

Shopping around?

When jihadism is understood as one of several countercultures existing in a broader cultic milieu, it is, as previously mentioned, no longer a surprise that some individuals have previously inhabited other seemingly opposing countercultures. Among my informants, one indicated he had previously been active in a left-wing counterculture and the Swede Ralf Lennart reportedly passed through neo-Nazism prior to his engagement in jihadism (Hedin, 2007). When viewing jihadism as a religio-political phenomenon, this appears inexplicable, but within the framework of cultic milieus and countercultures, it makes sense.

According to Kaplan and Lööw (2002), individuals who travel in a cultic milieu may try on several countercultures to find what they are looking for since:

Seekership is probably the one characteristic that all members of cultic groups have in common, and while this facilitates the formation of groups, it poses special problems for their maintenance. Seekers do not necessarily cease seeking when a revealed truth is offered to them, nor do they necessarily stop looking in other directions when one path is indicated as the path to the truth. (p. 18)

This means that such individuals have simply been searching for quite some time and either they did not find what they were searching for in the first counterculture or what they were searching for changed over time and, as a consequence, the first counterculture no longer provided them with what they needed. This is not to claim that some individuals are in any pathological sense predisposed to seeking, but
rather that in contexts where the majority definition of normality is very narrow, some individuals will always find themselves excluded and may consequently search for alternative normality within which they may feel more comfortable.

When viewed through the perspective of different countercultures emerging from the same cultic milieu, it also becomes clear that slightly different countercultures, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, are neither conveyor belts for, nor bulwarks against jihadism, but parallel alternatives.

What is in it?

When attempting to understand why the jihadism counterculture attracts relatively many, it is relevant to note that it currently has certain advantages compared to other countercultures. First, it is undoubtedly the most high-profiled one. Because it is perceived as associated with al-Qaida and terrorism, it is perceived and received as a threat to security. An individual who signals that he or she is part of this counterculture will not only be recognised as being against the established, he or she will also be recognised as a security threat and therefore be taken seriously. Or in the words of Lia:

[...] al-Qaida has created for itself a powerful and captivating image. It has become the world’s most feared terrorist organisation, which has an immense attraction for certain groups of young people. In some countries in Europe, it has become “cool” to be a jihadi. (Lia, 2008, pp. 3–5, italics in original)

Second, because jihadism is high-profiled and is perceived and received as a threat to security, it appears to hold the most potential for granting access to action and adventure. This makes it particularly attractive to individuals who find this appealing. The individuals attracted to action in turn attract further attention to the counterculture through their actions and strengthen its profile.

Finally, the nature of the public and political debate on Islam may contribute to the attractiveness of jihadism. According to Jenkins (1997), a minority can either embrace the construction of its identity as offered by the majority and work within the framework of it, or the minority can reject this construction and repeatedly fight it. From this perspective, embracing the construction offered by the majority and working within the framework of it is the easier alternative. According to Roy (2004), this may be what happens to Muslims in Western societies:

Objectification of Islam is also reinforced by pressure from non-Muslims, especially in periods of crisis, when Muslims are summoned to answer questions such as, “What does the Koran say on... [jihad, violence]?” It is also the product of a mirror effect between Western societies and Muslim public opinion, which explains why non-Muslims are more inclined to listen to conservatives and fundamentalists than to liberal thinkers. Conservatives and fundamentalists give definite answers to the question “What is Islam?” something that is more difficult for a Sufi, a spiritualist or a lay Muslim to do. (p. 154)

When majority society in this way reinforces and confirms conservative and fundamentalist versions of Islam as Islam, the easier alternative for a Muslim may be to accept this and work within the framework of it. This makes jihadism a convenient choice. Assuming the identity of a fundamentalist Islamist is to some extent easier than claiming that other Muslim identities are possible.
I argue that the attractiveness of jihadism is also that it seems to be in many ways a perfect response to a complex postmodern reality. First, it offers very simple explanations and guidelines for everything, focusing on how one can be absolutely certain about being on the right path. This can, for example, be seen in a preoccupation with imitating the Prophet and the first generations of Muslims in even the smallest aspects of everyday life and only doing things that are halal (permissible) and shying away from anything not proved to be such. Or in the words of an informant: “The way we understand the Quran you should avoid everything that is questionable and live as the Prophet did – he was a moral man. That is how we understand the Quran” (2, author’s interview Copenhagen, 22 January 2009).

Second, it rejects traditional sources of authority such as affiliation to institutions or formal education and is hyper-individualised, because the individual is not expected – or even allowed – to accept other authorities than Allah and is encouraged to trust their own “better judgement”. “You know, you should be extremely careful who you listen to. You cannot trust Sheikhs who are related to those in power anywhere – they are loyal to other things” (14, author’s interview Copenhagen, 25 June 2009).

As a consequence of the narrative about the End of Days and the role as the chosen ones, individual experiences are interpreted as guidance from Allah and therefore more credible than anything else. This implies that when something sounds right to the individual, it is not interpreted as a result of the individual’s own subjective analysis or opinion.

When you listen your heart should be completely open. If you are a Muslim on the right path, Allah will guide you at all times and if you keep your heart open, Allah will let you know what is right. (9, author’s interview Copenhagen, 24 January 2009)

Third, it offers a way to free oneself from the control of family or community in the shape of tradition, culture, norms and expectations. In the words of Ranstorp (2010): “Radicals often embrace takfiri Islam [deeming other Muslims infidels] as a rebellion against family members and as a justification for rejecting various norms. As such, we need to pay attention to the counter-cultural aspects of the radical belief-system” (p. 7). This is reflected in a strict reliance on written sources, which the individual is seen as able to read without any interpretations.

An example of these aspects can be found in events that unfolded in front of a court building during a trial in 2009. Towards the end of a lunch break, a young woman made herself comfortable by lying down on the lawn to enjoy the sun. After a short while, another young woman joined us. She was wearing an ordinary hijab and trousers, but apparently took offence by the other young woman’s behaviour. The young woman lying on the lawn in front of the courthouse was wearing a Somali-style garment (a traditional women’s garment, which covers everything except face and hands). The second woman politely asked the woman lying down to behave “in a respectable manner when you are dressed this way” (21, author’s interview Copenhagen, 22 June 2009). The second woman went on to explain: “The way a woman behaves when she is wearing a bikini is her own business, but when a woman is dressed in this way she should behave in certain respectable and appropriate ways” (21, author’s interview Copenhagen, 22 June 2009).

The woman lying down politely asked the other woman what she meant by “respectable” and “appropriate” and the second woman attempted to explain by
showing how the former woman should not lie down, but sit up straight with her legs to
one side. The woman lying down sat up and asked the second woman, “Where did you
find those rules? Is it in Islam or in culture?” (14, author’s interview Copenhagen, 22
June 2009). The second woman – now obviously uncomfortable – held her ground and
explained that there are certain ways in which a lady should behave and “this is a way of
showing respect” (21, author’s interview Copenhagen, 22 June 2009).

The woman wearing the Somali-style garment replied by stating: “I don’t mean any
disrespect, but I only abide by the rules of Islam, not culture or tradition” (14, author’s
interview Copenhagen, 22 June 2009). She added that if the second woman could
provide her with appropriate sources, such as a hadith, for her commands she would
greatly appreciate it and off course abide. The discussion ended peacefully and later,
the woman wearing the Somali-style garment explained to me the situation in her view:

Most Muslims follow traditions that have nothing to do with Islam and this is most
harmful. Only rules and commands that can be found in the Quran, Hadith or Sunnah
are to be followed and if a person commands another person to behave in a certain
way it is the duty of this person to provide such sources – the other person is not
obliged to abide until such sources have been provided, neither is he or she obliged to
investigate if the sources exist. (14, author’s interview Copenhagen, 22 June 2009)

She later expanded on the dimensions of this subject by explaining how many
women from Somalia have been subjected to genital mutilation because their parents
believe this is commanded in Islam – but it is not:

Many Somali girls begin to study Islam and they find out this is not allowed in Islam. In
the Prophet’s days some women came to him and asked if they were allowed to circum-
cise their daughters. The Prophet said no and they left. The women came back a second
time and asked if they were allowed to circumcise their daughters. The Prophet said no
again and they left. The women came back a third time and asked the Prophet if they
were allowed to circumcise their daughters and the Prophet then answered that they
could do like this: “She takes my right hand and pinches the skin on the back of my
hand between two fingernails. I comment that this is a clever way for the Somali girls
to break away from their parents’ control and from a crippling tradition. She replies:
“It is. But that is not why they study Islam – they do it for Allah’s sake. (14, author’s
interview Copenhagen, 22 June 2009)

The woman wearing the Somali-style garment was challenging traditional gender
roles and expectations of women by outbidding culture and tradition with “authentic
Islam” and she regarded her own efforts at challenging traditions as part of a larger
battle with traditions that have very concrete – and destructive – consequences for
other women.

The counterculture also offers ways to (re)claim a sense of self-respect and accep-
tance of oneself and one’s body by focusing on the individual as Allah’s perfect cre-
ation and by promoting the importance of behaviour, intentions and efforts over
looks and possessions. The inhabitants of the counterculture will go to great lengths
for each other to share whatever they have, to take care of each other and to be kind
and respectful to each other. Things like teasing, name-calling, sarcasm and irony
are frowned upon and everybody is expected to address or refer to each other with
adjectives and superlatives. The other side of this coin is that all these rewards can
very quickly be revoked if an individual trespasses or in other ways compromise the
strict social rules of the counterculture.
Conclusions
This paper set out claiming that by also analysing jihadism as a counterculture, we would benefit from a better grasp and understanding of the phenomenon, and subsequently also of its violent and political aspects.

Viewing jihadism as a counterculture does not bring us any closer to understanding issues such as why some individuals engage in illegal activities, whereas others do not, and the perspective is in itself far from sufficient for analyses of jihadism as a global or a local phenomenon. It must be combined with other perspectives, which account for the importance of politics, political ambitions, history, violent conflicts, psychology and all the other factors that presumably play a role. However, as an added perspective, it does hold some promise. Viewing jihadism as a counterculture allows us to make sense of the fact that some individuals have passed through seemingly conflicting countercultures and that individuals who appear to be part of an open liberal democracy can choose jihadism and accept the many costs associated with this choice.

The rewards discussed in the article include being seen as a real threat and therefore being taken seriously; a perfect response to a complex postmodern reality; a way to free oneself from control and to reject traditional sources of authority and attribute great authority to oneself; an identity as one of the chosen few; a way to (re)claim self-respect and self-acceptance through a focus on behaviour and piety over possessions and looks; strong social bonds and a community that emphasises kindness, sharing and respect; and, finally, the promise of access to action, adventure and influence. It is not surprising that some individuals are willing to pay a price for all that.

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Notes
1. Parts of the article are from the author’s PhD thesis (Hemmingsen, 2010).
2. Also known as the Sarajevo-plot.
3. The names of individuals who have been convicted are public, whereas the names of individuals who have been acquitted are not. In an attempt to protect their anonymity, I do not use their names, although it would probably not be difficult to find them.
4. Needless to say, the work brought with it a host of ethical challenges. The present article does not allow for a thorough discussion of these, but one may be found in Hemmingsen (2011).
5. Informants’ names have been replaced by numbers to protect their anonymity.
6. For more on this, see, for example, Wiktorowicz (2006).
7. For more on this narrative, see Hemmingsen (2010). The battles in as-Sham which are to follow the battles in Khorasan have not previously been mentioned. They were described in a long conversation with four informants on 1 July 2009 when I documented the full narrative about the End of Days as they presented it.

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References


