

Article

“IS Drew This Dream Picture—Like Floating on a Pink Cloud”: Danish Returnees’ Entry into and Exit from Salafi-Jihadism through Nurtured and Fractured Fantasies

Kathrine Elmoose Jørgensen

Faculty of Law, University of Copenhagen, 1165 København, Denmark; kathrine.elmoose.joergensen@jur.ku.dk

Abstract: Since the Syrian civil war erupted in 2011, an increasing number of European youth have joined Salafi-jihadist milieus in their home countries and/or in the Syrian/Iraqi conflict zone. Some are ardent believers in ending their days as—what they perceive to be—martyrs. Others renege on their commitment, return, and resocialize into conventional society. While engagement, disengagement, and resocialization have each been explored as phases separately within the existing literature, a coherent, criminological study of how those sequences are interconnected has still not been explored in a Danish context from an empirical angle. On the basis of qualitative interviews with three Danish Salafi-jihadist defectors (for example, from the Islamic State), this article unravels the connection and disconnection between engagement, disengagement, and resocialization. The analysis is theoretically informed by David Matza’s theory of drift (1964). However, the theory does have its limitations. As the commitment to Salafi-jihadism entails more than simply an “episodic release from moral constraint”, which defines drift, the informants are only part-time drifters, and here it is argued that the informants are rather entering and exiting a spiraling vortex of Salafi-jihadism. These entries and exits are fueled by the returnees’ nurtured and fractured fantasies.

Keywords: Salafi-jihadist pathways; returnees; drift; resocialization; fantasy



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1. Introduction

Since 2012, 5684 Western Europeans have left their home countries to become affiliated with Salafi-jihadist cadres in Syria or Iraq [1] (Pokalova 2020). In 2018, it was estimated that 1192 individuals have returned to European soil [2] (EPSR 2018), yet the exact number is hard to ascertain. In a Danish context, approximately 80 out of 160 adult individuals who traveled to the conflict zone after 2011 have returned to Denmark or another European country (Danish Security and Intelligence Service 2021).¹ Moreover, within the borders of Denmark, Salafi-jihadist networks have grown rapidly since the 1990s (Danish Security and Intelligence Service 2014) [4]. In 2014, the Danish Security and Intelligence Service estimated that around 100 individuals supported a militant Islamic ideology in Denmark and that the number of sympathizers was even higher (ibid.). An unknown number of homegrown Islamic extremists have returned to conventional society by disengaging from Danish-based Salafi-jihadist milieus. Even though the physical Islamic State (IS) was dismantled in Syria in 2018–2019, IS “continues to stretch its reach beyond borders, breeding homegrown militant jihadi killers wherever possible” [5] (McDowell-Smith, Speckhard and Yayla 2017:51), which means that IS still exists. Moreover, “as foreign fighters begin to stream home, a whole new set of challenges will begin” (Speckhard, Shajkovci and Yayla 2018:18) [6].² While a huge body of research has examined ways into Islamic extremism, why and how people exit such environments is less well explored (see [9,10] Dalgaard-Nielsen 2013; Horgan 2009). However, some scholars have initiated studies of defection from Islamic extremist milieus from a data-driven perspective [10–15] (e.g., el-Said and Barrett 2017; Greenwood 2018; Horgan 2009; Hwang 2017; Neumann 2015; Speckhard and

Yayla 2015). To date, there has been a heavy focus within the literature on the potential challenges and security threats defectors and returnees pose and how these should be handled e.g., [1,16,17] (Malet and Hayes 2018; Pokalova 2020; Vestergaard 2018). Less focus has been directed towards defectors' experiences of challenges and prospects for resocializing into conventional society.

Since the Salafi-jihadist milieu is clandestine and very hard to reach as a researcher, the field in general lacks a firm empirical grounding, especially in the form of ethnography and qualitative interviews with firsthand and secondhand sources [18–20] (Dawson 2019; Horgan 2012; Nilsson 2018). In addition, only a few scholars have explored more than one phase of terrorism pathways (e.g., [15,21] Barrelle 2015; Speckhard and Yayla 2015), and even fewer have unpacked the interconnection between engagement, disengagement, and resocialization from a data-driven perspective. In a Danish context, there are a few exceptions in studies examining all three processes; however, they primarily concentrate on the phenomenological meaning-making of leaving, joining, and returning for jihadi foreign fighters [11] (Greenwood 2018) and the influence of the socio-spatial context on these processes (Hjelt 2020) [22], with none of them undertaking a criminological analysis. Despite the merits of these studies, there seems to be consensus that exploring the different phases coherently is a crucial endeavor in order to contribute new knowledge and to reduce the risk of reengagement with Salafi-jihadism in the future [7,21,23] (Barrelle 2015; Horgan 2021; Nilsson 2021). As Nilsson (2021:183) [23] recently emphasized; “knowledge of these [radicalization] processes can help us understand the prospects of deradicalization when jihadists return to their home countries”. This article is based on qualitative interviews with three Danish ex-Salafi-jihadists (one female, two males). Two (one female and one male) made it to the conflict zone, one of whom was affiliated with IS, and the third made the arguments to go but was dissuaded at the last moment. The article aimed at exploring their entire trajectories. Specifically, the purpose was to study the possible interconnection between pathways into and out of Salafi-jihadism and the challenges and prospects of becoming resocialized into conventional society from a criminological angle.

Within criminology, the various sequences of criminal or delinquent pathways have been explored primarily through the lens of life-course criminology (e.g., [24,25] Moffitt 1993; Sampson and Laub 1997). As pointed out by Carlsson (2018:159), it has often been shown that “the factors facilitating desistance may be completely unrelated to the factors leading to onset of delinquency”. In spite of paying more attention to entry into crime, David Matza (1964) [26] has with his theory on delinquency and drift analyzed aspects of juveniles' drift into and out of delinquency and crime. According to Matza, drift is the result of loosened social, moral, and legal ties to the conventional order [27] (Currie 2010:6f), which happens because of what he terms neutralization (often related to a sense of injustice). This process of neutralization enables drift and thus becomes a precondition for infraction (Matza 1964:176) [26]. Drawing on this classic formulation, Matza describes (a) the “ordinary” delinquent as someone who drifts in and out of a delinquent lifestyle, (b) how the perceptive delinquent experiences a sense of limbo between the conventional and the criminal world (Matza 1964:28) [26], and (c) how drift is thus experienced as an “episodic release from moral constraint” (Matza 1964:69) [26]. Scholars analyzing various forms of crime and delinquency—both in an offline and an online setting—have found great inspiration in Matza's theory (see, e.g., [28–30] Blomberg et al., 2018; Ferrell 2018; Goldsmith and Brewer 2015). Within Islamic radicalization and terrorism studies, however, researchers have primarily used the concept of drift in conceptualizing “drifters” as part of typologies of various terrorists, with the important exception of [31] Cottee (2019) who draws on Matza's concept of drift in a short analytical note wherein he suggests that the Abdeslam brothers behind the 2015 Paris attacks, with their secular lifestyles, “drifted in and out of jihadi activism”. Aside from that, the typical extremist drifter has been defined as someone who does not have a strong religious, political, or ideological motivation, but is primarily led by social connections and the search for both identity and adventure [23,32,33] (Bjørge 2011; Nesser 2015; Nilsson 2021). However, none of these scholars explicitly refer to

Matza's concept of drift. Since Matza's theory provides a relevant theoretical apparatus that is useful for explaining how various factors play a role in entering and exiting Salafi-jihadism, this article draws on core elements from the theory. However, the theory has its limitations and is not fully compatible with the cases analyzed in this article. While the informants have commonalities with the "drifter"—both in Matza's definition and as explained in typologies—they also differ (as will be elaborated in the analysis). For example, they are not in a "limbo" *between* the conventional and criminal order, but rather they cut the ties to conventional society and thus the "release from moral constraint" is *constant*, not temporary. Thus, it is argued that the informants, rather than purely drifting, enter and exit the spiraling vortex of Salafi-jihadism. The article thus seeks to unravel the questions (1) how and why Danish youth entered Salafi-jihadist milieus, (2) how and why they exited Salafi-jihadist milieus, and (3) how and why their resocialization was both thwarted and facilitated. The interrelation between these phases is analyzed throughout the article.

2. Review of Existing Literature Dealing with Salafi-Jihadist Pathways

The literature dealing with Salafi-jihadist pathways (including foreign fighters and homegrown Islamic extremists) falls within the following categories: (1) engagement with Salafi-jihadism, (2) disengagement from Salafi-jihadism, and (3) resocialization of defectors and returnees. Each of the categories are briefly reviewed below.

Firstly, especially during the past decade, scholars have examined engagement (both in the form of cognitive and behavioral engagement) with Salafi-jihadism theoretically and empirically (for an overview see [34] Moskalenko and McCauley 2020). Besides often distinguishing push and pull factors (e.g., [22,35–38] Bakker and de Bont 2016; Coolsaet 2015; Hjelt 2020; Sheikh 2016; Vergani et al., 2020), the existing literature covers various engagement factors, some of which obviously overlap: personal and emotional; religious and ideological; social, psycho-social, and structural. Some studies examining the influence of personal and emotional motivations highlight that a "cognitive opening" caused by traumatic events, for example, makes the prospect of entering Islamic extremism easier [39,40] (Dawson and Amarasingam 2017; Wiktorowicz 2005). A group of scholars likewise finds that frustration with societal position and feelings of meaninglessness and loneliness influence jihadi foreign fighters' engagement in extremism [41–43] (Coolsaet 2016; Lindekilde, Bertelsen and Stohl 2016; Weggemans, Bakker and Grol 2014). The influence of emotionally-led motivations is supported by a range of scholars (e.g., [31,35,44–46] Bakker and de Bont 2016; Cottee 2019; Cottee and Hayward 2011; Hemmingsen 2011; Jensen and Larsen 2021). Others find that extremist groups offer a solution to, for example, existentially difficult life situations, which can be a motivational factor [11,39,47,48] (Cottee 2009; Dawson and Amarasingam 2017; Greenwood 2018; Sageman 2005). A branch of studies finds that increased interest in Islam, undergoing a religious transformation, and a desire to help co-religionists (ummah) are significant for engagement in Salafi-jihadism [43,49–52] (Dawson and Amarasingam 2020; Hafez and Mullins 2015; Micheron 2020; Speckhard and Ellenberg 2020; Weggemans, Bakker and Grol 2014). Moreover, researchers have recently started to explore the significance of religious emotions when engaging in Salafi-jihadism [46,49,53] (Dawson 2021; Jensen and Larsen 2021; Larsen 2020).

Social, psycho-social, and structural factors have also been shown to be significant for engagement with Salafi-jihadism. Marginalization, difficulties of assimilation, and a failed integration into Western societies among Muslim citizens are found by a range of scholars to be triggers for engagement in Salafi-jihadism [41,50,54,55] (e.g., Benmelech and Klor 2018; Coolsaet 2016; Hafez and Mullins 2015; Roy 2004). Studies find that encounters with charismatic persons and radical networks (e.g., the extremist brotherhood and sisterhood) are crucial for engagement in Salafi-jihadist milieus [22,48,56–58] (Hjelt 2020; Nilsson 2015; Reynolds and Hafez 2017; Sageman 2005; Speckhard 2012), with some pointing to particular subcultural attractions [59–61] (Hegghammer 2017; Jensen, Larsen and Sandberg 2021; Sageman 2008). Another division focuses on the influence of external,

structural factors such as propaganda material, and various online and offline recruitment strategies [31,37,52,62–65] (Bergema and van San 2019; Cottee 2019; Pokalova 2019; Sheikh 2016; Speckhard and Ellenberg 2020; Torok 2013; Winter 2018). One last group specifically focuses on drivers for women entering Islamic extremism (e.g., [66–69] Jacobsen 2019; Nuraniyah 2018; Pearson and Winterbotham 2017; Perešin 2015).

Secondly, a growing body of literature has started to focus on reasons given by individuals for disengaging (cognitively or behaviorally) and defecting from Salafi-jihadist milieus (for overviews of exit factors regarding other forms of violent extremism, see [9,21,70–72] Altier et al., 2017; Barrelle 2015; Bjørge and Horgan 2009; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2013; Windisch et al., 2016). Various forms of disillusionment with what life turned out to be in a given terrorist organization—for example, in the form of brutality, violence, and poor leadership—are found to be a primary reason for defection in a number of studies [5,9–11,13,21,22,42,52,70,73] (Altier et al., 2017; Barrelle 2015; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2013; Davolio and Villiger 2019; Greenwood 2018; Hjelt 2020; Horgan 2009; Lindekilde, Bertelsen and Stohl 2016; McDowell-Smith, Speckhard and Yayla 2017; Neumann 2015; Speckhard and Ellenberg 2020). Yet, disillusionment does not always lead to actually leaving a Salafi-jihadist milieu and becoming disengaged. For instance, Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Yayla (2018:5) [6] note that out of 63 IS defectors, 9 persons were found to have “either reversed their defection by returning to the battlefield or to have continued their ideological commitment to ISIS”. In a Danish context, Greenwood (2018) [11] finds that the six Danish foreign fighter returnees she had interviewed abandoned the cause as they were never completely dedicated and did not want a permanent jihadist lifestyle. Hjelt (2020:229) [22] finds that both push factors (e.g., unfulfilled expectations and loss of faith in the religio-political ideology) and pull factors (e.g., positive interactions with moderate “outsiders”, opportunities for education and employment and aspirations in life) were significant for the exit of radicals from the Salafi-jihadist milieu. Similar push and pull factors were found to be influential to disengagement among Indonesian and British extremists [74] (Kenney and Hwang 2021). Barrelle (2015) [21] conducted interviews with 22 former extremists, including jihadists, finding 15 disengagement themes that cluster into five domains: “‘Social Relations’, ‘Coping’, ‘Identity’, ‘Ideology’ and ‘Action Orientation’” (p. 133). Hwang (2017) [12] likewise finds that a combination of psychological, emotional, relational, and strategic factors drives disengagement from Islamist extremist groups.

Finally, literature examining defectors, returnees, and resocialization are primarily occupied with assessing the potential security threat and the challenges returnees bring [1,16,59] (e.g., Hegghammer 2013; Malet and Hayes 2018; Pokalova 2020). Concerning addressing those issues and challenges, studies dealing with the handling of returnees in a legal perspective emerge (see [17,75] Fejes 2019; Vestergaard 2018), while a fair amount of studies include policy prescriptions and recommendations [76,77] (Byman 2015; Speckhard and Shajkovci 2018; for an overview of different countries’ responses to returning foreign fighters, see Vidino et al., 2014 [78]). Some academic work examines home countries’ reintegration, rehabilitation, and counter violent extremism strategies [79–81] (Abbas 2019; Winterbotham and Pearson 2016 see Scrivens 2019 for an overview). A small number of studies explore the attitudes towards foreign fighter returnees among the home countries’ populations (e.g., [82–84] Brodén, Fridlund and Öhberg 2021; da Silva and Crilley 2017; Fangen and Kolås 2016). Only a few studies within Islamic extremism studies examine return and resocialization from the perspective of the defectors and returnees themselves (see Scrivens et al., 2019 [85] for a study of how former right-wing extremists perceive efforts at combatting violent extremism). Greenwood (2018:217) [11] finds that the foreign fighter returnees she interviewed experienced a return to “an unfriendly terrain in which the foreign fighters were viewed with suspicion as would-be terrorists”, which challenged their meaning formation. Hjelt (2020) [22] finds that the above-mentioned pull factors in combination with engagement in prevention programs and formal mentoring and supportive family and friends reinforce the Danish foreign fighter returnees’ exit pathways and facilitate reintegration. The latter is supported by other, non-Danish scholars [74]

(Kenney and Hwang 2021). Barrelle (2015:133) [21] finds that “genuine engagement in mainstream society after leaving [extremism] is the key to enabling individuals to move on with their lives”. The majority of these studies examine returnees as returning from the conflict zone and do not incorporate homegrown extremists who return to conventional society. Finally, women and children returnees are not mentioned in most of these studies (see Schmidt 2020) [86].

To sum up, engaging in and disengaging from Salafi-jihadist milieus clearly seems to be a coalescence of multiple factors. Besides a void of empirically-based studies, few scholars have examined the interconnection between more than one phase in the Salafi-jihadist trajectory, for example, between joining, staying, and leaving [11,15,22] (Greenwood 2018; Hjelt 2020; Speckhard and Yayla 2015), or between disengaging and reintegrating (Barrelle 2015) [21]. None of these specific studies set out a criminological analysis. Thus, there is a gap when it comes to the study of the interconnection between the factors motivating engagement with and disengagement from Salafi-jihadism and prospects and challenges of resocialization into conventional society from a criminological angle. This is the research gap this article aims to fill.

3. Methodology: Gaining Access to a Clandestine Milieu

This article is based on qualitative single interviews with three Danish defectors from Salafi-jihadism (one who returned from IS, another from the conflict zone, and the third who stayed in Denmark). When referring to Salafi-jihadists in this article, I thus refer to people who have been affiliated with Salafi-jihadist milieus,³ either only in Denmark and or in the Syrian–Iraqi conflict zone. Defectors cover both people returning from the conflict zone and those who defect from the Danish-based milieus.

Gaining access to hard-to-reach and illicit environments such as the Salafi-jihadist milieu is a difficult process that entails various levels of access and emotional trials [89,90] (Esholdt and Jørgensen 2021; Jørgensen and Esholdt 2021). Due to this impermeability, I set out a broad sampling strategy. During a process lasting almost three years, I attempted to gain access by initially contacting firsthand sources, people actively or formerly affiliated with the Salafi-jihadist milieu in Denmark. In addition, I tried to gain access to secondhand sources, people who knew persons affiliated with the Salafi-jihadist milieu professionally or personally, e.g., relatives, social workers, lawyers, and journalists. I contacted people by telephone, email, social media, or letter (sent to inmates). In addition, I undertook ethnographic field work in mosques and during trials related to the terrorism paragraph and at seminars and meetings for social workers and volunteers working in the prevention sector. During such events, I tapped the shoulders of potential gatekeepers and secondhand sources and introduced myself [45] (cf. Hemmingsen 2011). Most of the persons I approached did not show willingness to establish contact, or they did not respond to my approach.

I ended up gaining access to more or less traditional interviews with three informants: Rami, Yusuf, and Shiela. They all have ethnic minority backgrounds and grew up as second-generation immigrant Muslims in Denmark. They became affiliated with Salafi-jihadist milieus in Denmark between 2010 and 2016 while they were in their teenage years. After their defection, they all left Salafi-jihadism behind, however, not as apostates, but as moderate Muslims, and they thus remained religiously oriented. Rami traveled to the conflict zone to provide “aid work” and returned to Denmark after 8–10 months. Rami did not provide detailed information about who he was affiliated with or where exactly he was based while away from Denmark. However, during the interview, he offered statements like “if a bomb land on my tent, well, it doesn’t matter, because then I will be in Paradise. So that’s fine, I can live with that. I told my mom: ‘Mom, I’ll stay here for the rest of my life. I’ll see you in Paradise’”, which clearly underlined Rami’s (cognitive) Salafi-jihadist commitment. Yusuf was highly involved in the Salafi-jihadist milieu in Denmark, and he was very close to traveling to a Muslim country to practice his radical version of Islam, but was stopped by the authorities and his family just in

time. The contact with both Yusuf and Rami was established through gatekeepers whom I had spent 6–8 months establishing a trusted relationship with. The interview with Yusuf was undertaken at my gatekeeper's workplace (without the presence of the gatekeeper), and the interview with Rami was carried out in a public coffee shop (which Rami had suggested). Shiela traveled to IS where she got married and gave birth to a child, and later she returned to Denmark. The contact with Shiela was obtained via a specially convened private seminar about prevention of extremism, which I attended as part of my fieldwork. The seminar was arranged by a Danish counterterrorism organization. Journalists, social workers, volunteers, and researchers were among the audience, and every participant had to sign up and pay a participation fee. Shiela was invited to tell of her experiences of becoming engaged with Salafi-jihadism, later IS, defecting from the organization and returning to Denmark. She was seated in another room (during both her presentation and the Q&A session) so that no one from the audience could see her face, but her voice was not altered. After the presentation, which took approximately one hour, the audience was given the chance to ask Shiela questions. I had prepared some questions in advance, and I was lucky enough to be given the opportunity to put those questions to Shiela while the rest of the audience was listening. Nilsson has described how a gray zone "between more formal interviewing and ethnographic research" [20] (Nilsson 2018:5) may occur in cases where interviewing people from Salafi-jihadist milieus borders on ethnographic research. The encounter with Shiela can likewise be conceptualized within a gray zone, yet one that differs from Nilsson's concept as my ethnographic fieldwork did not allow me to establish a personal contact with Shiela. The "interview" with Shiela thus clearly differed from the traditional interview setting and hence held some limitations. The confident relation between interviewer and informant that I would usually try to establish was challenged, as there were a number of other listeners, and I could not look Shiela in her eyes or sense her body language apart from her voice. All three interviews lasted between 50 and 120 min. They were all carried out in Danish between 2019 and 2020. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and I have translated quotes included in this article into English. In cases of linguistic errors, these were altered in order to ensure readability. Informed consent that the interviews would be used as data for this article was obtained from Rami and Yusuf. There were no restrictions on the meeting where the "interview" with Shiela was conducted—in other words, the participants, including me, were given no instruction that notes during the session could not be taken or referred to later on. Furthermore, all details that could be related to the informants (e.g., names, geographical contexts) have either been left out or anonymized. The methods used for collecting and storing data for this project have furthermore received ethical approval from the Editorial Board at the Faculty of Law, University of Copenhagen.

The interviews were coded by using a thematic coding strategy, wherein the data were first grouped into overall themes and in a process between analysis and data, sub-themes that emerged across the interviews slowly formed and themes that were less substantial were omitted (cf. Scrivens 2019) [80]. However, this does not amount to an omission of contradictory elements between interviews in cases where such contradictions hinged upon overarching themes. The coding process was open-ended, which allowed any potential theme to gain attention before the process of narrowing down in order to ensure that the final themes were soundly structured. This process has contributed to maximizing the validity of my analytical findings.

4. Limitations and Opportunities When Interviewing Firsthand Sources

As noted by other empirically driven scholars within the field of Islamic radicalization and terrorism studies, it is impossible to be certain about the accuracy of interviews [10,18] (Dawson 2019; Horgan 2009). Thus, retrospective account-making may, as pointed out by [91] Cottee and Cunliffe (2020:184), imply methodological problems as regards "the way in which time skews memory and perception" and the problems "of the enormous pressures on them [offenders] to rationalize or excuse, rather than to reliably explain,

their involvement in terrorism". Yet, all three informants are not recent defectors and are all—according to themselves and the social workers who know them—well-integrated in conventional society, and it seemed their need to justify themselves was not as evident. Despite these obstacles, as expressed by [10] Horgan (2009:28), "[f]rom a research standpoint the terrorist is never more relevant than when he or she is disengaged. It is at that point that they are far more likely to realistically (and safely) engage with researchers about past activity". Additionally, all informants seemed to be aware of the retrospective nature, as Yusuf relates: "everything I'm saying now is hindsight". Through the use of interviews with firsthand sources, it thus became possible to study the processes of entering and exiting Salafi-jihadism from within the subject's realm of the world (cf. Carlsson 2018:161). Furthermore, the accounts are neither descriptive nor explanatory. They are rather exploratory case studies that, in order to provide some kind of explanation, need to be scientifically adapted through coding, analysis, and discussion in relation to existing theories and literature. Thus, "the analysis is explorative in character and therefore does not claim to generate generalizable results" [73] (Davolio and Villiger 2019). Indeed, as formulated by Nilsson (2021:183) [23], since "the sample may be unrepresentative of the larger population of interest, the aim of this study is theory development rather than theory testing".

5. Analysis

The analysis has a three-pronged structure aimed at exploring (1) how and why Danish individuals entered Salafi-jihadist milieus, (2) how and why they exited Salafi-jihadist milieus, and (3) how their resocialization was both thwarted and facilitated. The purpose of the analysis is to further scrutinize how these phases are interrelated. The informants' cases obviously differ from each other, as they each have unique and complex experiences of how and why they engaged, disengaged, and resocialized. Nevertheless, some factors emerged across the interviews, and these commonalities are highlighted in the analysis, while differences or contradictions are mentioned when relevant.

5.1. Entering Salafi-Jihadist Milieus

Four overarching factors were significant in generating the informants' entry into Salafi-jihadism. They are (1) emotional malaise stemming from experiences of discrimination and "normative marginalization", (2) an increased religious interest and a behavioral vacuum, (3) encounters with social actors representing a radical interpretation of Islam, and (4) fantasies about how life within Salafi-jihadism can solve their grievances. This analytical section unpacks the interplay between these factors and their role in the informants' entrance into Salafi-jihadism. By using conceptualizations from Matza's theory on drifting into delinquency, this part of the analysis argues that while the informants' pathways to extremism involve elements of drifting, they also deviate from a classic drift into juvenile delinquency by instead entering the vortex-like environment.

In his teenage years, Yusuf began to be a more seriously practicing, yet still moderate, Muslim, and he started to wear religious suits and to pray regularly. This aroused suspicion among his teachers and classmates, and after a while, during which Yusuf often defended Islam in teaching situations, they reported him to the school principal and the legal authorities. Yusuf then fell under suspicion and police scrutiny, and his family's house was searched. As Yusuf relates in the following quote, the experience that the suspicion was tied to his 'Muslim identity' caused him emotional malaise:

The police officer tells me 'some of your classmates believe you have extremist tendencies and that you plan to blow up the school.' And at that point I was like flabbergasted (. . .) And he asks me 'are you Sunni, are you Shia? (. . .) I assume you have fulfilled the five pillars of Islam? Do you have thoughts about fulfilling anything with it?' (. . .) So he just keeps on about this religious identity and background and it really provokes me extremely much. (Yusuf)

In the aftermath of this, Yusuf developed a keen sense of injustice. Rami did not experience this cloud of suspicion to the same extent, but he felt he did not fit into Danish society because of his “Muslim identity”, and he says it was “really hard” for him to “be part of the social” in a Danish elementary school with very few ethnic minorities. The clash between a liberal Western culture and the Muslim culture manifested as a feeling of emotional malaise in Rami. Shiela likewise explains that experiences of feeling discriminated against by the Danish mainstream society constituted a feeling of emotional, even physical, malaise:

I had a feeling of not belonging to Denmark. That Danes do not want any good for Muslims. You do not feel that you are worth anything. You cannot be in your own body any longer. You are suffocated. (Shiela)

Shiela further mentions that the Danish policies regarding Muslim women’s rights to wear a scarf were “unbelievably nonsense” that further contributed to her experiences of not belonging to mainstream society. Thus, all three informants to varying extents report emotional malaise from experiencing discrimination and “normative marginalization”, which is a form of marginalization that is “tied to identity and considers the effects of placing European Muslims as suspect according to societal security logics” [11] (Greenwood 2018:32). In the wake of these experiences, the informants’ religious interest increased, and they started caring about how to become a “good Muslim”. Yet, they also found themselves in a form of behavioral vacuum (cf. Matza 1964 [26]; Speckhard and Shajkovci 2018 [6]). For instance, Yusuf spent a lot of time “walking around for [himself], really disillusioned and the thoughts fly”, and Shiela was “in doubt as to how [she] should live her life”, while Rami relates that he “leaned much upon his erudite friend”. Matza (1964) describes that a “mood of fatalism”, which is a sense of losing control over one’s life as it is being controlled by external forces and authorities, allows the drift into delinquency [27] (Currie 2014:8). The behavioral vacuum that the informants find themselves in has parallels with the mood of fatalism. Feeling that they cannot act in accordance with their moderate Muslim lifestyle constitutes a “negation of the sense of active mastery over [their] environment” (Matza 1964:189) [26]. This mood of fatalism and the emotional malaise stimulate the informants to commence a move away from their marginalized social positions in conventional society towards a social community and social status. Rejected, as [47] Cottee (2009:1128) points out, “by the Western society they initially embraced and torn between two cultures, they are in the market for a solution to their problems”, and the informants became susceptible to establishing relationships with social actors representing a radical interpretation of Islam. The social encounters take place in the local mosque, their schools, or via the revival of old friendships, and they are thus—more or less—consequences of specific socio-spatialities [22] (cf. Hjelt 2020) they are already embedded in via their everyday lives. In the local mosque, Shiela established contact with a woman, who introduced her to people from the Salafi-jihadist milieu. One such person was a man who spoke to Shiela’s feelings of discrimination, which he

[c]aught hold of: (. . .) ‘the rhetoric concerning immigrants, where you feel that you are discriminated against’—those feelings he reinforced. He said: ‘this anger is not worth it, it is a waiting room to death.’ (Shiela)

The man contributed to reducing Shiela’s vacuous life situation as he offered her a potential solution in the form of becoming affiliated with IS. Similarly, an old friend proactively contacted Yusuf and told him that he worried about him. Upon disclosing his experiences with the legal authorities, the friend reacted with sympathy, saying

‘[t]hat’s what happens when we think this is our society. We get hurt. But brother, there are some who feel the same way as you do. They also have stories they can tell you.’ And I thought: ‘why not?’ at least if there is someone then we can share and then we can have a social community. And at that point I did not have any community, I mean, I was pushed out of the Danish. (Yusuf)

After the first visit in the group, Yusuf became rapidly immersed in the Salafi-jihadist network, where feelings of injustice and resentment were shared and cultivated through a continuous sharing of experiences of discrimination. As Yusuf explains, “all this hatred just boiled inside us. We were shocked simultaneously with thinking ‘how unjust this treatment was.’” To paraphrase [47] Cottee (2009:1126), “these failures and disappointments one after the other, not only frustrated [the informants], but also made [them] angry and resentful”, and the sense of injustice was further stimulated. After Rami started at a new school with more people with ethnic minority backgrounds, he began to visit the mosque regularly with this new group of friends, where they watched videos of children and women suffering from the Assad regime’s atrocities in Syria:

You enter a circle of friends, where the only thing you talk about is [the videos]. This is literally the only thing we talk about for three hours. Five times a week (. . .) you talk about it and then you talk about it again. And then you start talking about the fact that you want to travel. And then you just travel. (Rami)

By being immersed in these Salafi-jihadist networks, the informants experienced to varying extents what Matza (1964:191) calls “the situation of company”, which is a “context of mutual misconception (. . .) in which the subcultural delinquent comes closest to believing that he is committed to the precepts of a delinquent subculture”. In these cases, such precepts are the ideas and willingness to undertake a Salafi-jihadist lifestyle, within the milieus or by traveling to a conservative Muslim country or the conflict zone. When Rami relates that one gained “social status” in the group by traveling and that he desired that as well, it exemplifies how a “mutual misconception” (that it is “cool” to support jihadi foreign fighting) is supported in the group. Likewise, Yusuf explains that he and his friends did not want to watch the Danish news anymore, as they confirmed their hatred towards the government, and instead they watched sermon videos on YouTube corresponding with and enhancing their Islamist extremist worldview. In other words, a gradual frame alignment forms “as events in the world are interpreted such that radicalization ensues” (Nilsson 2021:182). The Salafi-jihadist milieus thus offered a solution and a promise of entering a realm of social inclusion and acceptance of their Muslim identities, thus countering what they wanted to repudiate, namely, a normative marginalization. Concurrently with strengthening their ties to the Salafi-jihadist milieu, their ties to the social, conventional order are thus equally loosened and later cut off. Matza explains that the loosening of ties to conventional order occurs through “neutralization”, which “proceed along the lines of (. . .) the sense of injustice” (1964:61). When Yusuf claims that he experienced a feeling of revengefulness after the authorities’ maltreatment of him, which made him think, “if they [the legal authorities] call me a terrorist, I will give them a terrorist”, he neutralizes his nullification of the legal and moral ties by referring to his sense of injustice and the authorities’ maltreatment. In other words, the legal authorities paved the way for him to direct his anger towards them, that is, as Matza (1964:61) [26] describes, “the law contains the seeds of its own neutralization”. Rami and Shiela also neutralized the loosening of ties to the conventional order and authorities by referring to their experiences of feeling socially excluded by mainstream society and desiring social inclusion and acceptance. This is the stage at which they begin to gravitate away, still not having entered the vortex. What then further activates the “will to infraction”, i.e., the thrust “by which the delinquent act is realized” (Matza 1964:181) [26] is, according to Matza (1964:188f) [26], a “feeling of desperation” that flows from the fatalistic mood. Thus, it is related to a strong need to take back control over one’s life. The informants’ infraction is here analytically defined as either traveling to the conflict zone or committing to do so. The will to do so, it is argued, is linked to a desperation over their lives as marginalized Muslims in the West. By breeding fantasies about a possible way of releasing their feeling of desperation and regaining control in their lives, the informants’ will to infraction is activated. The fantasies are online-fostered and socially nurtured, concerning the ideal Salafi-jihadist life that would solve their grievances. An example of one such fantasy is when Shiela explains how IS convened a better world through their propaganda material:

Through their videos, IS drew this dream-picture of the caliphate—like floating on a pink cloud. (Shiela)

Shiela explains that “it was hard to see through at that time [before traveling]”, but that she had the understanding that the mainstream media (who depicted another picture) was “one fat lie that wanted to create enemy images”. The brutal videos of women and children suffering in the conflict zone that Rami watched, indeed, did not display the fantasy but it induced a sense of moral outrage in Rami [91] (cf. Cottee and Cunliffe 2020), which made him and his Salafi-jihadist peers nurture a fantasy that “they could make a difference [by helping ummah] and then we agreed to travel [to the conflict zone] together”, as he relates. As mentioned, Yusuf and his friends watched online sermon videos of prominent jihadists whom “understood how it is to live in the West”, and as Yusuf says, he “just thought ‘where is it best to practice your religion? How do we become better Muslims? And then someone suggested this Muslim country and I thought ‘why not?’” The sermon videos thus spoke to their hatred against the West and activated a fantasy over how life as a good Muslim could be in a conservative Muslim country. The informants’ fantasies hence play a role in their thrust to regain control in their lives and escape Western, conventional society, as well as their emotional malaise. As noted by Sageman (2005:8) [48], it seems like the Salafi-jihadist milieu “reliev[ed] the malaise arising from their exclusion and marginalized status. Their sacrifice and participation in this Islamist vanguard provide[d] them with a sense of moral superiority, optimism and faith in the collective future”. This collective future was encapsulated in their fantasies. These were located in “a real place, rooted in the offline world” that had become a fantastical place via a global online media culture infused with Salafi-jihadist meanings [92] (cf. Miller-Idriss 2019:128). Whereas Nilsson concludes that an “apocalyptic worldview functions as a liberating mechanism and a way to take control of one’s hopeless situation” among Salafi-jihadists on the battlefield [23] (Nilsson, 2021:187), for these informants—outside the battle field—it is instead the fantastical worldview that serves this function.

Through the informants’ infraction (where they either traveled to the war zone or decided to do so, thus becoming further engaged with the Salafi-jihadist milieu), their ties to the social, moral, and legal order of conventional society were cut off and they were no longer “encircled by the members of adult society”, which is the case with the juvenile delinquents Matza describes in his classic theory (1964:46). In addition, when Matza and Sykes (1961:712) [93] point out that “[a] number of supposedly delinquent values are closely akin to those embodied in the leisure activities of the dominant society”, it is in contrast to the cases being described in this article, where the Salafi-jihadist values cannot be seen as an extension of mainstream society. The infraction thereby differs from the one committed by “ordinary delinquents”, (e.g., petty theft), which Matza is occupied with (Carlsson 2018:159). As no resistance existed, the Salafi-jihadist community was not just their “primary frame of reference”, it was their only frame of reference (Carlsson 2018:154). As such, they gravitated rather than drifted, and their fantasies precipitated and fueled this gravitation towards the vortex of Salafi-jihadism. In this way, the informants should only be considered as part-time “drifters”. When they became immersed in the milieus, which inevitably required a more committed engagement with a Salafi-jihadist lifestyle and way of thinking, they entered into a downward spiraling vortex. Inherent in the term vortex is a denial of agency. However, this is not to suggest a total absence of agentic control in terms of the process of entering the vortex, as the informants did illustrate a clear desire to enter. Rather, my point here is to suggest that upon entering the vortex of Salafi-jihadism, their agency diminished and they claimed it was as if their lives were no longer within their own control.

To sum up, the informants’ emotional malaise stemming from experiences of discrimination and their increased religious interest are coupled with the “right” social contacts and an inclination to fantasy, which contributes to explaining how and why they enter into Salafi-jihadism. As with the drifter, a “fulfillment of a number of social needs” [32] (Björge 2011) also played a role for the informants, yet this was at all times related to and

centered around a shared religious interest; resentment towards Western societies; and, importantly, fantastical reveries.

5.2. *Exiting Salafi-Jihadist Milieus*

Backing out of the Salafi-jihadist milieu was a gradual and incremental process in all three cases (cf. Hwang 2017 [12]). Common among them was that the disengagement—in various ways—was propelled by a combination of (1) experiencing and recognizing that their fantasies were not turned into reality, (2) persistent external social actors who believed in their disengagement, (3) a new devotion towards a religiously moderate lifestyle outside Salafi-jihadism, and (4) an increased emotional positivity towards conventional society. Inspired by Carlsson (2018:158), who considers drifting out “as a reversal of the process of drifting into delinquency”, this analytical section explores if and how the factors motivating and characterizing the exit from Salafi-jihadism can be seen as reversal of the factors motivating and characterizing the entrance into the milieus.

In Rami and Yusuf’s cases, external social actors played a role in their recognition that their fantasies were not turned into reality and that it was no longer worth fighting for them. This realization commenced their defection. While Yusuf still had a “well-established relationship to the [Salafi-jihadist] group”, he one day received a letter from the legal Danish authorities where they apologized for their maltreatment of him and invited him for a chat. Yusuf was skeptical, but did agree to meet with a representative (a social worker), who contributed to opening Yusuf’s eyes to a new, more moderate interpretation of Islam:

He said: ‘you want to go to [Muslim country]—that makes no sense. Because Islam is not about the collective, it is about individuality (. . .) Your work is individual and you have to work with yourself.’ And I thought: ‘what the hell, do you challenge me on my home ground?’ (. . .) His holistic view was different from what I was used to. I was used to ‘do this, do that.’ But I was also characterized by the group I was part of, where it was much about them and us, much black-and-white, but he [the social worker] was more like, it is about me and my religion and how I feel about it. (Yusuf)

After this chat, long sessions of discussing the meaning of Islam then followed. The social worker stimulated a “scriptural discovery” [94] (Cottee 2015) in Yusuf, where he slowly started to recognize a more moderate interpretation of Islam. From this point, his disengagement process slowly initiated, and after eight months, he “took down [his] clenched fists and thought: ‘there must be something here [outside the Salafi-jihadist milieu] that is true.’” Being a well-educated person who had “found his feet in Denmark with house and family and everything”, the social worker became a “role-model” to Yusuf and planted the thought in him that “perhaps this can happen [to me] as well”. As such, Yusuf experienced that the authorities now treated him in the opposite manner—instead of behaving in a way that left him with resentment and fantasizing about becoming a terrorist to get revenge, their behavior now left him feeling “forever thankful that they did it [apologized]” as Yusuf relates and with a desire to obtain a normal life unleashed from violent extremism. In the beginning of Rami’s stay in the conflict zone, his fantasy about helping ummah, for example, and making a difference was for a short period realized as he “helped people” and “did something that was good”. After a while, however, external social actors in the form of his mother became influential on his recognition that his fantasy was not fully realized and that there was an alternative life outside the conflict zone:

One day my mother called me. And she just talked normally and quietly to me about this fact that ‘you can provide help even though you live in Denmark. You can take an education. You can initiate fund-raising campaigns. And you can do many things—you are a young boy. You have a family’ and that was like the turning point for me (. . .) I was at the wrong place (. . .) She tried to understand me. Why was it? No one had asked me these questions; why did you do it? What

was the reason? And it was like the fact that my mother tried to understand me. That motivated me. (Rami)

Rami describes that he had a hard time seeing things the way his mother suggested as he “lived in a box” where he used to say; “It is not right, Rami, don’t care about it [returning to Denmark]”. After a while however, he began to realize that his fantasy was not fulfilled. Rami relates that he felt “sort of too young” to be in the conflict zone and that he felt that he cheated himself out of another life, as he explains, “getting married, become established. I felt I had to go home and get an education. I did not provide enough help, I did not make any difference”. The discovery that there was a life outside Salafi-jihadism is not in the same sense scriptural as it was to Yusuf, but Rami, too, started seeing Islam in a wider perspective where his fantasy about “ending up in Paradise” was superseded by an awareness that to actually make a difference he needed to pay attention to his family and get an education, thereby regaining control in his life. When Shiela explains that it was confirmed to her while living under IS that Denmark was her “real home country”, she also expresses a new devotion towards life outside Salafi-jihadism and conventional society. Furthermore, external social actors had an indirect influence on Shiela’s defection as they represented the opposite to what she faced in the Caliphate, and she reports that during her sojourn, she missed her “family and their unconditional love”. Moreover, she describes her fractured fantasy when she tells that she was surprised by the air strikes she continuously witnessed and she experienced that there was a mismatch between her expectations of life as a Muslim female in the Caliphate and the reality. For instance, she had to stay in a safe house every time her husband went out to fight, as she was not allowed to live by herself. Shiela was, in other words, turned into a non-agentic figure. Her experiences were thus the opposite of “floating on a pink cloud”, and that motivated Shiela to leave the Caliphate. Thus, in a reversal of what motivated the informants to enter into the milieu, they all became more and more open towards conventional society, and Islam became detached from fantasy.

The appeal of the Salafi-jihadist community that the informants’ experienced as motivating for their engagement turned out to be rather unappealing. They fantasized about a community where they would feel accepted and gain social status. This fantasy was fractured as well. For example, Shiela describes how everybody in the Caliphate

Thought about themselves. You could not trust anyone. It was always about feathering one’s own nest first. You look for a social community, which you actually never get. (Shiela)

This absence of the social inclusion she dreamed of also motivated her to defect. Just as Yusuf describes in the above that he gained new role-models who were so indeed because they were not affiliated with Salafi-jihadism, Rami explained that he changed his view that to travel released social status. When defecting, he reversed this and says that to him someone who “has established a family and has an education, who has a work, that kind of person is more successful to me than someone who has travelled to Syria. But that’s not how it was at that time [before disengaging], where one such person to me would be a stranger”.

Matza (1964:54) [26] suggests that a result of drifting out can be the “discovery of previously shared misunderstandings” that characterized the company with other delinquents. Even though Yusuf held on to the group for a long period, he came to discover that he misunderstood his peers from the milieu by believing that radical Islam was the right thing to live for. As he says, “you think they believe in the same as you. But actually it is you, who believes what they believe, well. It sneaks in, you can say. You are not aware of it”. In this way, Yusuf came to recognize that his agency was somehow denied while immersed in the milieu. As the milieu does not fulfill their social desires, they all come to focus more on their wishes for their own life outside Salafi-jihadism, paying less attention to the expectations of the milieu. In Matza’s words, their “membership anxiety” is reduced (1964:53) and they refute their commitment to Salafi-jihadism (cf. Horgan 2021) [7].

Besides these remarks, Matza (1964:54) [26] is mostly occupied with the process of drifting into delinquency, and he primarily explains the process of drifting out by referring to what he calls “maturational reform”. He proposes that the desistance from delinquency is likely to happen concurrent with the transition to adulthood through, for example, “[w]ork, marriage and other conventional adult statuses” (Matza 1964:55) [26]. It is thus in approaching and entering adulthood that “the individual is undergoing a process of maturation that in turn makes him or her leave crime behind” (Carlsson 2018:157). For the informants in this article, it is not the concrete transitioning into adulthood that makes them want to defect. Instead, hopes and dreams about being able to transition into adulthood are a somewhat derivative effect of realizing that their fantasies were fractured and that there is a life outside the Salafi-jihadist milieu where control and agency could be regained. It should be mentioned that certain adult activities (getting an education, a job, getting married to moderate or non-Muslims) are somehow not compatible with a strict Salafi-jihadist lifestyle, which is why it is difficult to make such a transition in parallel with being engaged in the milieu. This further underlines that their ties to conventional order were cut off and not simply loosened. Shiela was married and became pregnant while staying in the Caliphate, and she explains that this was like her last resort:

I thought I would forget [that she missed her family] if I had a child (. . .) I became pregnant, because I did not believe that I would get back to Denmark—and when I stopped believing it. (Shiela)

The quote underscores that these conventional adult statuses indeed functioned as a way of trying to escape within the Caliphate. It is well-known that escaping terrorist organizations and in particular IS can be extremely difficult, emotionally stressing, costly, and dangerous [23,50,95] (Hafez and Mullins 2015; Nilsson 2021; Speckhard and Yayla 2016). Indeed, for the informants, defecting is in that sense not just about changing habits or ideas but involves a profound change of their lifestyle; their dreams; and, for Rami and Shiela, also their geographical contexts. These factors underline that the defection is more like a spiraling out from the vortex rather than a drift away from, for example, petty thefts. When inside the vortex (immersed in the milieus), they experienced a lack of control over their lives as a Salafi-jihadist ideology and its supporters controlled them. This corresponds to the denial of agency that is encoded in the vortex. When spiraling out of the vortex, the informants started to regain agency.

The process of exiting thus somehow mirrors the process of entering. Upon breaking free, a long process of becoming resocialized into conventional society followed.

5.3. Resocialization into Conventional Society

Once the informants started their processes of exiting the Salafi-jihadist milieus, a prolonged process of resocialization followed. When referring to resocialization, I refer to both the informants’ cognitive and behavioral resocialization. The state of resocialization seemed to occur as the informants became active members of conventional society through voluntary work; job; education; marriage; and new social, non-extremist networks and when trust towards mainstream society was regained and they started to feel that others perceived them as more than merely ex-Salafi-jihadists. As pointed out by a range of scholars, defection can be a tenuous and sensitive process, and it is not a given that defectors will reaffirm their disengagement (Speckhard, Shajkovci and Yayla 2018; Wright 1987) [6,96]. Indeed, it is crucial to explore how the informants deal with their fractured fantasies and gain indulgence after returning to conventional society, thus both what thwarts and facilitates their resocialization. Experiences of a normative stigmatization, denigration, and invisibility thwarted the informants’ resocialization process, while external social actors persistent in seeing them as more than “returned extremists” and the informants’ refutation of extremist ideas and behavior facilitated their resocialization and reaffirmed disengagement.

All the informants experienced resocialization into mainstream society to be emotionally exhausting and difficult. Rami relates that the first seven months after his return to

Denmark were “*extremely tough*”, Shiela says she suffered from PTSD, and only after eight months did Yusuf feel able to trust conventional society again. There is a great deal of evidence that the populations in Western societies relate to former extremists and returned foreign fighters with reservation and denigration [82–84] (Brodén, Fridlund and Öhberg 2021; Fangen and Kolås 2016; da Silva and Crilley 2017). Indeed, the informants experienced that their Muslim identity (still) created barriers to them becoming resocialized, as they felt they were shrouded in suspicion and made “invisible”. Jeff Ferrell (2018) [97] describes train-hoppers, refugees, and homeless people as contemporary North American drifters. He emphasizes how these “migrants and political refugees, who are imagined as the carriers of exotic disease, the thieves of honest labor and good jobs, even the Trojan horse of terroristic violence, are effectively made dead to those who have learned to fear them” (2018:186). This social death, which Ferrell explains has spawned subsequent spirals of social and physical invisibility, also characterized the informants’ experiences upon returning, and they are, in line with Ferrell’s observations, made suspicious and invisible both by their social surroundings and by themselves. Rami, for instance, describes that he felt socially excluded and that it thwarted his resocialization:

It was like the people I went to school with had painted some kind of a picture of me being a walking issue. The principal was after me all the time. I sensed that. And I could sense it from my local community—for example, I used to visit the mosques and there people started to distance themselves from me. I could sense that when my friends’ parents called them and I was with them, they would never—no one would say my name (. . .) It was like ‘this person is dangerous to hang out with.’ (Rami)

Rami’s social surroundings thus conspired in constructing him as a “multi-excluded youngster” [42] (Lindekilde, Bertelsen and Stohl 2016:871). Yusuf struggled to regain trust in the authorities and conventional society at large, while Shiela fought against accusations from the Salafi-jihadist milieu that she was involved in attacking members of the Caliphate and the Intelligence Services had put her under surveillance. Despite the fact that Shiela says she “is well today” and “has a strong network”, she would only tell her story behind a veil of anonymity, which underscores that her life as a returnee is characterized by living in accordance with the codes of physical and somehow social invisibility. In a similar manner, the prolonged and difficult process of gaining access to interview participants in general clearly exemplifies the invisibility that accompanies these people’s lives as ex-Salafi-jihadists in conventional society endeavoring to evade public visibility. The normative marginalization and denigration they experienced after defecting is thus additionally a side effect of both the invisibility resulting from their own behavior and the invisibility imposed upon them according to a societal fear of terrorism and security logics [11] (cf. Greenwood 2018:32). For example, the informants relate that they did not feel well upon their defection, and Rami says that he was in a state of depression, being only in his room, watching movies without talking to anyone. As such, the normative marginalization and denigration countered and thwarted their resocialization, and the informants thus entered a new vacuous life where they still had not totally regained control over their lives. In their study of IS defectors from Western Europe, Balkan countries, and Syria, Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Yayla (2018) find that the return to the defectors’ home countries was not any better than life in the Caliphate, as they labeled “those who went to assist in the uprising in Syria as terrorists” (2018:9). In essence, the defectors perceived the alternative to living with IS as being worse and they therefore reengaged with IS. Even though the informants in this study had similar experiences, a marginalization fatigue did not result in a reengagement for the informants, and at a certain point, the normative marginalization, invisibility, and denigration began to wane.

It is well known within the literature that the detachment from an extremist group or cult is “much easier if the individual can find a social support structure which helps to encourage disaffiliation” [6,9,96] (Wright 1987:75; cf. Speckhard and Shajkovci 2018; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2013). Indeed, social external actors’ ability to see the informants as

“human beings”, listen carefully to them, show positive expectations, and not “put them in a box” functioned as prospects for the informants’ resocialization. As Yusuf says about the previously mentioned “role model”:

I start telling [him my story] and he does not interrupt me or anything and I really appreciate that. When I was allowed to say something in the beginning, my tone of voice was pretty high because I wanted to be heard, but he is so calm, so my tone of voice automatically drops down and I get to tell it all (. . .) I felt that he gave me something in terms of trusting the system again. (Yusuf)

Rami likewise established a trusted relationship with people from his local milieu who saw his potential for resocialization, and both he and Shiela experienced great support from their nearest family members. Nilsson (2021:191) [23] argues that “[i]f socialization was an important factor [for radicalization], new social contacts, for example, in the form of nonviolent Salafism, could contribute to cognitive deradicalization as new ideas are adopted, indirectly contributing to behavioral deradicalization”. Indeed, the encounters with external social actors caused a “cognitive opening” for new behaviors to emerge, allowing the informants to refute the prejudices people had by stepping into more conventional activities, for example, begin to study, become members of civil society associations, and get married and thereby finally regain control in their lives. Concurrent with that, they started to build goodwill and their ties to mainstream society were strengthened, which functioned as a self-perpetuating process for their resocialization. Rami relates:

Now I am member of an association that helps young people. And I can see that the elderly people, with whom I speak today, they greet me very well. So I can feel . . . that people do not see me as they used to see me before. (Rami)

This reverse process of discrimination, where they became rooted in an alternate plausibility structure (cf. Wright 1987:75) [96], supported their resocialization. The reconciliation with conventional society and the reestablished ties through “being seen as a human;” being met with understanding and openness; and becoming affiliated with more conventional, non-extremist life activities thus supported their resocialization, while the re-experience of what they originally wanted to escape thwarted the process. Hence, the reversal of the factors that motivated the informants’ entry into the Salafi-jihadist milieu was successful for their resocialization and contributed to solving their grievances. The major challenges of becoming resocialized and the fact that it took the informants on average 8–10 months before they felt resocialized further underlines that exiting was not just a process of drifting out but rather an immense extrication from the downward spiraling vortex whereupon they regained agency.

6. Concluding Discussion

The purpose of this article was to explore the interconnection between Danish Salafi-jihadist returnees’ spiraling into and out of Islamic extremism and their experiences of challenges and prospects in their resocialization into conventional society. Despite the small sample size, the article adds crucial empirically driven insights to a field suffering from a data deficit. In this concluding section, the implications of the article’s findings will be discussed.

Firstly, through a combination of an emotional malaise stemming from experiences of normative marginalization and discrimination, an increased religious interest, a behavioral vacuum, encounters with internal social actors, and nurtured fantasies regarding the ideal Muslim life in a Salafi-jihadist world, the informants were motivated to become engaged with Salafi-jihadism in Denmark and ultimately in the Syrian–Iraqi conflict zone. Each of these factors in isolation resonates with existing literature studying explanations for engagement in Islamist extremist milieus (e.g., [50,52,56] Hafez and Mullins 2015; Nilsson 2015; Speckhard and Ellenberg 2020). In particular, perceptions of discrimination and feelings of alienation in Western societies have been found to be primary motivational factors among second-generation Muslim immigrants [6,11,50,54,55,57] (Benmelech and Klor 2020;

Greenwood 2018; Hafez and Mullins 2015; Reynolds and Hafez 2017; Roy 2004; Speckhard and Shajkovci 2018). Furthermore, such experiences are, sadly, part of many Muslims' lives in the West. However, the majority of Western Muslims handle such struggles around Salafi extremism (cf. Nilsson 2021) [23]. That being said—and without studying engagement failures—this article suggests that the combination of the factors highlighted here may propel at least some people into Salafi-jihadism. Without a doubt, the informants did not provide complete insights as regards their pathways, and other factors, which have not been covered in this article, may also have played a part. There seems to be consensus within existing literature that reasons for engaging in Salafi-jihadism are multifactorial. Unpacking how multiple factors are interrelated and act together to stimulate a gravitation towards Salafi-jihadism, however, adds new insights to the field. Secondly, the article argues that the factors playing a role in entering Salafi-jihadist milieus, when reversed, drive the informants' exit from Salafi-jihadism. These factors—in isolation—have also been found among other scholars to be influential for defection (e.g., [15,22] Speckhard and Yayla 2015; Hjelt 2020). While motivations for disengagement have not been conceptualized as a form of fractured fantasies, various sources of disillusionment have been highlighted as a primary reason why people exit terrorist and extremist groups. The close examination of the interrelation between factors motivating engagement and factors motivating disengagement contribute new insights. As such, my findings suggest—in line with other scholars [7,38] (Vergani et al., 2020; Horgan 2021)—that a holistic perspective on extremist pathways should be considered. It is not a big surprise that if people—extremists or non-extremists—search for something and they do not get it, they may want to leave [32] (cf. Bjørge 2011). However, it is not given if and under what circumstances this could lead to actual defection, and examining how certain fantasies are fractured and what implications that has for the persons in question can be less obvious. While the concept of fantasy has been touched upon within (cultural) criminology [98–100] (Hayward 2012; Hayward and Hall 2021; Young 2009) and recently gained some traction within studies of right-wing extremism [92,101] (Askanius and Keller 2021; Miller-Idriss 2019), the field of Islamic radicalization and terrorism studies has primarily studied the concept of fantasy by linking it to “the war on terrorism” or to perceptions and imaginations of the terrorism threat [102–104] (Aretxaga 2002; Hamilton-Hart 2005; Zulaika 2012). That being said, the influence of social media propaganda has been widely explored, and it is well known that IS especially has been successful in recruiting through propagandizing an “ideal world” [6,105] (Speckhard, Shajkovci and Yayla 2018; see also Picart 2015). The case of a 13-year-old girl who thought she would be traveling to IS Disneyland if she joined the organization (Speckhard and Shajkovci 2018:91) [6] is a profound example of how terrorist groups may be successful in grooming people by creating fantasies, drawing them to engagement in extremism. Additionally, Hayward (2022) [106] notes that today “such dreams—along with a whole host of other even more damaging murder, rape and abuse fantasies that thrive in the subterranean recesses of the dark web—are easily accessible across the internet”. The foregoing notwithstanding, the significance of fantasy still has not been brought into studies of Salafi-jihadist pathways. Hence, [91] Cottee and Cunliffe (2020:186) stress that “[w]e still know all too little about how extremist online propaganda is consumed and understood by those already radicalized or moving toward radicalization, still less how its consumption shaped their thoughts, emotions and, ultimately, life-choices”. This article adds to our understanding of how this online content plays a role in entry into—and exit from—Salafi-jihadism. The malleability of the online content, in combination with its social and emotional appeal to individuals feeling discriminated against and caught in a behavioral vacuum, feeds the fantasies and fuels the gravitation towards the spiraling vortex of Salafi-jihadism. However, the porosity, the rapidly developing cracks in such fantasies in an offline setting, and the influence from external social actors to recognize such fractures initiate a retreat from extremism and a reversing of the direction of entering the vortex.

Thirdly, resocialization was thwarted by a (new) normative marginalization where the informants had experiences of being shrouded in suspicion and being made invisible by their societal and social surroundings [97] (cf. Ferrell 2018), as well as by themselves. By slowly beginning to reengage with conventional activities, proving that they had exited and with the influence from persistent external social actors who did see them as more than returnees, their resocialization was supported, and this contributed to addressing their grievances.

Finally, by drawing on Matza's theory of drift into and out of delinquency, the article shows that the theory is valuable as it allows for an understanding of aspects of the informants' pathways into Salafi-jihadism. Nevertheless, the theory also has its conceptual limitations. When the ties are cut off and the informants become immersed in the milieu by either traveling to the conflict zone or deciding to do so, the drift metaphor no longer applies, and the theory may no longer provide a toolkit for explaining the rejection of conventional society and the full-on commitment to crime. The binary relationship between life and potential death that characterizes the transformation to radical Islam is in contrast to the limbo *between* conventional society and the subculture of delinquency that characterizes Matza's classic drifters. The article argues that entering and exiting Salafi-jihadism can be conceptualized as spiraling into and out of a vortex. That being said, the processes of entering and exiting Salafi-jihadism have some commonalities with the drifting of juveniles into and out of delinquency, which places the informants as part-time "drifters". This article thereby brings a core criminological concept into the field of Islamic radicalization and terrorism studies, suggesting that elements of the theory of drift are also relevant to draw upon when describing severe forms of crime that differ from traditional juvenile delinquency, while other aspects need rethinking. Furthermore, the people who gravitate differ from the "drifter" [32,33] (cf. Nesser (2015) and Bjørge's (2011) definitions) by being motivated by emotional, religious, social, and fantastical dynamics, being firmly committed, yet returning to mainstream society. They thus also differ from ardent believers and re-engagers. Nevertheless, a caveat to relying too much on ideal types must be echoed (cf. Nilsson 2021) [23].

The results stemming from this article indeed show that we are better at understanding both the challenges and prospects of the resocialization process since we know what led returnees to initially become engaged in and disengaged from Salafi-jihadism. With these results in mind, it is thus appropriate to confirm other scholars' (e.g., Barrelle 2015; Horgan 2021; Nilsson 2021) [7,21,23] acumen that knowledge about the interconnection between various phases of extremist trajectories are imperative. Considering more sequences of the extremist pathways coherently will further our knowledge within a field where these important elements have often been studied in isolation.

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Notes

- ¹ In October 2021, three Danish women (and 14 children) were repatriated to Denmark—these numbers are not included in the latest officially estimated number of returnees, which was in March 2021 (National Board of Social Services 2021) [3].
- ² See also Zelin (2021) and Horgan (2021) [7,8].
- ³ Salafi-jihadist milieus are here broadly defined as the social networks and communities (e.g., the brotherhoods and sisterhoods) that support Salafi-jihadism, the violent defense of Islam (Wiktorowicz 2006) [87], either cognitively or behaviorally. The milieus

are based in Western societies or in conservative Muslim countries. In Denmark, the milieus are typically found in the areas around the larger cities, such as Copenhagen, Aarhus, and Aalborg (Danish Security and Intelligence Service 2021) [88].

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