

Street culture meets extremism: How Muslims involved in street life and crime oppose jihadism

Sébastien Tutenges^{1,*}  and Sveinung Sandberg²

¹Department of Sociology, Lund University, Box 117, 221 00 Lund, Sweden

²Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, University of Oslo, P.O. Box 6706, 0130 Oslo, Norway

*Sébastien Tutenges, Department of Sociology, Lund University, Box 117, 221 00, Lund, Sweden; sebastien.tutenges@soc.lu.se

Many studies have examined why individuals with a background in street life and crime are drawn toward extremism. This paper examines why most people with this background reject extremism. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Oslo, we found that Muslims involved in street culture were generally opposed to jihadism because they perceived jihadists as evil people who harm innocents; bad Muslims who defame Islam; and cowards who break the ‘code of the street.’ This opposition resulted in avoidance behaviours, criticism and, sometimes, violence against suspected jihadists. We argue that research on the crime-terror nexus has focussed too narrowly on the similarities between street culture and jihadism, contributing to a distorted image of Muslims involved in street culture as potential terrorists.

Key Words: crime-terror nexus, ethnography, extremism, jihadism, street culture

This country has given me everything. My clothes, all I’ve got. [...] then these damn terrorists come with their bombs [spits demonstratively on the ground]. If the police gave me the permission, I would fucking kill them all. If I had seen that guy with the bomb the other day, sneaking around, and fuck. If I was given the permission, I would fucking kill that pig. It’s those fucking jihadists. They stand right over there in the back alley, trying to brainwash people. Fuck them. If I was allowed [punches in the air].

Akim yelled out these words in broad daylight by the stairs leading down to a metro station in central Oslo. Two days earlier, a 17-year-old jihadist had been caught with a homemade bomb some 50 metres away from where he was standing. Akim sometimes earned money from drug dealing in the area around the metro station, which is the largest drug market in Norway. His fierce opposition to violent jihadists was widely shared by the other drug dealers operating the market, although few were as outspoken as him. They had good reason to be upset. Jihadists

sometimes roamed around the metro station to recruit followers, and several of the dealers had friends who had gone to Syria, Somalia or Iraq to fight for jihadist groups such as the Islamic State (IS/ISIS).

This drug market has a long history of poverty, illegality and police intervention. In 2005, when we first began our ethnographic research in the area, the people operating the market were much like they are today. Most were young male immigrants from Muslim-majority countries. Many were struggling with childhood trauma, social marginalization and drug abuse. They were generally committed to a form of street culture that revolves around illegal activities and intensive partying. However, certain things have changed since, especially when it comes to religion. Our more recent ethnographic research in the area, conducted from 2017 to 2018, showed that Islam had become more central to the way the dealers defined themselves and interpreted their lives. Moreover, the issue of jihadism had changed from being a minor concern for them to something they spent a lot of time talking about and, to some extent, acting upon. Jihadism reached out to them more directly than before through media coverage, online propaganda and face-to-face recruitment efforts by increasingly well-organized jihadist groups (Lia and Nesser 2016).

These developments are not unique to Oslo. There are reports from across Europe of a new jihadi presence on the streets, in prisons and other places of marginalization (Kupatadze and Argomaniz 2019). Studies show that a growing number of petty offenders have been pulled into jihadism in countries like the UK (Stuart 2017), France (Roy 2016), Sweden (Rostami et al. 2020), Spain (Argomaniz and Bermejo 2019) and the Netherlands (Van der Veer, 2019). Scholars argue that what we are seeing is a new crime-terror nexus, which involves the 'convergence of criminal and terrorist milieus,' both of which recruit 'from the same pool of people' who come from similar disadvantaged backgrounds (Basra and Neumann 2016: 26).

Individuals with a history of drug dealing and other street crimes have been drawn toward violent extremism, while extremist groups—most notably IS—have become more willing to include such individuals in their ranks (Nesser 2019: 19). This is significant for a number of reasons. Life on the street can impart skills that may benefit extremist groups, such as competence in evading the authorities, acquiring weapons and perpetrating violence (Basra and Neumann 2016). At the same time, extremist groups offer military training and experience that can turn former petty offenders into 'extremely dangerous criminals' (Kupatadze and Argomaniz 2019: 269). Those who return to life on the street may bring with them new methods of violence and a new willingness to engage in organized crime (Gallagher 2016; Lakhani 2018).

Most research on terrorism comes from fields other than criminology, including psychology, political science and religious studies. These approaches have provided vital insights into the psychological characteristics of terrorists (Borum 2004), their ideological ideas (Maher 2016), their religious beliefs and practices (Cook 2005) and the rational strategies they employ to reach their goals (Hegghammer 2013). Criminology may be fairly new to the study of terrorism but has much to offer (LaFree and Freilich 2016). Of particular relevance are criminological works on subcultural theory (Pisoiu 2015), strain theory (Agnew 2017), situational action theory (Wikström and Bouhana 2017) and social learning theory (Akins and Winfree 2017). Moreover, criminology has a very long tradition of researching drug dealers, gangs and street culture (for an overview, see Ilan 2015; Fraser 2017). This research is of great importance for understanding the factors that motivate or demotivate transition from street crimes to terrorism (Decker and Pyrooz, 2011, 2019; Reid and Valasik, 2018).

This study is a critical ethnographic exploration of the new crime-terror nexus. The aim is to understand how self-identified Muslims on the streets of Oslo relate to jihadism and jihadists. Empirically, it is based on fieldwork among street-level offenders, involving sustained observations and in-depth interviews. The data presented in this paper were collected in 2017–18. The

findings suggest that jihadi recruiters have operated in this environment, and with some success. However, apart from a few exceptions, most Muslims on the street were fiercely opposed to jihadism. The paper highlights why they rejected jihadism and how they expressed their opposition in both words and actions.

THE NEW CRIME-TERROR NEXUS

The notion of crime-terror nexus traditionally refers to the way terrorists use crime as a source of funding, and how criminal organizations have partnered up with terrorists (Wang 2010). Research on this nexus shows that terrorists worldwide often rely heavily on criminal activities for a number of reasons—for example, to generate money, access weapons, obtain information, recruit personnel and develop expertise in violent conflict (Basra et al. 2016). There are many similarities between organized crime and terrorist groups. Both tend to operate in secret, act brutally against their enemies and use similar tactics such as kidnappings, assassination and extortion. However, they do not share the same goals. Terrorists generally aim to cause fear, send out a political message and trigger societal change, whereas criminal organizations primarily aim at power and profit (Schmid 1996).

There are many historical examples of how terrorist milieus have coexisted, converged, or collaborated with criminal milieus, including the IRA, PKK and FARC (Hutchinson and O'Malley 2007). However, the connection between terrorist groups and criminal groups appears unprecedentedly strong. As Van der Veer (2019: 7) puts it, 'the boundaries of what constitutes a terrorist organization and a criminal organization are so blurred that one could qualify IS both as a criminal and a terrorist organization'. Importantly, the close connection between jihadism and crime exists not only on an organizational level but also on an individual level (Rekawek et al. 2020). Bakker (2011: 8) observes that a fifth of the jihadists in Europe had prior convictions, before their arrest on terrorism charges. Over the last decade, these numbers have increased in many countries. In a study of potentially violent jihadists, the Norwegian Police Security Service found that the women in this group were generally law-abiding, whereas 68% of the men had been suspected, charged, or sentenced for criminal acts prior to their radicalization (PST 2016). Similarly, in Sweden, two out of three jihadi foreign fighters were suspected of having committed at least one crime prior to their radicalization (Rostami et al. 2020).

In a study of jihadism in Europe, Nesser (2015) uses the term 'misfits' to describe jihadi extremists who have a history of childhood trauma, substance abuse, social marginalization and conflict with the authorities. These misfits are important targets for jihadi recruiters because they can be turned into powerful tools capable of carrying out violent attacks. Terrorist groups tend to use different recruitment strategies over time, depending on their staffing needs (Bloom 2017). In some periods, focus is on spotting experts with academic skills, for instance in engineering, while in other periods focus is on finding manpower with hands-on expertise in war or crime. Virtual entrepreneurs from IS have been particularly effective in using encrypted apps such as Telegram (Hughes and Meleagrou-Hitchens 2017) to reach out to 'misfits (criminals and social losers) and offer them purpose and community [...] and mold them into terrorists' (Nesser 2019: 19).

Studies show that people involved in street life and crime may be attracted to violent extremism because it offers them opportunities to be part of a community, obtain a sense of belonging, make use of their violent skills and find a higher purpose in life (Sageman 2008; Basra and Neumann 2016; Crone 2016; Roy 2016). Indeed, jihadi groups give promises of community, not only in this life but also after death. This community is promoted as superior in all regards to a vilified out-group of nonbelievers. Allegedly, dedicated insiders will be granted access to paradise, whereas outsiders will have an afterlife of great suffering (Halverson et al. 2011). Such

promises can have a powerful impact on people on the street, many of whom feel that they are generally unwanted (Bucerius 2014) and at odds with mainstream society (Bourgois 2003).

There has been criticism that the new crime-terror nexus is not that new after all, and that its significance may be overestimated. It has thus been argued that the 'IS effect' on terrorism in Europe has been limited (Nesser et al. 2016) and that street-level offenders rarely become jihadi entrepreneurs, religious specialists, or ideological propagators (Nesser 2015). Moreover, studies in the US indicate that concerns about radicalization among prison inmates have been exaggerated (Decker and Pyrooz 2019). Studies from the US also suggest that gang members and violent extremists differ in several aspects; for example, gang members are generally younger than domestic terrorists (Pyrooz et al. 2018). Still, there is evidence that large numbers of individuals with a background of street life and crime have been drawn toward jihadist groups, especially in Europe (Sageman 2008; Basra et al. 2016; Rostami et al. 2020). In many European cities, 'crime-terror melting pots' (Kupatadze and Argomaniz 2019: 265) can be found in specific localities, such as certain gyms in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Here, street youths and violent extremists can form alliances (Vidino et al. 2017) and cultivate what may be considered a hybrid culture of street jihadism (Larsen and Jensen 2019, Cottee 2020).

Previous research on the new crime-terror nexus has mainly focussed on the similarities and collaborations between criminal groups and extremists. The focus and results of our study are different. We found that the great majority of Muslims involved in street life and crime are opposed to extremism and explore how they explained and expressed this opposition. Our main interest is thus the crime side of the crime-terror nexus.

METHODS

The research reported in this paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork. Most of the fieldwork was conducted at an open drug market in downtown Oslo (Tutenges 2019), for long Norway's largest and located by the river Akerselva. Over the last two decades, it has moved some hundred metres down the river to its current location in and around the Vaterland Park. When the fieldwork was carried out in 2017–18, the market was publicly visible and easy to access, attracting a broad clientele most hours of the day and into the night. Most of the drug dealers were immigrant men from Somalia and other Muslim-majority countries. They sold illicit drugs such as cannabis and cocaine, and sometimes stolen bikes and other goods. The police had the market under surveillance and frequently conducted raids to disperse the dealers or make arrests. These raids were particularly stressful for those dealers who were illegal immigrants and at risk of deportation.

Our study was inspired by another ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2005–6, in largely the same area, conducted by the second author (Sandberg and Pedersen 2011). Part of the research design for the present study was to examine changes in street culture over time. As reported elsewhere, the 2005–6 fieldwork exposed cultural narratives on the streets of Oslo that were strikingly similar to the narratives found among street populations elsewhere, such as destitute inner cities in the US (Bourgois 2003). This is a type of street culture that places high value on being 'cool', gregarious and violently competent, with religion only playing a peripheral role in everyday life. The data from this early fieldwork is not presented in this paper but was instrumental in shaping our interpretation of what we discovered during the 2017–18 fieldwork.

The 2017–18 fieldwork was conducted by the first author. It took the form of an ethnographic revisit (Burawoy 2003) to largely the same site with the aim of obtaining a more profound understanding of its culture and the changes it had undergone. In particular, we wanted to examine changes in the role of religion on the streets of Oslo, and, more specifically, the relationship between Muslim street youths and violent jihadists. The focus was on individuals

who self-identified as Muslims and were regularly involved in street life or crime, ranging from hanging out with street-level drug dealers to active engagement in theft, drug dealing and other lawless acts.

Access to the field was facilitated by two social workers at the 'Outreach Section' in Oslo, which is a public organization specializing in helping at-risk populations on the street. These workers had a high status among the drug dealers and played an invaluable role in giving advice, making introductions and providing emotional support. It, therefore, did not take long before the first author was accepted at the drug market, which was frequented by an estimated 70–80 active dealers, though typically only five to ten at a time. He was allowed to hang out with them as they went about their daily business of selling drugs, using drugs, eating food, going out for drinks and playing computer games. Efforts were made to approach different social groups, including low-status groups (e.g. heavy drug abusers) and high-status groups (e.g. successful dealers), and it also happened that individuals took the initiative to introduce themselves or a friend and propose an interview (Hannerz and Tutenges 2021). While in the field, notes on observations and interactions were continuously written down. These were later elaborated on and typed into a computer.

In addition to participant observation, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 men and three women aged between 18 and 33. Most of them were encountered at the drug market; others were recruited through chain referral or in a suburb of Oslo. They all publicly identified themselves as Muslims, although two of them confided that they were atheists but afraid to say so openly out of fear of ostracism. The interviews typically lasted between one and two hours and were conducted in places where the participants felt comfortable and were able to speak freely, such as restaurants away from the drug market. The interview guide used in the first round of interviews comprised open-ended questions on demographic characteristics, crime career, religion, violence, the police and jihadism. Follow-up interviews were conducted with four participants to get more information on useful details and feedback on emerging interpretations.

A potential limitation of this study's research design concerns the reliability and validity of the data. It is possible, for example, that some participants provided misleading information about their relationship with jihadists. The first author developed friendship ties with a few of the study participants, but remained in many respects an outsider to the field. He is a white academic, of Danish and French ancestry and 10–20 years older than the study participants. However, the relatively long-term presence in the field combined with the face-to-face nature of the data collection made it possible to observe the participants' behaviour, speech and body language, providing rich data that could be used to evaluate statements. The personal connections established in the field increased the ethnographer's sensitivity as well as participants' trust in the ethnographer (Boeri and Lamonica 2015: 138). The first author was, for example, entrusted with evidence (e.g. photos) of severe crimes (e.g. machine gun possession) and cultural taboos (e.g. apostasy).

Another limitation of our study concerns its timing, a period when jihadism was on the decline. IS and other terrorist groups were losing on the battlefields in Syria and Iraq, and jihadi returnees to the West could not, as had previously been the case, boast about the triumphs of the Caliphate. Numerous jihadi atrocities were publicly exposed, and anti-jihadist sentiments were surging in the general population. Some of our participants spoke of these changes, saying that there was a time when they had been fascinated by jihadism, but that those days were over. These changes are important to keep in mind. Our findings are historically and geographically specific, and the opposition to jihadism that we found is subject to change.

The study was part of the "Radicalization and Resistance" project at the University of Oslo. It was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. One of the ethical challenges in the

study was to avoid drawing negative attention to Muslims involved in street life and crime, a group that is already heavily stigmatized (Bucerius, 2014). To make connections between street culture, Islam and jihadism can easily be misunderstood. However, these connections are already at the fore in public debates. We believe that it is crucial to nuance these debates with criminological insights. In particular, there is a need for detailed ethnographic evidence to challenge widespread stereotypes about ‘criminals.’ Another ethical problem concerns the sensitive character of our research topic. Prior to inclusion in the study, the participants were given detailed verbal and written information about the study’s objectives and procedures. Potential risks were continuously discussed with them, as were the measures taken to protect them (e.g. erasing audio recordings immediately after transcription, anonymizing all field notes and transcripts and keeping all data on secure computers). Whenever they expressed resistance to dealing with particular issues, this was respected, and they were reminded that they could withdraw from the study if they wanted to. Moreover, we took care not to ask insensitive questions and to provide support for those in need (e.g. offering meals and contact information of support professionals). All participants gave their full consent to participate and expressed support for the research project.

The data from the fieldwork were analysed using a three-cycle coding procedure. The initial cycle was undertaken by the first author who read through the interviews and field notes in order to identify categories and build a coding scheme with a set of main codes and sub-codes. With help from a research assistant, this scheme was tested on parts of the data, and then modified. Finally, the scheme was used to analyse all of the data. In this paper we draw on the following main codes: ‘anti-jihadi statements,’ ‘anti-jihadi actions,’ ‘pro-jihadi statements’ and ‘pro-jihadi actions.’

RESULTS

The main result of our study was that the Muslim men and women who took part in this study were generally opposed to the culture, ideology and activities of jihadists. They showed this opposition in various ways, ranging from short exclamations and facial expressions to longer explanations and lines of action. Below, we present the reasons they gave for their opposition, beginning with the notion that jihadists are evil people who harm innocents. Another more religious type of reason centres on the view that jihadists are bad Muslims or nonbelievers who bring disrepute to Islam. The third reason is specific to street culture and centres on the notion that jihadists violate the ‘code of the street.’ In a final section we present the types of actions that Muslims in street culture take to counter jihadism.

Jihadists are evil men who harm innocents

‘They kill women and children;’ ‘They massacre;’ ‘Why innocents?’ These were common statements by Muslims on the streets of Oslo when they spoke about jihadists. Such declarations were often accompanied by signs of sadness, disgust, or hate. Many expressed bewilderment that the jihadists could be so brutal, and many found it hard to think about the pain they were inflicting on their victims. Jihadists were widely framed as evil men, whereas their targets were portrayed as innocent women, children, or unarmed captives.

Seated in a café close to the drug market, 26-year-old Norwegian-Pakistani Faizan said that in his early youth, he had gone through a lot of ‘shit,’ tried ‘all existing drugs’ and perpetrated many sorts of crimes. However, he had now found a job and was committed to staying out of the gang life, which he had seen cause much havoc among his peers. He expressed some understanding of the jihadists and their hostility toward the West, but nevertheless called them ‘criminal devils’ and ‘sick in the head,’ primarily because of their violent actions against innocent people.

They think that all Western media is bullshit, right. Because the media doesn't report correctly from Syria and Iraq. [They think] that our "brothers" down there are the real Muslims who are being oppressed and who are trying to fight their way out of it, against the West. They think they are fighting a war against the West, the tyrants, USA, the Jews and the Zionists. They have that kind of mindset, which is completely wrong. And even if they were to fight a war against the US and the Zionists and the Jews, why do they have to go and kill innocents?

Faizan's words capture the general attitude among Muslims involved in street life and crime—that the killing of innocents is wrong, no matter what the circumstances. Some pointed out that, although Western forces committed crimes in Muslim countries, this did not justify counter-attacks on random Western civilians. To kill innocents was presented as essentially evil: immoral, unjustifiable and leading to nothing but suffering.

Gulsan, a 24-year-old with a Kurdish background, had been in the inner circles of a group of drug dealers for several years but not dealt with drugs herself. She had been involved in numerous fights, however. 'I was totally chaotic', she said, placing her most violent period in her early youth. Her main grievance against jihadists was that they maltreated children by indoctrinating them, using them in propaganda videos, sending them to war and forcing them to kill or be killed.

You know what? I cry almost every time when I see those children. I become really [takes a deep breath]... How can people do that? You see children covered in blood, and they don't understand a thing [...] Poor kids, and poor women who have to live with a man who is extreme like that, who is mentally out of it. For him, it doesn't matter if five other men come and rape her. I think it's so sad.

Several studies have found that street culture is 'macho, sexist and celebrates toughness' (Delhaye et al. 2014: 305) and gives little room for the expression of personal vulnerabilities such as feelings of sorrow. In this study, however, many expressed and acknowledged feelings of sorrow, grief, fear and feebleness when they were in private settings. These emotions were especially strong when the conversation was about the murder of children, women and captives. For example, during an interview, Ismael said that he once saw an IS propaganda video that made him cry and, subsequently, break his cellphone in anger. Mustafa said, with reference to the same video, that it made him 'feel pain [...] then, I feel hatred, yes hatred'.

The threat of jihadism is not something remote and abstract on the streets of Oslo. Several of the participants knew people who were fighting for or against jihadists in countries like Somalia and Syria, and some had close friends or relatives who had been crippled or killed in terrorist attacks. Such personal experiences partly explain the emotional reactions during conversations about jihadism. The following excerpt is from an interview that took place in a restaurant with 31-year-old Somalian-Norwegian drug dealer Magan who had suffered many personal losses due to jihadism.

I don't believe they practice what they preach, man! If they really believe that shit about martyrs and 72 virgins [starts shouting and gesticulating with his steak knife]... Why are you still here? Why are you trying to get me killed? Why don't you get yourself killed? [...] Nonsense! Fucking nonsense! [Continues in a calmer voice] I get angry because I have family members who died because of this bullshit.

In addition to his family members who had been killed by jihadists, Magan also had seven friends and acquaintances whom he considered 'lost' because they had travelled to Syria or Somalia to join the jihadists. He was angry at them but also blamed the jihadists for 'brainwashing' them into their schemes.

Many of the Muslims we observed and interviewed were thus against jihadists because they considered them to be evil murderers. This view is far from unique to Muslims involved in street life and crime. Studies of populations of various socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g. [Joose et al. 2015](#); [Van Es 2018](#); [Sandberg et al. 2018](#)) show that their rejection of jihadism is closely connected with notions that it is wrong to take lives. In spite of their social marginalization, the participants shared many of the values, opinions and stories prevailing in wider society. Their opposition to jihadism was in many aspects the same as that of other citizens.

Jihadists are nonbelievers who defame Islam and Muslims

Another major reason behind the opposition to jihadism had to do with the way people on the street understood themselves and their religion. With a few exceptions, they considered themselves Muslims and were proud of their religion. None of them were particularly devout in their religious practices; they rarely, if ever, read the Quran, prayed, or went to the mosque. Nonetheless, Islam was important to them as a moral compass and identity marker, which provided them with ‘a sense of locatedness’ ([Seul 1999](#): 558) in their turbulent lives. They saw Islam as a righteous force that could potentially lift them out of their current situation and put them on the path toward the good life with marriage, children and a job. The jihadists were seen as a threat to these hopes and were widely portrayed as bad Muslims or even non-Muslims who committed sacrilegious acts that destroyed the reputation of Islam.

Yasir, a 23-year-old Norwegian-Somalian, earned a bit of money dealing drugs. He was periodically homeless, which made it difficult for him get the sleep, showers and food he needed to successfully compete with the other dealers over customers. He said that there was a time when he used to read the Quran and pray and that he knew what Islam stood for, and it was not war or destruction. ‘What Islam means is peace, nothing else. Just peace. No one should kill no one.’ He knew a few jihadists and found them ‘foolish’. He mentioned a friend who had been lured into jihadism by people who ‘manipulated by use of the Quran’. He said that his friend had allegedly been told: ‘You will go to war for us. Then, you [will] go to paradise. We can help you.’ Yasir’s friend eventually travelled to the Middle East to fight for a jihadist group but soon realized it had been a mistake.

He finds out that everything we are doing here is worse down there. They use cocaine. They use drugs that are even worse when they go to war. They go to women to fuck and make children. After one year, they are allowed to go to war, after they have made children [...] They are separated into different groups. Some do suicide bombing, some go to the front, some drive a car. In the end, he just fled back to his parents here in Norway.

Yasir thus painted a picture of jihadists as sinners who abused the Quran for their own violent purposes. This was wrong in and of itself, he said, but more than that, it cast ‘a negative light not just on Somalians but Muslims around the entire world.’ Jihadists’ sacrifices did nothing good, he argued. ‘All that comes out of it is just hate and loss, nothing else.’

Muslims on the street were used to being looked at suspiciously. They knew that their presence could be intimidating, and sometimes used this to their advantage, for instance, to discourage others from meddling in their affairs. However, many felt that the rise of jihadism had changed the way people were looking at them—no longer just with suspicion, also with fear and hate. 23-year-old Norwegian-Somalian Hirsi blamed jihadists for making him look worse than he was. He had committed crimes in the past and occasionally gotten into fights, but he considered himself a decent person who did his best not to harm people unless it was absolutely necessary.

They ruin it for other Muslims who are decent. Everyone thinks that we are all IS, the whole bunch of us [...] They ruin it for the rest of us who are decent when they use the name of Allah and scream “Allahu Akbar” and blow themselves up or take a truck to crash into people.

Many Muslims on the street had long beards, visible scars and sometimes wore camouflage patterned clothes. It is uncertain where this look comes from—possibly from hipster or jihadi culture (Hegghammer 2017). In any case, this style of appearance likely worsened their public image. Many were fine with being perceived as ‘street soldiers’, but they did not like being stigmatized as jihadists.

There were conspiracy theories on the street that powerful anti-Muslim actors were financing, arming, or otherwise supporting jihadist groups. Magan often alluded to such theories but never specified who the anti-Muslim actors might be.

I think that ISIS is bullshit. I don’t even give them a name or call them ISIS, but the enemy of Islam. They are paid by some outer force to make Islam look bad or get people to think bad things about Islam. I am not saying that as a Muslim but as a logical human being. I really think this is a plot against Islam, because they don’t represent me or the common Muslim.

Norwegian-Somalian Diric held similar views, arguing that jihadists ‘talk rubbish’, were ‘not Muslim’ and were all about ‘giving a bad name to [the] religion’. This was true for jihadist groups in Norway and elsewhere, he argued. ‘Like IS, the thing they’re doing, I don’t think that’s Muslim people. I think it’s American, for real, or a group of “black ops”, doing stuff, you know’. The term ‘black ops’ has been popularized by the computer game ‘Call of duty’ and refers to covert ‘black operations’ undertaken by forces who conceal their involvement or make it look like other forces are responsible. Diric and Magan thus drew on popular conspiracy theories to argue that things are not what they appear, that jihadists are anything but Muslim and that some superpower pulls the strings of the jihadist to defame Islam and Muslims.

Muslims on the street were aware that their current lifestyle was at odds with Islam’s teachings, but they expressed the hope that they would someday live in better accordance with the religion’s ideals of purity and civility. That is, they did not accept the jihadi logic that in the lands of war, the ‘dar al-harb’, it is permissible and sometimes obligatory, to commit crimes against non-Muslims (Basra and Neumann 2016: 29). For them, Islam was a barrier rather than a bridge to crime (see also Linge 2021). Therefore, although religion can clearly be used as a tool to promote crime (Topalli et al. 2013), Muslims on the street used their interpretation of Islam to argue against crime and jihadism. They were much concerned that the rise of jihadism had cast a negative light on their religion.

Jihadists break the code of the street

According to Muslims in street culture, not only are jihadists breaking central human rights and Islamic rules, they also break what some interestingly referred to as the ‘code of the street’. This code is found in street cultures worldwide and is described by Anderson (1999) as a set of informal rules that govern interpersonal behaviour among youths in disadvantaged urban areas. Many codes on the streets of Oslo are conducive to crime and violence, suggesting, for example, that ‘you don’t snitch’, ‘you don’t walk away from a fight’, ‘never let anybody step on you’ and ‘always back your friends’. However, there are also codes that put a damper on violence, for instance, by indicating that it is wrong to harm certain people (e.g. innocent children) and to use excessive forms of violence (e.g. using a weapon against a weak opponent).

Hirsi, who had lived in Norway since the age of six, said he sometimes got into fights— one-on-one, in groups and occasionally with weapons. He admitted that he liked to fight, in part

because it was exciting and allowed him to ‘vent anger, lots of anger’. ‘We are boys! Of course you want some action!’ he said. He had recently got into a fight with a friend who had to get some stitches later; but it was nothing serious, he said. Now everything was fine between them. The violence committed by jihadists was different, he argued, because it caused lasting suffering. He explained that, in contrast, there were rules guiding the kind of violence he was into, such as ‘don’t use a knife when you go into a fight, unless the other guy has one’ and ‘don’t ever bring in the cops if something happens’. Jihadists did not seem to have any such principles; they were into another game altogether, involving ‘bombs, suicide bombs, death’.

31-year-old Norwegian-Somalian Warsame was an active member a gang. He emphasized that jihadists followed rules that were fundamentally different from those of the street. He admitted that he sometimes inflicted serious harm on other people and mentioned how he had once assisted in capturing and torturing members of a rival gang. However, rather than confronting opponents face to face, like he would do, jihadists targeted unarmed civilians and ‘shot them in the back’. Also, they used ‘cowardly’ weapons, such as car bombs, and killed people indiscriminately in what he considered were senseless suicide attacks. ‘You’re not normal if you strap on a bomb and kill yourself along with thousands of people like children, young girls, women and old grandma’. He thus challenged the jihadists’ ideals of masculinity. He insisted that his own violent actions were different from the jihadists’, and that he only used violence against other ‘gangsters’. Jihadists were of a completely different breed, he argued. To illustrate this point, he described a video he had seen of ‘an IS guy who shot someone in the chest, ripped the heart out, and ate it raw [making eating sounds]. They are not human. They are not like you and me. They don’t have any kind of feelings’. This dehumanization of enemies is a powerful device to construct social out-groups, mark them as fundamentally other and legitimize violence against them (Presser 2013: 33).

Muslims in street culture criticized jihadists for breaking the code of the street and, moreover, not living up to their ideals of street masculinity (Mullins 2006). They were generally tolerant of violence but condemned jihadi violence on the grounds that it was cowardly and out of proportion. The intense symbolic boundary work (Lamont and Molnár, 2002) they did towards jihadists suggests that there are substantial differences between criminal and terrorist milieus.

Actions taken against extremists

The opposition to jihadism was not only expressed in the anonymous context of interviews but sometimes translated into concrete actions on the street. A common type of action consisted of avoidance behaviours, including attempts to not meet suspected jihadists, not interact with them and not talk about them. Such behaviours may be considered a form of ‘soft resistance’ (Laursen 2017) because their modus operandi is to circumvent and disrupt rather than confront and destroy. Although avoidance behaviours may not be motivated by any altruistic principles (Loseke 2009: 509), such as countering extremism, they may nevertheless have certain preventive effects because they contribute to the isolation of extremists and complicate their recruitment efforts.

Twenty-one-year-old Norwegian-Somalian Filsan said that he knew a ‘famous jihadist’, one that ‘every Muslim in Norway knows’. This jihadist lived in Filsan’s neighbourhood and sometimes walked the streets, preaching to the local youths but with little success.

[People] always tell him, “Please, we don’t want to hear about it”, because the guy is so deep into it that there is no way out for him [...] If you sit with him for an hour or two and listen to what he has to say, you might get brainwashed. That’s how simple it is. He is enormously convincing. He has this way of getting to those who are down and out and pull them up to their feet [...] he will say what a person needs to hear.

Filsan and his friends avoided the jihadist because they considered it both pointless and dangerous to interact with him. He would never abandon his extremist ideas, no matter what he was told, and he was allegedly such a convincing speaker that he could quickly transfer his ideas to the marginalized youths he was targeting. Many considered it safest to keep contact with jihadists down to a minimum, or avoid them if possible.

Others pursued the more active strategy of openly criticizing jihadists. Such criticism was mainly expressed between people belonging to the same in-group of friends and family, but it was sometimes expressed directly to the jihadists themselves. This strategy of criticizing is not as 'soft' as the aforementioned avoidance behaviours because it involves a direct confrontation with specific individuals or their symbols and morality.

Twenty-year-old Norwegian-Somalian Ibrahim mentioned that he was once approached by a group of jihadi recruiters a few hundred metres away from the drug market. This is in itself remarkable, since previous research on jihadism in Europe suggests that, 'extremists' efforts to target criminals—whether through propaganda or via direct face-to-face engagement—appear limited' (Basra and Neumann 2016: 30). In contrast, our study suggests that jihadists in Oslo have been active in their efforts to convert or recruit people involved in street life and crime. This is how Ibrahim described his encounter with the jihadists:

One of them approaches me and starts asking me questions about Islam [...] I start to pose some questions: "What kind of [an] ideology are you into?" He answers in this calm way, "We try to get people, you know, to go to Syria, to go to war, something called jihad, go to war, right. Fight for everybody. Because we see so many of our Muslim brothers and sisters get killed in Israel". "No man, that ain't good", I answer. "No dude, what are you talking about? You wanna get people go kill people? Are you insane?" He asks me what I mean, and I go, "What! You want people to travel into a war zone and fight! What's the point of this war?" I ask. [He answers] "No, no, to fight in the name of our religion. For God". I tell him, "Listen, in Islam, you are not allowed to kill!"

Ibrahim said that he felt his anger building up and getting out of control, so he went away because, as he put it, 'I know this sort of thing will end in a fight'. Such anger was unusual for Ibrahim, who was renowned for his peacefulness. However, jihadists could make him lose his temper. When he met somebody expressing extremist ideas, he readily engaged in fierce discussions with them.

Some advocated interventions that were more drastic, such as reporting to the authorities. In accordance with other studies of street culture (e.g. Rosenfeld et al. 2003), the people on the streets that we studied generally held that it was wrong to provide information to the police and other authorities. As Magan expressed it, 'If you snitch, you cannot live here. You cannot have a community'. Indeed, to be labelled a snitch could be detrimental to a person's reputation and safety. However, several argued that the rule of 'no snitching' should be suspended when it came to jihadists because, as Geedi put it: '[They are] messing with the Quran. If you shoot people, you are not a Muslim, and they are just shooting [...] If I see IS supporters trying to recruit people, I will call the cops'. Others had more elaborate plans that, if given the chance, they would gather evidence against the jihadists and hand that over to the authorities to ensure they were incarcerated.

Norwegian-Somalian Ismael was a former gang member with a history of violence. He rather openly spoke against jihadism on the street, and he said that he had secretly contacted the authorities on two occasions. The first time was after viewing a particularly brutal IS video online. He was so outraged that he had gone to the local police station to ask them to block it. The second time was after an encounter with a man who was preaching to local street youths. The man

was 'so good at speaking, that if he spoke to you, you would fall in love with his language'. He had already succeeded in radicalizing a number of youths, according to Ismael, so he decided to gain his trust and find out more about him. It turned out that not only did the man try to convert and radicalize people, but he also had personal contact with a member of a terrorist group.

What if he gets orders from [name of the contact in the terrorist group]? I told the cops about him, and they took him and I never saw him again. I did it because I don't believe in terror. I believe in peace [...] I did my part as a Muslim, but other Muslims are scared to do the same. If you are honest, say it. Me being a Muslim, I don't let anyone disown me as a Muslim. I didn't say the guy was a terrorist, but I knew he had bad intentions. No one ever knew I did this.

Ismael said that the best strategies for dealing with jihadists were to ridicule them, warn people against them, gather evidence and turn them over to the authorities. To kill people was wrong, he said, but he still occasionally expressed an urge to use violence against jihadists. For example, he once blurted out, 'I wish I had a gun on me and [I could] go outside and shoot those fucking terrorists. I just wish I knew there was a terrorist around; I would just fucking shoot him'. Statements like these should not be taken too literally. They are a form of 'street slang' that frames violence as an appropriate means to solve problems but without necessarily implying that violent action is imminent (Ilan 2015: 97). However, when such statements come from people with a history of violence, they deserve notice. Arguably, given the participants' street socialization, they are more likely to act on their violent anti-jihadist sentiments than other social groups with similar sentiments.

Abshir, an active member of a gang, said that he was willing to fight jihadists and that he had previously done so during a yearlong stay in his country of origin, Somalia. After returning to Norway, he continued his battle against jihadists, albeit in a non-violent manner—for instance, by confronting anyone saying anything remotely positive about them. He had met supporters of IS on a few occasions, which always left him fuming. 'My blood boils because I have lost so many friends to terror. If I hear anyone praise terrorists, I feel like smacking him in the face. That's how personally I take it'. He explained that people from his gang understood his anger and agreed that snitching on jihadists was fine for two reasons: 'First of all, it's not like if I snitch on him [a terrorist], my gang will be endangered. Second of all, I get rid of someone who recruits people, abuses the name of our religion and gives Muslims a bad image'.

One of the persons we studied considered joining al-Shabaab, others said that they had once been fascinated with jihadism, and many had friends who had joined jihadist groups in Norway or abroad. However, the great majority were fiercely opposed to jihadism. Common anti-jihadi actions on the street included avoidance behaviours and criticism. Moreover, some spoke of concrete plans to harm jihadists and a few mentioned past episodes where they had deceived, fought, or 'snitched' on jihadists.

DISCUSSION

Over the last two decades, young Muslims with a background in street life and crime have played an increasingly central role in jihadist groups and terror attacks in Europe (Bakker 2011; Nesser 2015; Kupatadze and Argomaniz 2019). Many of them were not trained in violence by jihadists in military camps or on foreign battlegrounds; rather, they learned violence before their radicalization, on the streets or in local prisons (Crone 2016; Roy 2016; Rostami et al. 2020). This development is linked to what Sageman (2008) calls the 'third wave' of modern terrorism, which is a 'leaderless jihad' waged by self-financed marginalized individuals who channel their frustrations into mass violence. Indeed, there is much to suggest that what we are seeing is a new

crime-terror nexus (Basra and Neumann 2016), a new hybrid culture of street jihadism. Prior research on the new crime-terror nexus has primarily focussed on the individual characteristics of extremists and the conditions pushing them from 'ordinary' crime to terrorism (Basra et al. 2016; Rostami et al. 2020; Van der Veer 2019).

Inspired by this body of research, we returned to a drug market in Oslo, which we had previously studied, to collect new ethnographic data on the role of religion and jihadism among Muslims involved in street life and crime today. We observed that significant changes had taken place. In 2005–6, drug dealers with a Muslim background mainly thought of Islam as a benevolent religion that could help them out of crime (Sandberg 2010). At that time, no one talked about jihadi ideology, extremist propaganda, or the prospect of committing terror attacks to wash away old sins. Moreover, there were no jihadist groups around with whom they could partner and apply their street skills. In 2017–18, jihadism had dramatically entered this scene: jihadi recruiters had begun approaching people on the streets, online jihadi propaganda was circulating widely and some people were radicalized and went to fight in Syria, Iraq, or Somalia.

Our recent fieldwork in Oslo found strong opposition to jihadism among Muslims involved in street life and crime. With a few exceptions, they all denounced violent jihadism and its followers. They argued that jihadists are evildoers who inflict harm on innocent people, that they bring disrepute to Islam and its true followers and that they are unmanly men who violate the code of the street. This denunciation was not merely verbal but also deeply emotional and behavioural. It occasionally resulted in actions taken against jihadists, including attempts to avoid them, not speak with them, not speak about them, or criticize them behind their backs or face-to-face.

We also observed widespread hostility towards individuals suspected of being jihadists, as illustrated by the field note in the beginning of this paper. Moreover, during interviews and informal conversations, several participants claimed that they wished to fight jihadists, that they wanted to collect evidence against them and that they wanted to report them to the authorities. Importantly, a few participants stated that they had already reported suspected extremist activities to the authorities or fought against jihadists abroad. All of this testifies to a widespread willingness to counter jihadism through legal or illegal means. Our study thus supplements the existing literature on the new crime-terror nexus, which focuses on why, how and to what extent street offenders and other marginalized individuals are attracted to extremism (e.g. Basra and Neumann 2016, Vidino et al. 2017; Ilan and Sandberg 2019; Kupatadze and Argomaniz 2019; Larsen and Jensen 2019; Cottee 2020). Dozens of studies thus highlight the connection between individuals associated with street crime and jihadists, but ours is the first to examine the resistance to extremism emerging from street culture.

Popular culture and discourse tend to portray people involved in street life and crime as exotic others, always ready to do harm. Arguably, such associations have trickled down into terrorism studies, which also emphasizes the harmful aspects of criminal milieus and individuals. Criminology, too, is not free of such exoticification and has produced numerous problem-focused accounts of street culture. While there are important exceptions, especially in the ethnographic tradition (e.g. Bucerius 2014; Kalkan 2021), the emphasis in criminology has generally been on how those committing crime differ from the mainstream. Focus has been on crime, substance abuse and social marginalization—and for good reason. We need to understand social problems to better deal with them. However, there is also a need to examine other facets of street life. In particular, there is a need for more knowledge about harm reduction dynamics in street culture and similar environments. Such knowledge may be used to nuance debates and improve preventive interventions (Tutenges et al. 2015).

Resistance to violent extremism has previously been highlighted in studies of the general population (e.g. Joosse et al. 2015; Sandberg and Andersen 2019; Sandberg and Colvin 2020) but not in studies of street culture. The present research, therefore, fills a gap in the research

literature, highlighting opposition to jihadism among Muslims involved in street life and crime. This opens up new possibilities for how to approach Muslims in street culture—not merely as a group at risk of radicalization but also as a potential resource in counterterrorism efforts. Several of our study participants had been close friends since early childhood with individuals who had joined the jihadists. Some were still in regular contact with these jihadists or their families. This puts them in a unique position to reason with them, detect early warning signs of terrorist planning and, perhaps, report them to the authorities (Sageman 2017: 168; Thomas et al. 2020).

It is of great importance, therefore, that law enforcement agents and social workers treat those involved in street life and crime with sensitivity. They should not be reduced to mere suspects of crime and terror in need of evermore control, but should, at least sometimes, be seen as potential accomplices in the struggle against violent extremism. In sum, our study shows what critical criminological studies has to offer terrorism and extremism studies. Importantly, ethnographic research on street culture can nuance assumptions that street youths are easily preyed upon by those looking for recruits into extremist groups.

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