



‘Reaching the land of jihad’ - Dutch Syria volunteers, *hijra* and counter-conduct

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Abstract

The topic of *hijra* is very much present in the ideological messages of IslamicState and Al Qaeda as well as in many studies exploring why and how people are motivated to join the violent struggles in Syria. Yet, with a few exceptions, many studies mention *hijra* as something self-evident without exploring the meanings attached to *hijra* among the volunteers who joined Al Qaeda and/or IS. Based upon ethnographic work among Dutch Islamic militant activists of the Behind Bars network constituting a very vocal early contingent of male Syria volunteers, this article explores the meanings of *hijra*. I will show that ideas about *hijra* were essential to the construction of their departure narratives and examine how *hijra* for them, in different and sometimes contradicting ways, became a pathway to an ethical and political transformation. One which was, at the same time, being instrumentalized to strengthen the very type of governance they tried to escape.

Keywords Hijra · Jihad · Syria · The Netherlands · Counter-conduct · Radicalization

Introduction¹

Ideas about movement from one place to another (relating, for example, to *exodus* or *hijra*) have been given prominent status in modern political thought (Lienesch, 1988; Masud, 1990). The study of *hijra* is an important theme in research on Salafism (Adraoui, 2019) and on Islamic jurisprudence (Demichelis, 2019). Recently, the relationship between *hijra* and the recent conflict in Syria has been explored in particular paying attention to IS rhetoric about *hijra* (Abdelrahim, 2019; Barton, 2019; Colas, 2017; Larsson, 2019; Toguslu, 2018), in relation to IS’ recruitment work (Lakomy, 2019; Sarat-St. Peter, 2019; Schulze & Liow, 2019) and some critical work

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disputing IS' interpretations (Huda, 2017). Yet, these studies do not tell us that much about the understandings of *hijra* among people who left Europe to join the violent struggles in Syria. In work focusing on the motivations for departure, the issue of *hijra* is often presented as a matter of fact and as an Islamic notion of migration (Bakker & De Bont, 2016; Dawson & Amarasingam, 2017).²

The focus in this article is on how a specific, and very early, contingent of Dutch male Syria volunteers, who left between the summer of the 2012 and the winter of 2014, gave meaning to their position in the Netherlands, their migration and their aspirations in Syria through *hijra* and jihad. My argument is twofold. First, by exploring people's own narratives about *hijra* and jihad based upon their written and video statements as well as on life story interviews and informal conversations with them, I will argue that although the violent jihad was an important element in their departure narratives, their ideas about *hijra* were also essential to the construction of these narratives. Second, by exploring the narratives about *hijra*, I will show how the Dutch Syria volunteers from the Behind Bars network engaged in ethico-political resistance against Dutch politics and, at the same time, strove to achieve an alternative Islamic destiny for 'true Muslims'. As such, *hijra* became a divinely empowered form of mobility for them, promising an ethical and political transformation, and redemption for those who engaged in it.

In this article I first introduce the Behind Bars network and describe the specific perspective I adopted to analyze their activism: counter-conduct in the context of the Dutch national security regime, integration policies and liberal-secular rule. Although not representative of the whole group of Syria volunteers at the time of the research (2012 to 2014),³ the Behind Bars network played an important role in the departure of the first Syria volunteers with many of them joining ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. After introducing the network I discuss the protests of the activists against the Dutch state by exploring a pamphlet distributed by a section of the Dutch Syria volunteers — *De Banier* (The Banner) — and the departure narrative of one of the Dutch Syria volunteers: Abu Muhammed. His life story will then be analyzed in order to demonstrate how *hijra* and jihad coalesced for this specific group of Syria volunteers.

Protest against something and protest for something⁴

The Dutch network, Behind Bars, was established in 2009 by a group of young men from The Hague and was first called 'Team Free Saddik' in support of their friend Saddik Sbaa who was imprisoned in Morocco after failing to join Al Shabaab in its military struggles in Somalia. In 2012 and 2013, when many young men from the Dutch networks left for Syria, the ones left behind remained in Behind Bars and established a website, *DeWareReligie* (The True Religion), which acted as a news channel for, and about, the Dutch Syria volunteers.

Attempts to join the military jihad in various regions, such as those made by Behind Bars activists, are often analyzed through the perspective of radicalization, to explain

² A notable exception is Winter (2016).

³ For a good overview see Bergema and Van San (2019).

⁴ Based upon De Koning et al. (2020).

how, why and when people resort to political violence.⁵ Notwithstanding the usefulness of such research, this focus tends to reduce the matter to a specific security issue which pathologizes the subjects motivations and actions, and often neglects the constitutive role of the state's institutions in the so-called radicalization processes (Fadil et al., 2019). The dominance of this approach is not surprising given IS' brutal acts against local people in Syria and Iraq and terrorist attacks, which were often accompanied and amplified through a provocative visual rendering of those acts. Partly through this theatre of cruelty, IS became regarded by many Western commentators and politicians as a unique form of evil threatening the civilised world (Friis, 2015).

In this article I want to capture and critically thematize the perspectives and narratives of the Syria volunteers themselves.⁶ A useful approach was proposed by Alloul (2019) who regards the *muhajirun* (migrants) in Syria as 'anti-citizens on the move', portraying how they are racialized as abject citizens either by their own doing or by the state and other outsiders. Another useful and inspiring approach is that of Li (2019) who describes the jihad of the Arab volunteers in Bosnia in the 1990s as one universalism among several others. What Li and Alloul's approaches have in common with the approach used here is that they provide insight into how people become, and express themselves as, 'actors of ourselves', and how self-transformation is practiced and expressed (Pyykkönen, 2015: 27). However, while Li focuses predominantly on the situation and practices of Arab volunteers in the Balkan region prior to the War on Terror, I largely focus on the perspectives of the Dutch Muslims prior to their departure in 2012 and 2013 and shortly after their arrival in 2013 / 2014. At that time the political ideas about 'foreign fighters' had significantly changed.

And while Alloul concentrates on how the Syria volunteers can be seen as anti-citizens from the perspective of the country of departure, I suggest that the practices of *hijra* by my interlocutors must be understood not only as a protest *against* the regulation of Muslims based upon ideas about national security, integration and liberal-secular rule, but also as a protest *for* a utopian alternative that is more just and satisfying for them. Here, I analyze the stories told and written by my interlocutors as examples of narratives of a particular kind of resistance: counter-conduct. Foucault put forward the term 'counter-conduct' to describe forms of protest and resistance that are less large-scale than uprisings and revolts, but are attempts to "not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them" (Foucault in: Death, 2011: 428). In fashioning themselves as Muslims, activists, migrants and warriors, and creating a public presence through such frames, they conduct themselves in and through the ways they are addressed by the frames of the Dutch liberal secular security state. At the same time, they question its assumptions: is democracy living up to its promises? The general idea behind this type of resistance is that the same mechanisms used by the state to control the conduct of individuals also creates space for the development

⁵ For example focusing on friendships, ideologies and psychological disorders, see: Bakker and De Bont (2016); Schuurman et al. (2016); Bergema and Van San (2019).

⁶ Syria volunteers is my term of preference here as it is closer (also in its political connotations), to the Dutch term *Syriëganger* (Syria traveller) and more open and neutral as it does not assume a combative role. The term jihadist is problematic in my view (See: De Koning, 2020b; and also: Li, 2015; Sedgwick, 2015).

of forms of resistance that enable dissidents to behave in a ‘deviant’ way and claim the ‘right to be different’ (Foucault, 1982: 781; Foucault, 2007).

In order to explore the fusion of political protest and ethical self-fashioning through *hijra* and jihad among my interlocutors, I will focus on the stories of Abu Muhammad – one of my key interlocutors – about his life and activism. I have known him since 2005 via the various research projects I have conducted, and he was one of the core members of the militant activist network Behind Bars with members pre-dominantly living in the Hague: Abu Muhammad’s hometown. At the end of December 2013, after a demonstration in support of Muslim prisoners, Abu Muhammed left for Syria. There, his dreams of becoming an ‘eye-witness journalist’, having a website about Islam and making a documentary all came true. In the past, Abu Muhammad failed in his attempt to go to Afghanistan to fight against the US and, after being imprisoned in Pakistan, he tried to find his place again in his family and in Dutch society. In a meeting in a shopping mall in The Hague prior to his departure, he told us⁷:

“Look, we criticize and we’re not really supposed to be here. But since we’re here, you have to be able to function in society. The problem is the ideology, not the person. We talk about that. I have an aversion for this society, but here I am anyway. And, of course, I do *da wa* – that’s a condition for being allowed to be here.”

Abu Muhammed, and his friends, saw the Dutch state as unjust and opted for what they regarded as an alternative system. Most of the time they could live with the compromises they had to make, but on other occasions however, with their friends in prison, for example, and in light of the looming prospect of an upcoming ban on the face veil, they felt the need to speak up publicly which then prompted a reaction from Dutch authorities. In 2013, the activities of the Behind Bars activists and their friends and acquaintances, and the departure of many of them to Syria, triggered the attention of Dutch authorities. According to the official numbers, there were several dozen Dutch volunteers who left in early 2013, some 220 in 2015, and at least 280 in 2017 (Bakker & De Bont, 2016; Bergema & Van San, 2019). Based upon my own estimates, at least 35 individuals who were part of, or close to, the Behind Bars network left and those who remained played an important role in spreading pro-ISIS and pro-Al Qaeda propaganda. Initially, officials from the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, the National Coordinator of Counter-terrorism and Security (NCTV) and others working in the field of counter-radicalization were unsure about how to qualify this network.⁸ Later on, the members of Behind Bars were seen as recruiters and ‘accelerators’ of radicalization and suspicion of them grew, particularly when it was known that several of their members had tried to join the violent struggles in Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq (De Koning et al., 2020).⁹

The focus on the potential radicalization of Muslims in the Netherlands builds upon already existing discourses in policies and debates which problematize Islam as a

⁷ In these meetings I cooperated closely with journalist Jeroen Kostense.

⁸ Informal communication with public officials.

⁹ The changes in the lives of these young men and in the socio-political context had many consequences for the research, my relationships with interlocutors and public officials. For a reflection see, De Koning (2020a).

potential threat to social cohesion and security, often in combination with debates and policies regarding migration. In the case of the Dutch Syria volunteers the challenge they present is organized into a very specific configuration of security questions that claims the Dutch nation-state as its locus of protection and allows the state to present itself as a protector by constructing some Muslims as a threat to the Dutch nation-state (De Koning, 2020b).

As such the figure of the Syria volunteer is seen as an epistemic and symbolic threat and a closer look at the oft-used term *foreign fighter* sheds some more light on the issue of what it is that this figure is actually disrupting. According to Malet (2015: 456 - 457) the term *foreign fighter* was used in the past to refer to the International Brigade volunteers in the Spanish Civil War and to European mercenaries in the Croatian forces in the 1990s Yugoslav wars. Malet points out that it was the distinction the US made in Afghanistan between local Taliban fighters (who were released) and non-Afghan volunteers (who were detained) which connected the term *foreign fighter* to jihadism and made it part of contemporary speech. The evaluation of the presence of (Arab) volunteers in the 1990s war in Bosnia changed with the War on Terror and prompted the changes in Bosnian security policies labelling these foreign fighters as terrorists (Li, 2019). Later, during the Iraq war, it became a common term in research following intense media attention that claimed that the volunteers from outside Iraq exhibited higher levels of violence than local fighters (see also: Hegghammer, 2010).

In the Netherlands, however, the equivalent for ‘foreign fighter’ (*buitenlandse strijder*) is rarely used, if at all. The common term to describe the volunteers who went to Syria is ‘*Syriëganger*’ (lit. Syria-goer or Syria traveler), often used interchangeably with ‘jihadist’.¹⁰ Furthermore, while the term ‘foreign fighter’ is never used to describe European UN soldiers, terms similar to *Syriëganger* have been used for Dutch UN soldiers, such as those who went to Lebanon — ‘*Libanongangers*’ — and for other war volunteers, such as those who fought in the Spanish civil war — ‘*Spanjegangers*’. In that sense, the term *Syriëgangers* does appear to imply people going to a place of a violent struggle but does not necessarily impose outsider status in the Dutch context.

During the war in Syria the Dutch term ‘*Syriëganger*’ and the English term ‘foreign fighter’ became but two on a long list of words (e.g. radical, extremist, fundamentalist, Salafist, terrorist, jihadist) which denote danger and are used in policies and debates to distinguish between the good and bad citizen, and more particularly, between the acceptable and the unacceptable Muslim (Fadil et al., 2019; Sedgwick, 2010). In the case of the Syria volunteers (my preferred term), this danger pertains specifically to those who cross borders and boundaries: those who move from one country to another without authorization from any state institution or democratic body with the intention of fighting for a specific cause which is regarded as being ‘at odds’ with good citizenship. In that sense, Li’s reference to these foreign fighters as ‘Muslims out of place’ seems apt from the point of view of the nation-states (Li, 2010). The category of the foreign fighter or *Syriëganger* does not only violently challenge a particular regime of a state, but also the entire system of the one nation-state which people ideally belong to, have citizenship in and are loyal to (Li, 2010: 363–367). Yet, I suggest taking Li’s idea of ‘Muslims out of place’ a step further. It is, after all, an idea that has a much

¹⁰ The labels used are highly gendered as women, for example, are sometimes referred to as ‘jihadi brides’ (Navest et al., 2016).

longer history in the European, including Dutch context, evidenced by terms such as Turks, Mediterranean Muslims, ethnic minority, Allochtones, moderate and radical Muslims which problematize Muslims in relation to migration and their presumed potential incompatibility with Dutch identity. Such categories are built upon discourses of ‘out-of-placeness’ which are embedded in beliefs about people’s origins and in essentialist understandings of cultural and visible differences related to those origins. They are deployed in debates and policies designed to manage risks and dangers to peace and social cohesion (Yanow & Van Der Haar, 2013). Furthermore, in this article we will see how a small but influential faction among the Dutch Syria volunteers is labelled as radicals and extremists and how they co-emerge and present themselves as ‘Muslims who are already out of place’ in the Dutch context and as ‘Muslims where they need to be’ in the Syrian context (see also Abu Muhammed’s comment above about ‘...we’re not really supposed to be here...’).

Waving the banner: Challenging and building upon the national security regime

The Behind Bars activists responded to, and used their ideas about the Dutch regulation of Muslims, *hijra* and jihad in order to construct themselves as activists and fighters by presenting themselves as Muslims who have faith in God’s plans, testify about it and act upon it. According to Foucault (in: Davidson, 2011: 28), activities that combine the ethical and the political are specific to counter-conduct. As Lemke (2011: 24) explains, Foucault identifies such activities as being inherently critical as they include problematization, voluntary insubordination and exposing oneself as a subject. Adopting this critical attitude is then an intellectual and ethical practice of subjectivation that is vital to people’s endeavors to conduct themselves differently.

In the activists’ messages, which they disseminated through their own channels, they set themselves up in opposition to the hegemonic norms of the society which they regarded as oppressive and hypocritical. Furthermore, they also created a strong opposition to the established circles of Islamic preachers and imams who claimed to follow the Salafi methods of reading and implementing the Islamic sources (and who regarded the activists as young people who had gone astray) and to Muslims who cooperated with local and national authorities in counter-radicalization policies, calling them hypocrites and/or infidels. Over the course of 2013, seeing themselves being increasingly presented by the state as a danger to national security, they came forward with several messages that were almost diametrically opposed to those created by the state institutions (De Koning et al., 2020). One activist in response to news items portraying the Dutch Syria volunteers as dropouts who were suffering from an identity crisis put the following comment on my Facebook page early 2013, presenting the Syria volunteers as people ‘to be proud of’ because they sacrificed themselves while others did nothing:

“[...] We as the Netherlands [should] be very proud of the people who are prepared to take up arms against the regime of Beshar Asad [sic]. The West, and Arab leaders too, have neglected to do this. We should be proud of them all, whether they are journalists taking photos to tell people the truth, and risking their

lives in doing so, or journalists who want to make documentaries, or people who are willing to sacrifice their lives for a pure Middle East. Why should we be proud of the young men who fight in the name of the fatherland in Afghanistan, but not proud of men who leave their comfortable lives in the West, leave behind their families, their studies, their work and friends, waiting in uncertainty, to make a future for the children of the Middle East?"

One of the most remarkable attempts to challenge the narratives which presented the activists and the Syria volunteers as a danger to society, freedom and democracy, and depicted them as naïve people who did not know what they were doing, was the booklet *De Banier* (The Banner) published in October 2013 on the Facebook page ‘*De Nederlandse Mujahideen in Bilaad As-Shaam*’ [Dutch Mujahideen in Bilad al-Sham]. (Bilad al-Sham is a reference to Greater Syria.) In the opening chapter the anonymous authors argue that capitalism is in fact a form of amoral exploitation that converts everything – including xenophobia – into a commodity. For the authors current world politics are a continuation of the old colonial politics of the West. The discussion of this is geared to fostering awareness amongst Muslims about the conflict between Islam and the West and its ancient origins in the early days of Islam. *De Banier* thus tapped into and reinforced the impression that there was a major conflict between the West, Israel (i.e. the Jews, see for example p. 81 of *De Banier*) and regimes supported by the West on the one hand, and ‘true Islam’ (which was betrayed by Muslims selling their faith to the West) on the other. This ‘true Islam’ did not pertain to the Islamic traditions (in particular Shia) followed in Syria, but to an Islam that was regarded as detached from contemporary diversions and temptations while, at the same time, greatly influenced by an oppositional view against the West.

In the pamphlet the authors juxtapose Muslims (*umma*, the Muslim community) and the West, Islamic law and democracy, and relate these to an opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’. This construction acquires further meaning because of the two other oppositions that are presented: justice versus injustice, and truth versus falsehood. Throughout *De Banier*, we read that the West is in moral decline, and that emancipation, freedom, justice and democracy are hollow hypocritical slogans, used only to retain power and suppress Muslims. The authors frequently cite a huge range of sources from Western media in support of their arguments.

Their dystopian picture of the West is contrasted with an ideal picture of the caliphate, governed by Islamic law which would bring true freedom, equality and justice.¹¹ It is the inverse of the picture created by Dutch politicians who construct an ideal of Western society with secular freedoms and/or a Judaeo-Christian heritage which has to be defended against a doomsday vision of Islam (Van Den Hemel, 2014). Apart from references to the cruelty of the opponents, *De Banier* completely ignored the atrocities of the war in Syria. The violence against local Syrian people, the

¹¹ Note that *De Banier* was written before ISIS claimed the caliphate. From my own observations the early contingent of volunteers was one which was predominantly male and strongly invested in Salafi-Jihadi teachings and often involving individuals who broke away from the other Salafi circles (as happened in the case of Behind Bars). Others in the early contingent were much less into such ideologies but also went for idealistic reasons. After IS claimed the caliphate a new contingent of people travelling to Syria emerged: men and women who wanted to live, as they said, under ‘Islamic rule’. For a good overview, see also Bergema and Van San (2019).

fragmentation among Muslims which resulted from *takfir* practices (among other things), and the negative image in which anti-Islam opinion leaders readily draw on the legacy of Al Qaeda, was either largely undiscussed, or portrayed as part of the war against Islam. In so doing, the writers of *De Banier* expressed a strong ideal that many of the early Dutch Syria volunteers espoused: that they were doing something good (or heroic) in going to Syria and joining the war against the Al-Assad government.¹² As we will see in the next section however, the Dutch Syria volunteers disagreed on how to wage that war, what kind of violence was allowed and against whom.

A few days after *De Banier* was published I met Abu Muhammed and two of his friends, who were involved in the production of the pamphlet, at a local bakery in The Hague to discuss the pamphlet. In this meeting I told them that many of the readers of *De Banier* whom I had spoken to, thought the authors were very vague when presenting their alternative to the West. The response of one person, also a Dutch Syria volunteer, on Facebook, for example, was: “This snuffed the whole pamphlet out like a candle.” Abu Muhammed and his two friends stated it was enough that *De Banier* pleaded for the principle of an Islamic state and made it clear that this was better and more just than other forms of government. When I replied that this would still be a man-made endeavor and people living under Islamic law would still make mistakes, they retorted that once Islamic law was established in a proper manner, people would change their behaviors and attitudes accordingly. This idea shows a sense of belief among them in a particular destiny and in the possibility of achieving divine empowerment if only Muslims act upon it, for example by migrating. The expectations that are attached to implementing Islamic law may seem fixed (that change and improvement would come, for example) yet, following what Elliot and Menin (2018: 293 - 294) call the ‘malleable fixity’ of destiny, they are malleable as they are imagined, negotiated, re-interpreted, manipulated and sacralized and de-sacralized during particular times and in particular places. This destiny is not concrete but the belief in it is a necessary condition if one is to act upon it. At the same time this belief can be nurtured by connecting one’s individual empowerment with a specific call to action from God. In that way *hijra* and *jihad* are, I suggest, signifiers of the malleable fixity of destiny: specific ideas about a utopian destiny which merge with people’s individual choices and actions and help them to realize what they regard as God’s unavoidable plan.

***Hijra*: A goal in life**

In the stories that Abu Muhammed and others told us prior to their departure, about their lives and how they saw themselves, they connected a political story about justice and injustice, and the need for sacrifice and *hijra*, with ideas about God’s plan and the struggles between falsehood (unbelief) and truth (faith, belief) and between good and evil (De Koning et al., 2020).¹³ Abu Muhammed, in particular, was very outspoken

¹² Although *De Banier* was the document in which ‘*De Nederlandse Mujahideen in Bilaad As-Shaam*’ [The Dutch fighters in Greater Syria] presented their agenda, we should be cautious in regarding it as such, as not everyone had read it and the *De Nederlandse Mujahideen in Bilaad As-Shaam*’ was about a specific group of Syria volunteers from the networks in Delft and The Hague who were in the same battalion in Syria.

¹³ This section builds upon chapter 5, from De Koning et al. (2020).

about his own perspectives, experiences and ambitions in that context, connecting his ethical ambitions and political views:

“Today there are young men who know contemporary society inside out: girlfriends, drug dealers, pimps. Allah has guided them and purified them. They turned to the pure worship of Allah, but that is not possible in this society, which constrains them in their worship. It is a corrupt society; you cannot call people to prayer.

... They (the Dutch volunteers in Syria) left this society, with all the consequences that entails, and left their families distraught. Allah says: they were a small group of young men and we gave them leadership, made their hearts steadfast.”

The quote shows how *hijra* is presented as a critique on Dutch society and how this critique is underpinning their aspirations to migrate and to redeem oneself from their previous life. With the support of God then, young men have gone from ‘Muslims out of place’ to the place where they should be in a physical and spiritual sense, according to Abu Muhammed. Abu Muhammed also stressed the need to move to Syria under divine guidance and connecting both by pointing to the issue of sacrifice:

“History repeats itself. They are really poor in Syria now, really poor. Less than 80 dollars. They believe it is better to be poor there than rich in this country of unbelievers and *mushrikin* [polytheists]. You see the ideology and sacrifice there. There are three gradations of belief: those who believe, do *hijra* and fight in the name of Allah. You see that with the boys who are fighting in Syria now. Life is made difficult here; you don’t belong here. You see the same sacrifice in the story of Ibrahim, who wanted to give his son to Allah.”

Notably, almost all the activists (including those who preferred to support Jabhat al Nusra) referred to their departure as *hijra* and to IS(IS) as *dawla* (the state) prior to the declaration of the caliphate in June 2014. In 2013, this did not mean a state that claimed to be a caliphate, but rather an ideological construct and – for many people – a promise for the future, connecting both the idea of *jihād* and that of *hijra* and, such as in Abu Muhammed’s quote here, relating that to one’s ethical aspirations and the transformation that comes with this desire. I will focus here on his story, but it is important to note that there are differences among the Syria volunteers with regard to their desired transformations. It would be a mistake to view these ideas and the support for it, as an indication that the Dutch volunteers in this period of time were a rather homogeneous and consensual group. For example, Abu Muhammed’s brother also went to Syria but his narrative of departure was different. Abu Muhammed’s brother considered himself not to be a devout Muslim at all. While Abu Muhammed presented himself going to Syria and joining the fighting factions as a logical and necessary next step in his idea of how to worship God (as he claimed the military *jihād* was an obligatory act of worship for all Muslims), his brother presented his migration and involvement in the war as an attempt to redeem himself.

In this section, I suggest that the *hijra* of the Dutch Syria volunteers can be analyzed as a form of counter-conduct which connects ideas about the self and about living a

good, virtuous life in an alternative place of one's own choosing. The *hijra* to the 'land of jihad' and becoming a fighter can then be seen as an attempt to put alternative ways of living into practice and devise alternative answers to the question 'Who am I supposed to be?' (Cadman, 2010). At the same time, these alternatives may well conflict with trends in policy and debate that emphasize and idealize the importance of secular values and freedoms, sexual freedoms and loyalty to the nation state (De Koning et al., 2020). Abu Muhammed expressed this ethico-political dimension of his migration quite well after he arrived in Syria. In a video message he framed his own migration to Syria (and that of others) as a response to the oft-heard statement 'go back to your own country' (again revealing a sense of being a Muslim out of place). And, furthermore, as a response to the attempts to revoke the Dutch citizenship of the Syria volunteers and stop them from going:

"If you want to get rid of the jihadists, why do you stop them from going? (...) All these young people want to get rid of their Dutch nationality."¹⁴

He was quite clear in our conversations that he did not expect the Dutch government to change its stance. It was an example of him speaking out in the sense of testifying what he believed. Bearing witness is a key element in the way he shaped and presented himself as a Muslim, as an activist and, at that point, as a migrant: disseminating memories of social injustice with speaking the truth and living a correct life (Munro, 2014: 1136–1139).

From the first time I met Abu Muhammed and his friends in 2005, they were convinced that European Muslims should, if possible, move to an Islamic country if they wanted to keep their faith and souls pure. If they were to stay in the Netherlands, they should engage in *da'wa* but still prepare to do *hijra*: to migrate. Although Syria, or more precisely, al-Sham (Greater Syria) played an important role in the propaganda of various factions in the war in Syria, this was less the case in the conversations I had with Abu Muhammed and his friends, as they already had a history of attempting (yet failing) to reach Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Chechnya to join the violent struggles. The war in Syria provided a new opportunity, one that appeared feasible and realistic for Abu Muhammed as many of his friends were already on the battlefield.

Abu Muhammed's use of public references to *Sham* was limited in the stories he recounted although, for a while, he and others in Syria called themselves *Shaam al-Malaahim* (The Glorious Battles of Syria, referring to the war in Syria as part of a series of great battles with the final battle taking place in Dabiq)¹⁵ on his Facebook pages and video messages. In later stories told by other Syria volunteers, this Islamic eschatology, which also featured prominently in the IS magazine *Dabiq* (named after the town where the last battle is to take place), was often combined with the idea that the violence perpetrated by IS was meant to be part of a process of purification. On the one hand, purifying and redeeming the individual fighter (with martyrdom and access to Paradise as the ultimate sacrifice, testimony and reward), and on the other hand, the attempt to

¹⁴ Video: 'A word of advice to the Dutch government (Een advies aan de De Nederlandse regering).' In possession of the author.

¹⁵ See also: Cook (2002).

cleanse the region of IS from everything and everyone deemed un-Islamic: highlighting the fact that while IS may have been a promise of transformation and justice to Dutch Syria volunteers, it was one that still had to be constructed.

For Abu Muhammed and his friends, *hijra* took on a very specific form — connecting jihad with *hijra*. Abu Muhammed presented his goal to become a fighter as a life-long endeavor:

“At school I read the book ‘*Een doel voor ogen*’ [A goal in mind] by Zohra Zarouali.¹⁶ It was just after 9/11 and the two Eindhoven martyrs had just lost their lives in Kashmir. I swore to myself that I would have the same goal in life. Reach the land of Jihad, establish the word of Allah on this earth and end my life as a martyr.

Never again! I never want to go back. I myself was born and raised in the Netherlands. I know the country from A to Z. I know democracy from A to Z. I have tasted democracy and it was foul. I have truly left for good, and everyone here in Syria says the same. The Netherlands is the country that ridicules us every day. The Netherlands is the country that ridicules our prophet.”

In this quote he expresses himself as a pious, combative, and steadfast Muslim on his way to fulfilling his life-long goal. Like many others with whom we spoke, he described his move to Syria not only as going on jihad but also as *hijra*: migration to ‘the land of jihad’. Furthermore, in his reference to ‘the Eindhoven martyrs’, death is not presented as a tragic end for them, but as an awakening for Abu Muhammed himself. And, much like Pandolfo (2007) describes for the undocumented migrants from Morocco to Europe, death becomes a way of life and a path to fulfill what he sees as his goal and destiny.

Abu Muhammad’s view about *hijra* and its connection with jihad, were at odds with the views and practices of many Dutch Muslims. And although within Salafi Muslim circles, in which Abu Muhammad and several friends had followed courses until 2008, the general importance of *hijra* and, in more abstract ways, jihad was emphasized, several of the Salafi imams rejected the circles in which Abu Muhammad ended up. Some did see the uprising against the al-Assad government as a mode of jihad but urged Dutch Muslims to stay away from it and to support charities instead. Muslim politicians vehemently rejected those views, some regarding Abu Muhammed and the likes as bandits and their views on Islam as ‘gangsta-Islam’ (De Koning et al., 2020).

Like in de case of *De Banier*, Abu Muhammed and his friends’ stories point to, what they regarded as, the hypocrisy of the Western world in the face of injustice and the need to act.

“I have always wanted to stand up for the weak in society, and we are all witnesses to what is happening in Syria. Assad is busy killing off his own people, and the Western countries – the so-called champions of justice – are not doing anything about it. So we went there to support our Muslim brothers and sisters,

¹⁶ Zarouali’s book (Zarouali, 2002) is a book written for young teenagers and tells the story of Bahar, a Moroccan-Belgian girl who is determined to finish her studies.

and to send out a clear message that we have not forgotten them and that we are prepared to sacrifice our own homes and relatives to help and support them.”

Reaching Syria (Aleppo) in 2013 was, for Abu Muhammed, the next step in his *jihad* and *hijra*:

“Some see me as a terrorist. Others see me as a freedom fighter. If you ask an American or the average Dutch person or a PVV member who I am, they’ll say: ‘He has a beard, he wears ankle-length trousers, shouts *Allahu akbar* when he fires, so he must be a terrorist.’ I hope that I will live a long and fertile life, in obedience to my creator, and that I can be of great use to the Islamic community – and, of course, that I end life as a martyr. A bullet in the head: the ideal end for me.”

Here Abu Muhammed’s self-presentation pertains to a fundamental question about the relationship between violence, the sovereign state and good or bad citizens. As Chatterjee (2005), for example, has pointed out — violence belongs to the dominion of the state. The state can use violence within particular boundaries and its use is ideally guided and legitimized by issues of utility, proportionality and the need to use it (Chatterjee, 2005: 97–98). This means, in line with Mustapha’s (2013: 744 - 745) explanation of the motivations of transnational volunteers in the Bosnian war, that the question emerges “whether or not non-state soldierly can ever be regarded as virtuous. Put another way, this is the question of whether one person’s freedom fighter is another person’s terrorist.” Abu Muhammed uses his perspective on the Dutch debates about the Syria volunteers as a way of presenting himself as a dedicated fighter; one who devotes his life to death.

When he was active in Syria, first as a freelancer (as he called it) and later on for IS, he presented himself as the Fighting Journalist — again showing how testifying for and living the right life were intimately linked in his story and constitute important elements of his counter-conduct (Munro, 2014).

Abu Muhammed’s story about his departure to Syria thus becomes an attempt to demonstrate him bearing witness to the need to stand up and fight against injustice and to convince his audience that this alternative is more just and rewarding. In so doing Abu Muhammed constructs, as does *De Banier*, a rather homogeneous picture of the Dutch volunteers claiming to speak on behalf of ‘we Muslims’ and/or ‘true Muslims’. There were, however, important differences within the Behind Bars network about how to implement Islamic rule, how to strive for it, how to wage war in Syria, how and whom to fight against, and how to position oneself vis-à-vis the local population in Syria.

Take, for example, a young man from the east of the Netherlands who called himself Muhajiri Sháám.¹⁷ After initially joining the same faction as the volunteers from The Hague, pledging allegiance to ISIS and cooperating with the people from The Hague to recruit more volunteers, he left ISIS and joined Jahbat an-Nusra during the course of early 2014. He publicly denounced ISIS as “khawarij”,¹⁸ declaring them inclined to

¹⁷ He also presented himself as Abu Muhammed al-Hollandi but, in order to avoid confusion, I will continue to use his online name Muhajiri Sháám.

¹⁸ *Khawarij* (outsiders, those who depart) is the name used in Islamic traditions to describe a group that splits off from the majority of the *ummah* during the struggle for succession following the death of the third caliph, Uthman, in 656 A.D. The group was allegedly known for violence and its frequent practice of *takfir*; today it is often used to describe individuals who are regarded as extremists.

“extremism” and claiming that he regretted ever joining ISIS as “they were following a deviated ideology” and were based “upon falsehood.” His anti-ISIS stance was the main ingredient of a Nusra propaganda video about him called *The Glorious* which was released after his death in Syria in 2015.¹⁹

Although most people in the network from The Hague remained loyal to ISIS, others tried to avoid, or resist, choosing sides.²⁰ Abu Muhammed also refused to take sides for a long time but after a number of months he finally joined IS. He then ceased his activities as the ‘Fighting Journalist’ because, he said, the media branch of IS did not allow him enough freedom to do it. For Abu Muhammed trying ‘to make *hijra*’ and finally reaching Syria meant that he had sacrificed almost everything he had in the Netherlands. He left his mother and sisters behind, as well as his wife and daughter. He made it clear that, although he missed them, *hijra* and jihad constituted his path towards fulfilling his ambitions and achieving self-realization. In the end his sacrifice and testimony was completed: he died in February 2015 during the battle of Kobane.

***Hijra* as an ethics of rejection, empowerment and trust**

Abu Muhammed and most of his friends went to Syria between the summer of 2012 and the end of 2014. A focus on the meanings of *hijra* in the case of a small but vocal early contingent of the Dutch male Syria volunteers, provides an analytical lens on particular effects of the Dutch state’s conduct of Muslims and how the counter-conduct it generates challenges, changes and confirms existing policies and borders of the Dutch nation-state which render a group of people as (temporary) out of place.

In constantly re-affirming the idea that Muslims are conditionally out of place by addressing them as migrants, allochtones, salafists, jihadists, the subjects emerge and come into being and start to claim a presence within this particular regime as well as rejecting it. *Hijra* was a way for Abu Muhammed to go where he believed he belonged: a state where Islam, in congruence with his understanding of it, determines the rule of law. As we learned from the conversations with him and his friends about *De Banier*, they believed that, in a state with this kind of rule of law, Islam becomes implemented by the people themselves, almost by definition. In that sense, *hijra* that encompasses moving away from a status that corrupts the soul, which is unjust against Muslims, to something that is just and operates according to God’s law, becomes a promise of belonging, redemption, self-realization and justice. On the other hand, however, it is also a project that needs to be realized, partly by self-sacrifice and partly by engaging in a military struggle. A struggle cast in terms of a just war *against* tyranny, and the enemies of Islam, and *for* the implementation of Islamic rule.

These ideas come together in the way Abu Muhammed presents martyrdom as a way of life and the ultimate goal and testimony of self-realization. In so doing, *hijra* and jihad become a divinely empowered method of mobility which individuals trust, as they believe in what God has destined for them, (albeit in different ways as Abu Muhammed and his brother’s stories reveal). This destiny becomes real and manifests itself only when they take action to realize that outcome and remain steadfast and

¹⁹ The Glorious – The martyrdom of Muhammed al-Hollandi. In possession of the author.

²⁰ For background information about the clash between ISIS and Jahbat al-Nusra, see (Zelin, 2014)

actively fight against diversions. Their ideas about *hijra* and jihad, therefore, combine three distinct dimensions: a sense of empowerment prior to, and during, the action; the notion of *hijra* used as a political argument to reject the daily experiences of being regarded as a threat and an outsider in all political discourse, and a heightened sense of agency from being part of a divine project, enabling them to fulfill their destiny while fighting against a tyrant.

Besides the paradox of claiming to fight against tyranny by joining IS and its theatre of cruelty, there is another paradox in the actions of the Dutch Syria volunteers. On the one hand, they challenged the system of nation-states in which violence is the prerogative of the state, where citizens belong to a particular nation-state and where the state's claim is that it protects the people. On the other hand, the Syria volunteers have become justifications for the expansion of the state powers and amplifying the political rhetoric about integration and the citizenship of migrants and Muslims (Fadil et al., 2019). And, while this security gaze imposes a rather homogenizing idea of the foreign fighters, and *De Banier* and Abu Muhammed claimed to speak on behalf of all the Dutch volunteers, there were major differences as to how jihad should be implemented in Syria, partly related to the rift between Al Qaeda and ISIS.

Declarations

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