The Magical Realism of Danish Counter Terrorism Policy, the Hunt for Witches and How to resist it

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Abstract

This article explores what perception of the terror threat legitimized the ongoing imprisonment of 6 Danish women and their 19 children in the Kurdish led imprisonment camps Al-Hol and Al-Roj in Syria. It argues that by framing the terror threat as an incomprehensible threat, the state successfully instills fear that can only be handled by exceptional measures. The article reads Danish counter terrorism policy as a text of magical realism to identify how the War on Terror speaks to an in-betweenness of realism and supernatural in the performance of threat. The framework enables scholars to point out states' unreasonable security claims, and thereby resist counter terrorism policy.

Introduction

For someone to be labelled as a terrorist threat does not imply an actual act of violence - the perception of intention of one is enough in itself:

> The senses perceive the events, yet magical thinking provides the explanation. The hidden knowledge provided by a secret source reveals the evil of witchcraft – or terrorism. The feared future dominates the explanation of the current state of the events.

- (Zulaika, 2016, p. 45)

This article explores what perception of the terror threat legitimized the ongoing imprisonment of six danish women and their 19 children in the Kurdish led imprisonment camps Al-Hol and Al-Roj in north-eastern Syria. It argues that by framing the threat of terror as an inevitable barbaric evil, the state can legitimize keeping its citizens detained in camps frequently referred to as "hell on earth". Hence, the threat of terror is framed within a crisis terminology enabling the state to successfully instill fear that can only be handled by exceptional measures, which is a general feature of governments' use of crisis narratives (McConnell, 2020). Empirically I zoom in on a specific type of crisis, the type of crisis that seems to be looming around every corner, yet only very rarely revealing itself in western contexts, and thus taking the form of an "imagined crisis" (Long, 2014). Long argues that states invoke laws of exception upon claims of national security when justifying border closure to prevent refugee entry. This article expands the argument by arguing that the crisis narrative, in relation to terror threats, not only legitimizes keeping foreign nationals out, but goes to the extent of keeping its own nationals out. Furthermore, the article explores a space for resisting Danish counter terrorism policy. Charlotte Heath-Kelly (2012) suggests reading counter terrorism policy as a text of magical realism to identify how the War on Terror speaks to an in-betweenness of realism and supernatural in the performance of threat, an in-betweenness which is characteristic of magical realism's assault on the basic structures of rationalism, and help us "point to the absurdity which we are obliged to accept" (Heath-Kelly, 2012, pp. 344–345). Magical realism utilises juxtapositions between the fantastic supernatural and the modern rationalist paradigm, and allows us to engage with the fantasy of counter terrorism policy, which seems to require us to believe in a "witchcraft-like possession", and highlight how its claims of security appear ridiculous (Heath-Kelly, 2012, p. 343). The analysis focuses on developments within Danish counter terrorism policy leading up to the public discussion regarding the 6 Danish women and their 19 children. The material

examined consists of official committee hearings; hearings in the parliament; newspapers; program proposals; policy papers; television and radio broadcasts; and institutional reports and range from 2002 until present.

Ontological commitments

The approach lies within the literature of critical terrorism studies (CTS). CTS adopts the ontological position of terrorism as a social fact rather than a brute fact, since the definition of a terrorist act does not rely on any objective characteristics but relies on judgements about the context, circumstances and intent of the violence (Jackson et al., 2011, p. 35). Terrorism was created to describe the actions undertaken by the French state against dissidents and dissenters in their own population during the time of the French revolution. In 1880 the Russian revolutionary Nikolai Morozov called for arms stating that: "Terroristic struggle which strikes at the weakest spot of the existing system will obviously be universally accepted in life" (cf. Jackson et al. 2011, p. 101). Today, it seems unimaginable that any one political actor would apply this label to themselves. This differentiation and transformation of the meaning of the word 'terrorism' is what Jackson describes as 'the definitional quagmire'; that no universal definition of terrorism exists, instead literally hundreds of different definitions are applied, and thus even the closest allies such as the USA, Canada, UK and Australia have different lists of proscribed terrorist organizations (Jackson et al., 2011, pp. 100–104). Because the understanding of terrorism shifts, so too does the understanding of *who* the terrorists are in any historical or political context, hence four Nobel Peace Prize winners has formerly been labelled as terrorists. The relationship between the historical context and the meaning of terrorism reminds us that it is a social construction (Jackson et al., 2011, p. 105). This does not mean that the acts of violence labelled as 'terrorism' are not brute physical facts for the victims and onlookers, indeed they are! Nevertheless, deciding which events count as 'terrorism' "depends upon a series of social, cultural, legal and political processes of interpretation, categorization and labelling" (Jackson et al., 2011, p. 35). Heath-Kelly argues that a constructivist approach enables us to engage in the politics of terrorism by exploring the creation of a discursive reality "where the term terrorism is used to delegitimise certain actors, achieve policy goals and conceal ambiguities at work" (Heath-Kelly, 2016, p. 60). Constructivist scholars are interested in investigating the political elite's application of labelling, and how this labelling affects a juxtaposition of the evil-doer and the legitimate power, functioning to emphasise the labellers position within legitimate politics.

I follow Zulaika's claims that "the ontology of terrorism has to look at the dynamics between form and formlessness intrinsic to the metaphysical powers and dangers of ritual, magic, pollution, taboo and the like studied by anthropologists" (Zulaika, 2016, p. 45). I suggest that reading Danish counter terrorism policy as a text of magical realism help us understand the perception of a supernatural mystified terrorist threat, which legitimizes imprisonment of Danish citizens. I contribute to Anja Kublitz's *Omar is dead: Aphasia and the escalating anti-radicalization business* (2021) by applying a constructivist approach. While Kublitz offers an analysis of how the perception of the 'new threat' of foreign fighters has surged a materialistic anti-radicalization industry, my approach offers an analysis of the construction of the threat that drives the industry. As accounted for below, the industry has materialized through increased government spending on Danish intelligence services and new public institutions aiming to prevent radicalization and extremism. Furthermore, it also accelerated radicalization businesses in the private sector including consultancy firms, and publishing of books and movies (see Kublitz 2021).

Danish Counter Terrorism Policy

Countering terrorism can be considered to entail policies that seek to eliminate terrorist environments and groups (Lindahl 2016, p. 214). Ronald Crelinsten argues that "how we conceive terrorism determines to a great extent how we go about countering it and what resources – money, manpower, institutional framework time horizon we devote to the effort" (Crelinsten cf. Jackson et al., 2011, p. 223). This perspective fits Danish counter terrorism efforts, since its policies have developed from specific events. In response to 9/11, Denmark adopted its first counter terrorism policy (Anti-terrorpakken) in 2002. Following the London bombings and the Danish cartoon controversy in 2005, Denmark adopted a second counter terrorism policy package (anti-terrorpakken II) in 2006 , and in 2015 the latest counter terrorism policy package ('Terrorpakken III') was presented. With a budget of approximately $152 million, 'Terrorpakken III' was more than seven times bigger than the two previous, money of which the majority was allocated to the Danish intelligence services, PET and FE (Kublitz, 2021, pp. 66–67). 'Terrorpakken III' came in the wake of the 'Copenhagen shooting' where Omar el-Hussein, a Danish-Palestinian, killed two people and was shot dead by the police. It was deemed a terrorist attack and not only increased government spending on intelligent services, but also accelerated an anti-radicalization industry that did not target the problem. Rather than focusing on immigrant youth in deprived neighbourhoods in which

Omar el-Hussein was brought up, the 2015 counter terrorism package mainly targeted Danish foreign fighters, despite the fact that Omar el-Hussein was not a foreign fighter. Hence, 'Terrorpakken III' did not only surge an acceleration of the anti-radicalization business but also forged a radical link between the terrorist attack in Copenhagen and returned foreign fighters (Kublitz 2021, p. 68).

In 2016 Denmark adopted its National Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Extremism and Radicalisation (Regeringen, 2016), which strengthened the authorities' overall efforts for countering extremism and radicalisation at home. To sum up, Danish counter terrorism policy has recently been prioritized in terms of increased funding to both intelligence services and plans for countering radicalisation and extremism, which are influenced by the 'Copenhagen shooting', and increased focus on foreign fighters as the dominant terror threat to national security, despite the fact that the 'Copenhagen shooting' did not involve foreign fighters.

The slippery tung and the signs of the witch

In her article *Can We Laugh Yet? Reading Post-9/11 Counterterrorism Policy as Magical Realism and Opening a Third-Space* (2012), Heath-Kelly compares counter-radicalisation policies within the United Kingdom, to knowledge of the 'signs of the witch' as seen in *Malleus Malificarum* (Kramer & Sprenger, 1486) during the Middle Ages, as "both fantasies revolve around the notion that a secret society exists within, and threatens, the greater society – a feature noted of witchcraft discourse in the Middle Ages" (Heath-Kelly 2012, p. 347). Below, I investigate some of the similarities carried out by Danish counter terrorism policy to expose a juxtaposition of a supernatural and modern rationalist paradigm from a Danish perspective.

The Malleus Malificarum contains information for use in identifying witches. Malleus Malificarum was used as a judicial instrument to detect and persecute witches, and to specify the rules of evidence (Kramer & Sprenger, 1486). The comparison of anti-radicalization policy to medieval ages is not a farfetched line of thought in a Danish context. In fact, Muslims have in Danish public discourse been compared to medieval societies before. In 2004, the minister of culture, Brian Mikkelsen, introduced a 'battle of culture' stating that "a medieval Muslim culture will never become as valid as the Danish culture…" and that "in the midst of our country a parallel society is developing in which minorities are practicing their medieval norms and undemocratic mindsets" (Brian Mikkelsen cf. Kublitz 2010, pp.

112-113). The perception that a parallel society is developing within the greater society as a threat to 'our' values, shares similarities to how Malleus Malificarum frames the vulnerability of women to the supernatural threat of witches:

> Therefore a wicked woman is by her nature quicker to waver in her faith, and consequently quicker to abjure the faith, which is the root of witchcraft… …No might of the flames or the swollen winds, no deadly weapon, is so much to be feared as the lust and hatred of a woman who has been divorced from the marriage bed.

- (Kramer and Sprenger 1487: 1:VI)

The quote highlights the threat of witches within communities of women and suggests that, women divorced from the marriage bed have an innate risk of becoming a supernatural danger. Likewise, 'parallel' Muslim communities are practicing medieval norms and undemocratic mindsets in parallel societies 'divorced' from democratic values like democracy, equality, and human rights, and hence subjects are in risk of being radicalised individuals. Danish strategies for countering radicalisation and potential terrorists are focused on specific parallel societies that are in opposition to the hegemonic values of Danish society, in similarity to investigators of medieval Europe searching for secret societies and looking for patterns within communities of women (Heath-Kelly, 2012, p. 348).

As a part of the 2016 National Action Plan, the Danish government entered an agreement on stricter measures in relation to religious representatives (Regeringen, 2016). These measures are to prevent and ban foreign 'hate preachers' from undermining Danish democratic values and promote parallel conceptions of law and justice. The agreement includes a number of measures, such as a sanction list of hate preachers, criminalisation of voicing approval of certain criminal acts and mapping of mosques. Inherent in the perception of hate preachers within this legislation is an unseen power of words, which seems similar to the power of witches' spells:

> Religious preachers have a special position in terms of affecting its congregations. Therefore, it is especially problematic if they through their behaviour counteract and undermine Danish law and values.

- (*L 48 Forslag Til Lov Om Ændring Af Udlændingeloven.*, 2016)

Danish counter terrorism's focus on the slippery tongue of hate preachers expose a juxtaposition of the supernatural and modern rationalist paradigm. This power of words, as Heath-Kelly points out, bears resemblance to the era of spell casting (2012, p. 349), which is seen in the Malleus Malificarum's interest in how the greater society can protect itself from witches' words and their effects:

> …they distract the minds of men, driving them to madness, insane hatred, and inordinate lusts. Again, he continues, by the terrible influence of their spells alone, as it were by a draught of poison, they can destroy life… …by the terrible power of their evil spells, without any actual draught or poison, kill human beings.

- (Kramer and Sprenger 1487:1:II)

The legislation against the slippery tongue of religious preachers and their connection to hate or evil, has clearly targeted Muslim communities, since it contains a 'mapping of mosques' as part of the strategy. Malleus Malificarum stated that if people were properly educated, the power of witches would be redundant (Heath-Kelly 2012, p. 349). Likewise Danish counter radicalization policy includes "…providing children and young people with democratic skills, honing their critical thinking and social competences, and thereby preventing the development of risk behaviour" (Regeringen, 2016).

The part of Danish counter terrorism policy addressing radicalization shares similarities with the medieval hunt of witches in a number of ways. The similarities discussed, such as situating the threat community as parallel society within a greater society, and the slippery tongue of religious preachers resurrecting the notion of spell-casting witches, expose how Danish counter terrorism policy engages in a hunt for a supernatural entity that is incomprehensible.

The 'new challenges'

The premise for applying effective counter terrorism policy is itself exposing a juxtaposition of the modern rationalist paradigm and the supernatural. Most policy papers on countering terrorism presents a narrative of the threat as something inescapable or incomprehensible, as seen in the government's 2015 anti-terror package: "In the fight against terror we can never guard ourselves 100 pct. It will always be possible, no matter what we do. There is always a risk that one fanatic person will succeed in carrying out an attack" (Regeringen, 2015, p. 2) or

in the standard sentence of Centre for Terror Analysis' (CTA) risk assessments that "Terrorist attacks may occur with no prior intelligence indications, even when the perpetrators have previously been known to sympathize with militant Islamism or political extremism" (Center for terror analyse, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020, 2021). The narrative of an incomprehensible threat that we can never fully grasp, while simultaneously requiring evermore developed preventative strategies and security measures, exposes a juxtaposition of the supernatural and the modern rationalist paradigm. Read as a magical realist text, this example shows how the *magical* of counter terrorism policy is not obvious but an ordinary matter of everyday occurrence – "admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism" (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 3).

Central for all Danish counter terrorism policy efforts is CTA's Assessments of the Terror Threat to Denmark (VTD). Two things strike me when reading through the VTDs. Firstly, the terror threat to Denmark has remained on the level of 'significant' (level 4 out of 5) since 2012, and it seems although the threat of terror is developing in character and mode, the level of the threat stays the same, and thus no matter how much money the government has put into its counter terrorism efforts throughout the years, it has never managed to bring down this level of threat. Secondly, I do notice a development of the reports, not of its content but of the layout. Up through the 2010's the report was published in a quite boring fashion. But the two recent VTD's are more presentable, including a guide on key concepts in the introduction of the report for, and a more presentable layout including pictures showing what I assume to be possible targets of terrorist attacks, such as Christiansborg (the parliament building) with its 85 balls of granite set up to secure the building from terrorist vehicles.
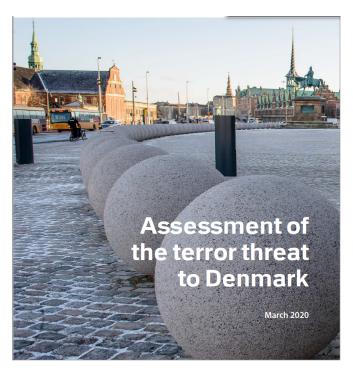
Figure 1: picture from CTA's VTD 2020

Furthermore, the newest reports highlight quotes of the most central threats to Denmark such as the foreign fighters.

It is CTA's assessment that a number of factors may have a particular impact on the potential intent of individuals in other countries, including Denmark's neighbouring countries, to attack targets in Denmark: Denmark's international military involvement, including Denmark's participation in the international coalition against IS in Syria/Iraq, current or previous cases where Denmark is portrayed as a "nation of offenders", prior knowledge of Denmark, awareness of the fact that preparations for an attack in one country against targets in another country may be particularly difficult for the authorities to uncover and thus to prevent, unwillingness to attack in one's own country and Denmark's geographical proximity.

"The threat may come from returned foreign fighters or individuals who are released after having served terror-related sentences."

Figure 2: picture from CTA's VTD 2020

The development in CTA's VTDs highlight the institutionalization of the 'War on Terror'. Jackson argues that the narrative about the existential terror threat has been repeated so many times by authoritative actors, and acted upon as if it were indeed a truth, that it has become an unquestioned truth. In addition to this, it has taken an external reality that can be seen and touched, including institutions such as PET, the airline industry and even the architecture of the Danish parliament building, making the terror threat warnings very real (Jackson et al., 2011, pp. 142–143). The authoritative voice of The Danish intelligence service is also established within this truth regime about terrorism, and their risk assessments are within discussions of security politics seen as extremely valid. The VTDs function as an important guideline for counter terrorism policy, although this perspective has also been challenged by

the government's policy of not evacuating the women and their children from al-Hol and al-Roj, which will be elaborated in the following section.

Responding to foreign fighters

The current government's position on Danish foreign fighters is that they are 'unwanted', that they have 'turned their backs on the Danish democratic values', and that they have "admitted themselves the face of terror and committed monstrous crimes against the humanity" (Frederiksen 2021, p. 14.40). This shows that, in the reality constructed by politicians, Danish foreign fighters have already been convicted of 'crimes against humanity' although they have not been put to trial yet - a tendency resembling how prisoners in Guantanamo was detained to provide "the proof that the worst of the worst were being kept under control and punished" (Zulaika, 2018, p. 211). In fact, the detainment of a Danish prisoner in Guantanamo was the subject of political discussions in 2004. Present Danish foreign minister, Jeppe Kofod, advocated for bringing him home by arguing that "it is about critical principles and values" (Kofod, 2004) and that we must defend citizens against being detained for years, having no access to a lawyer, and not being put to trial to determine legal status. On the 6th of September 2019, Jeppe Kofod stated that because their parents have turned their backs on Danish democratic values, the children in al-Hol and al-Roj are in a tragic situation: "There exists no forgiveness for the parents that brought their children to Islamic State's empire of the dead". Following Jeppe Kofod, and the current government's argumentation, the same principal values of democracy are used to argue the advocation for bringing home a foreign fighter imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay, and then 15 years later, to legitimize the detainment of not only alleged foreign fighters, but also their children. This tendency to portray the other in order to define one's own identity, is what Michael Taussig calls the Columbus Quincentenary:

> A formative influence on the precise constitution of this mixture and its tension is paranoia, as if the make-up of knowledge, the Self, and the very principle of identity itself cannot exist without the fantasmic presence of a feared other

- (Taussig, 1992, p. 37)

Hence, Jeppe Kofod, in these examples, provides a depiction of the national democratic identity in opposition to a fantasmic presence of a feared other, although the opposite has changed from being the ones detaining, to becoming the detainees.

At the core of the government's argumentation is the prioritization of 'national security' which is unequivocally linked to the aforementioned VTD's of CTA (Hækkerup, 2019b) - at least until most recently. In the 2020 VTD it was assessed "that the risk of indoctrination and other types of influence increases with the time spent by the children in a radicalized environment such as the camps in north-eastern Syria" (Center for terroranalyse, 2020, p. 16). To this, the minister of justice, Nick Hækkerup stated that "PET has made their assessment and that is fair enough. Nevertheless, it does not fit the government's policy…" (*Åbent Samråd Om Hjemtagelse Af de Danske Børn Fanget i Teltlejrene i Syrien*, 2021). What these turns and twists in the current government's policy illustrate is how the construction of the perceived threat, and the response to it, changes and is legitimized in accordance to the cultural hegemony. The change in argumentation and policy of the current government from 2004 until now, reaffirms the perception of the terrorist as something so magical that the government's own intelligence services' modern rationalist response to it, can be ignored or occluded (Stoler, 2016).

Kublitz argues that Omar el-Hussein has been stripped from the specific historical and social context he grew up in, enabling the government to turn him into an empty signifier of the Islamic terrorist, including returned foreign fighters. This contradicts the fact that he was a Danish citizen growing up in Danish housing projects, going to Danish primary schools, involved in Danish gang-related conflicts and spending time in Danish prisons (Kublitz, 2021, pp. 70-72). From a similar perspective, also highlighting a form of occlusion of knowledge, Zulaika & Douglass argue that "By turning terror into a projective fantasy of bizarre plots and utter anomaly dreamed up by others wholly unlike us, the real terrors in our daily lives are concealed and granted normalcy" (1996, p. 187). From these perspectives, reading Danish counter terrorism policy as a magical realism text offers an ontological disruption which "serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation" (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 3). These insights helps us see the 'accepted realistic conventions of causality' inherent in Danish counter terrorism policy, and especially in regards to the perception of foreign fighters following the 'Copenhagen shooting'. Furthermore, the ironic dichotomy encoded in the critical term "magical realism" is also exposed. The term implies a clear opposition between the reality and magic that exists in a magical realism text – "For the characters who inhabit the fictional world, and for the

author who creates it, magic may be real, reality magical…" (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 3). Hence, the authors of Danish counter terrorism policy (the state) through the construction of the threat of foreign fighters and the ongoing institutionalization of the 'War on Terror' makes the 'magic' of terrorism very real, while, when scrutinizing this text, it becomes apparent that the state's 'real' has become 'magical' for the inhabitants of this fictional world.

Closing remarks

With this article, I aim to contribute to a better understanding of the mystique of something, that while it is statistically less fatal than choking to death on one's lunch, has been perceived as one of the greatest public threats (Zulaika & Douglass, 1996, p. 6). I find that situating parallel societies of Muslims within the greater democratic Danish society and the magic spells of religious preachers, bear resemblance to the hunt of witches written in the Malleus Malificarum. Secondly, juxtaposing the supernatural with a modern rationalist paradigm does not only, nor necessarily, open up a third space of laughter, but is useful as a concept to scholarly resist the absurd security claims of Danish counter terrorism policy (Heath-Kelly, 2012, p. 345). By zooming in on a specific type of crisis, the article argues that laws of exception do not only apply to foreign nationals (refugees) (Long, 2014), but extend to nationals as well. I suggest that the occlusion of knowledge (Stoler, 2016) seen in the aftermath of the 'Copenhagen attack' (Kublitz, 2021) is driven by the construction of the 'terrorist' as something so barbaric and evil that 'the attack' cannot simply be caused by specific historical and social conditions, but must be caused by a supernatural power, that not even our intelligence services can fully grasp. Conclusively, I find that what drives the anti-radicalization industry is the states' construction of some people (including children!) as ultimate evil-doers having witchcraft-like possessions, that by all means possible must be countered - no matter what the costs and consequences.

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