
Scandinavia's Daughters in the Syrian Civil War: What can we Learn from their Family Members' Lived Experiences?

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Abstract

The phenomenon of Scandinavians joining Salafi-jihadi groups in the Syrian civil war is high on the political agendas of Scandinavian countries. To counter the phenomenon, authorities are increasingly focused on the inclusivity of families in efforts to counter violent extremism. However, research on the topic is limited. This article seeks to remedy this, by investigating the insights that can be gained from the lived experiences of relatives of three Scandinavian women who have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups, primarily the Islamic State, based on ethnographic fieldwork. Through a narrative analysis of family members' stories, this article critically discusses two different ways that family members' lived experiences are used within the field of violent extremism. Firstly, media and researchers use the lived experiences of family members to explain why European Muslims join Salafi-Jihadi groups. Secondly, political initiatives increasingly emphasise that families should be involved in efforts to stop young men and women from becoming foreign fighters. This article employs these insights to discuss how the narratives of family members can be used to understand why people become foreign fighters, and to consider the role of the family in countering violent extremism efforts.

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Introduction

'Jacob's' daughters one day left their home town in Scandinavia and moved to Syria to join the terrorist organization, the Islamic State (IS). "It is as if my daughters are dead, but not really", he tells me. His daughters are two of Scandinavia's 70-80 women, who since 2013 have joined Salafi-jihadi organizations in Syria.² The majority became a part of IS, who

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² Officially 30-40 Swedish women and 18-19 Danish women have joined groups, such as IS and the Nusrah-front. There are no official Norwegian numbers, but media sources assess the number to be 9-10. Conversations with the authorities, family members and study of Scandinavian media indicate that the number, especially from

until the fall of Raqqa in 2017, were wives; raised a new generation of warriors; and participated in propaganda, recruitment and humanitarian work (Aasgaard, 2017). Only a few women have returned to Scandinavia. The fate of the majority of these women is unknown after the fall of Raqqa. This article explores more closely the lived experiences of family members of Scandinavian women, who joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups.

The purpose is to critically discuss two different ways that the lived experiences of family members of Scandinavian women who joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups are approached in media, research and political initiatives. The first approach is that media and researchers use family members as witnesses to explain why Europeans join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. In recent years, several stories have been published in the media in which family members explain why their children chose to join such groups. The second approach is one in which global and domestic political initiatives increasingly emphasise that family members should be included in efforts to counter violent extremism.

This article discusses these two approaches through a narrative analysis of the lived experiences of family members of three Scandinavian women, who have either joined IS or the Nusrah-front in the Syrian civil war. The term Salafi-jihadi is employed to describe these two groups. This article seeks to explore how family members' lived experiences are used to understand the foreign fighter phenomenon, and how families can be included in efforts to counter violent extremism.

Terminology

The following definitions clarify terms used in this work. 'Foreign fighter' is applied to both men and women who have travelled to Syria to join such groups, although the term may appear misleading since women do not actively participate in fighting. Here, the term is used more broadly than usual, but with justification. In their roles as wives, and by contributing logistically to the combative effort (for instance through nursing wounded

Sweden and Denmark, is higher. See: (Arias, 2015; Center for Terroranalyse, 2017; Hopperstad and Arntsen, 2015)

soldiers or providing meals for fighters), it is argued that ‘foreign fighter’ is also applicable to women. ‘Violent extremists’ are individuals or a group, who express “their ideological beliefs through violence or a call for violence” (Southers, 2013, p. 4). Efforts to counter violent extremism are understood as “non-coercive attempts to reduce involvement in terrorism” (Harris-Hogan, Barrelle, and Zammit 2016, p. 6). ‘Radicalization’ is a contested concept and there are many different definitions (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Koehler, 2017; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008). In this text it is understood as “a politically contrived concept, based on an attempt to understand, explain and prevent home-grown terrorism” (Gemmerli, 2015, p. 2). ‘Lived experience’ can be understood as the continuous interaction of human thought and action with our personal, social and material environment (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007, p. 39).

Research About the Families and Foreign Fighters

In this part, I discuss existing research on the relationship between families, foreign fighters and violent extremism.

Employing family members’ narratives to explain the motivations of foreign fighters

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, researchers and the media have focused on foreign fighters who joined the war. Because it is challenging to gain access to foreign fighters themselves, it has been common to present family members’ narratives as an empirical source, and as a means of better understanding the motivation of foreign fighters. I have conducted a systematic search in the major academic databases and think tank institutions for reports and articles published between 2011 and May 2016. I conducted the search employing the search word ‘foreign fighter’ in Google scholar, JSTOR and the Copenhagen library database, as well as research in major English-language based think tanks working on radicalization, foreign fighters and violent extremism.³ The bibliographies of the

³ Examples include the Quilliam foundation; Combating Terrorism Center at West Point; International Institute for Counter-Terrorism; International Centre for Counter-Terrorism: The Hague; Washington Institute for Near

works identified were systematically crosschecked to ensure that no articles were missed. As a result, 53 peer-reviewed academic articles and 65 think-tank reports in English discussing foreign fighters as the main topic were identified.

A majority of reports and studies are based on an analysis of secondary sources from the media or social media. Researchers use media analysis to create narratives of foreign fighters (Chmoun and Batrawi, 2014; Christopher, 2015; Heinke and Raudszus, 2015; Holman, 2014; Sandee, 2013; Shtuni, 2015; Skidmore, 2014; Weggemans et al., 2014; Zelin et al., 2013). Some of these reports are based directly on interviews with family members of foreign fighters. One report (based on interviews with family members, foreign fighters and social workers) discusses some of the factors which seem to have influenced an individual's decision to become a foreign fighter in Syria: group pressure; family connections in Syria; social media; or a wish to increase social status (Mercy Corps, 2015). Another publication reports on interviews conducted with family members and others who had direct contact with male foreign fighters during their preparation for departure to Syria (Weggemans et al., 2014). These authors used their findings to fictitiously document the life stories of five Dutch foreign fighters who travelled to Syria. However, these reports do not discuss the limitations when employing media interviews or interviews with family members to understand the motivations of others. It is methodologically problematic as they have not been able to discuss the issues with the foreign fighters themselves. There are likely differences between the foreign fighters' perspectives and the perspectives of their family members. In contrast, this article critically assesses the challenges arising when employing the narratives of family members who have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. It employs a narrative methodology enabling a focus on the relatives' lived experiences.

Literature on family and violent extremism

Few of the identified reports examine the experiences of family members of foreign fighters. Based on media analysis, Maher and Neuman (2016) discuss the experiences of

East Policy; The Soufan Group; International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence; Institute for Strategic Dialogue; Brookings Institution et.al.

family members of IS recruits from 17 different countries. It reports that the family members experienced pain, caused by a deep sense of loss and bereavement. Some family members felt anger and shame, because they felt responsible for their family members' actions, and several were surprised by their relative's departure.

Because research on the family members of foreign fighters has been limited, it is necessary to understand the phenomenon through studying literature about families and violent extremism in general, and violent Islamist extremism specifically. Research based on right-wing, left-wing, and Islamist violent extremism shows that problems in the family environment can encourage youngsters to join violent extremist groups (Lützing, 2012; Sieckelinck and Winter, 2015). These problems include parental divorce, an absent father, lack of emotional support, psychiatric issues, violence, illness, or deaths of close relatives (Sieckelinck and Winter, 2015). Studies on the family backgrounds of Norwegian and Danish foreign fighters who have travelled to Syria show that some of these factors applied in almost half of the known cases (Ankestyrelsen, 2015; PST, 2016). Lützing (2012) demonstrates that young people in need of belonging can sometimes find a surrogate family in violent extremist groups.

An important tendency within violent Islamist extremist groups is that family members increasingly recruit each other (Bakker, 2006; Hafez, 2016; Harris-Hogan, 2014; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008; Roy, 2016; Sageman, 2004). Hafez (2016) calls this *kinship radicalization*. Improved intelligence services have made it hard for individuals to recruit outsiders, and so they have instead focused on their own family members. Examples include the perpetrators behind the Boston Marathon attack in 2013, and several of the perpetrators of the Paris and Brussels attacks in 2016. Bergen, Schuster and Sterman (2015, p. 3) claim that one-third of those who joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups have a "familial connection" to jihad through relatives currently fighting in Syria or Iraq, through marriage, or through links to jihadi fighters from prior conflicts or terrorist attacks.

It is essential to point out that the recruitment of family members and friends from Europe joining Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups mostly occurs within the same generation. Research from the Netherlands indicates that parents mostly oppose it (Bakker et al., 2013; Weggemans et al., 2014). Roy (2016) calls this rupture between the first and second generation of immigrants a *generational revolt*. He argues that after radicalizing, second-generation Muslims and native converts (non-Muslim European converts) are making a break with their parents, their culture, and their religion, while parents oppose and try to prevent this revolt. Roy (2016, p. 2) argues, that a key factor in this generational revolt is the “transmission of a religion that is culturally integrated”.

Families tend to leave religious education to the mosque, giving their full trust to the religious education taught there (Ahmed and Weine, 2012; Andre et al., 2015; Dalgaard-Nielsen and Larsen, 2015). As young Muslims lack religious education from their parents, they are unable to question extremists’ views if they enrol into a religious group that promotes such beliefs. Research shows that enrolment into violent Islamist extremist groups often cause isolation from families (Bakker, 2006; Leiken, 2012; Lützing, 2012; Roy, 2016; Sageman, 2004; Silke, 2008). Dalgaard-Nielsen and Larsen (2015) explain that young individuals who experience a split between their parents’ cultural background and the Danish context can find a cultural and religious identity through an extreme interpretation of Islam.

On the practical and political level, an increasing number of initiatives have been launched that include families in efforts to counter violent extremism and radicalization. Authorities (social services, governmental projects, domestic initiatives) encourage relatives and friends to contact them if they fear that someone is in danger of radicalization (Gielen, 2015). Examples of political initiatives include: the Scandinavian Action Plan for preventing radicalization and violent extremism; the Aarhus-approach against radicalization, which aims to advise family members of youth who have travelled to Syria or who are in danger of becoming foreign fighters in Syria; Hayat in Germany; and the network “Families Against Terrorism and Extremism” in Europe and North Africa.

Although there is limited research exploring how families should best be included in

efforts to prevent violent extremism (Gielen, 2015), the importance of these initiatives is discussed from a research perspective in a growing body of literature (Gielen, 2015; Koehler, 2015a; 2015b; 2017; Ranstorp and Hyllengren, 2013). These works focus on family counselling and how family members should be involved to prevent violent extremism and radicalization. Koehler (2017, 2015a) argues that families and their social networks are important in terms of understanding pathways into violent extremism, identifying early signs of radicalization, as well as intervening before an individual commits an act of terrorism. For this reason family and friends can be valuable for early prevention work (Koehler, 2017). Employing experiences from family counselling programs in Germany, Koehler (2015b) states that in regard to foreign fighters, these programs firstly aim to prevent the individual from joining Salafi-jihadi groups. Secondly, they motivate those who have left to return home. Thirdly, they facilitate the process of deradicalization and help the individual to reintegrate back into the society. Koehler (2015b, p. 9) concludes that family counselling programs “used as deradicalization tools may be considered the most innovative approach that has been designed in the field during the past few years”.

However, a recent study exploring the role that parents and family dynamics play in radicalization and deradicalization shows that former extremists and their families only recognized an indirect influence of parents (Sikkens et al., 2017). This conclusion was drawn from qualitative interviews with former extremists involved in right-wing, left-wing and Islamist extremism. These authors argue that a difficult family situation may influence radicalization processes. For this reason it is necessary to support parents and provide them with more knowledge about radicalization and teach them tools to prevent it.

Methodology

To be able to critically analyse how the lived experiences of family members can be included in efforts to counter violent extremism, this article analyses the lived experiences of family members of Scandinavian women who have joined Salafi-jihadi groups. In order to be able to carefully study the issue, it employs three interviews, conducted in Norway, Sweden

and Denmark between 2015 and 2016. The languages spoken in these three countries were used during the interviews. The small number of named informants allowed an in-depth focus on their narratives. As Riessman (1993, p. 69) points out, narrative analysis “is not useful for studies of large numbers of nameless subjects, as it requires attention to speech, organization of response, local contexts and social discourses”.

Interviews took on average 90 minutes and were held in public coffee shops at the request of the participants. Despite the sensitivity of the issue, informants gave permission for the interviews to be recorded. They were subsequently transcribed. Recording and transcribing are essential to narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993), and contribute to its trustworthiness (Webster and Mertova, 2007). The recordings were useful when analysing the interviews, as they enabled analysis of nuance and intonation to derive additional meaning, as advised by Hermanowicz (2002). To make participation less challenging for the informants, insight from Dyregov’s (2004) article about bereaved parents’ experience of research participation was employed. For instance, I changed the topic if I realized that some issues were too painful to talk about. Rather than meeting the families with prejudice, I tried to express sympathy, recognizing that the conversations may bring up difficult memories.

The process of gaining access to relatives of women who have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups was the most challenging part of the research. The challenge of obtaining access to family members of militant Islamists groups is discussed by several terrorism-researchers (Dolnik, 2013; Hemmingsen, 2011; Speckhard, 2009). For this reason, limited research about violent Islamist extremism is based on interviews with the people involved, themselves (Dolnik, 2013). Because of their family member’s participation in Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups, relatives typically feel the need to live with secrecy, suspicion and clandestine activity. Most relatives do not want to talk; it is stigmatised that Scandinavian women have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Women in the IS-territory in particular threaten to stop keeping in touch with their families if they broach the subject openly to others. Some relatives have told their extended family members that their children are studying abroad, to avoid shame, while others fear threats from IS. If their family members have died, grief makes talking even more

difficult. Initially, I thought governmental actors and community workers would be good gatekeepers and I contacted them in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Although some had established contact with family members or foreign fighters in Syria, they were not willing to facilitate contact, arguing that their commitment to confidentiality meant they could not expose anyone, and that they were not willing to destroy established support relationships. Contact is also sensitive because many relatives do not have any interest in talking to authorities, as they feel they have received no support from them.

I also contacted support networks for parents, but they did not want to assist. After many unsuccessful attempts, I established contact with three informants: one via a journalist, one through an NGO, and one during a conference. The research process showed that the Scandinavian relatives had limited contact with each other. Therefore, employing a gatekeeper, as suggested by O'Reilly (2012) did not facilitate access to new informants.

Ethical considerations were the main priority for the study. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees. In each case, interviewees were informed about the purpose of the research, and the risks and benefits of participation were explained. It was clarified that interviewees could withdraw their participation at any time, and that anonymity was assured. To protect the informants' anonymity, their names and other basic information that would make them easily identifiable was changed (for example, country of origin, current country and city of residence, as well as the year their relative travelled to Syria). Analysing the informants' narratives showed that the country of residence had minimal influence on their experiences. Focusing on Scandinavia as a whole increased the possibility of reaching informants and increased the possibility of anonymity.

Limitations

As I only discuss the lived experiences of a limited number of female family members, the research cannot be generalised. Instead, the analysis is a point of departure for further research. For this reason, the article does not aim nor claim to generate objective or general

knowledge about the families of Scandinavian foreign fighters. Further, it is necessary to interview family members of men to highlight gendered differences further.

The informants participating in this study belong to a specific group, who have chosen to be open about the fact that their female family members have become foreign fighters. This has likely influenced the outcome. The time and point of the interviews have affected the generated data. The informants' family members had travelled to Syria two or three years previously. It seemed that the informants wanted to highlight the consequences that this decision had for the relatives, and how support was to be given to them. Further, they hoped that their story would prevent other families from experiencing the same situation. This likely influenced the narratives. There are likely some relatives adhering to a Salafi-jihadi ideology, who encouraged their relatives to join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Their stories would have been different. In fact, other researchers who have met family members of male foreign fighters have described that to some extent they were proud that their sons had decided to do something meaningful in their lives and decided to make Jihad.

Riessman (2012) discusses how personal narratives can be analysed performatively, emphasizing that when we tell stories about our lives we perform our preferred identities. Hence, informants negotiate how they want to be understood by the stories they develop, and do not reveal everything as they perform a preferred self, "selected from the multiplicity of selves that individuals switch as they go about their lives" (Riessman, 2012, p. 705). As discussed later, parents portray themselves as victims and blame others for the women's decisions. Therefore, there is potential for biases in the generated data.

Analytical Framework

To analyse the interviews, I employed the narrative methodology of 'narrative inquiry', a methodology for studying lived experience (Clandinin, 2006). Narrative inquiry values individual lived experience as a source of insight (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007) and is

useful for studying traumatic life experiences (Riessman, 2012). As the article later shows, it is a traumatic experience when a female family member joins a Syrian Salafi-jihadi group.

To be able to analyse the lived experiences of the family members, this study in particular employs narrative positioning theory. Positioning can be seen as a dynamic alternative to the static concept ‘role’ and is a discursive construction of personal stories, making peoples’ actions understandable (Harré and Langenhove, 1998). This enables an investigation of how family members position themselves, the women and the broader social context in their lived experiences. This enables a critical analysis of how the family members’ lived experiences can be used to understand the foreign fighter phenomena. Through analysing the family members’ narratives focusing on positioning theory, it is possible to discuss some of the challenges arising when employing family members’ stories to understand radicalization.

Introducing the Family Members in the Study

In what follows, the informants in the study are introduced briefly, before the narratives are analysed more closely.

Alia, about her sister who was killed in Syria

‘Alia’ is a woman in her late twenties. Some years ago, her sister Sara, then in her late teens, suddenly travelled to Syria, where she worked as a volunteer for a group that is likely connected to the Al-Nusrah front. Their family came to Scandinavia from a war-torn Muslim country when she was a child, and she grew up among six siblings. Although Alia’s parents were divorced when she was a child, she describes a happy childhood with caring parents. Both she and her sister Sara had a special relationship with their father, who died of cancer seven years ago. Alia is a devout Muslim and she expresses gratefulness towards her father having taught her about Islam, tolerance and respect for other religions. Alia’s other siblings work, while Alia is studying subjects at a high school level so she is able to enter her desired field of studies.

Alia describes Sara as a talented girl with top grades. When Sara was 16 years old, she married a very religious Arab. They later divorced after Sara realized that the man was already married and had children. Sara became a part of a Salafi youth network in her hometown six or seven months before she travelled to Syria. She was introduced to the network through a friend, They both went together to Syria. The authorities have told Alia that her sister was likely killed four weeks after her arrival in Syria.

Rosa's story: Contact with Scandinavian IS supporters and her niece in Syria.

'Rosa' is of Scandinavian origin and has children herself. Rosa's niece, Lisa, joined IS some years ago, taking her young son with her. Rosa and Lisa are close, and Lisa often stayed with Rosa as a child. Lisa had a challenging childhood. Her father lives in the Middle East, has a new family and they do not have any contact. Lisa was placed in foster home care as a child. She has a son with a Muslim husband, but they later divorced. Lisa's mother was a Muslim convert, but Lisa was not a practising Muslim until her mother died after a long illness. Lisa was forced to move out from the apartment she had shared with her mother and she had no job or kindergarten position for her son. According to Rosa, this caused a personal life crisis for Lisa. After some time, she became a part of a female Salafi group on social media and she also met people from the group in person. Then she suddenly moved to IS territory. When I interviewed Rosa, she and Lisa were often in contact via social media. Rosa and her family have tried to convince Lisa to travel home. Rosa has been in contact with other women in Scandinavia who give her updates about Lisa, or who ask her to send things to Lisa. Rosa positions herself as a caring aunt in this story, someone who cares about Lisa and tries to support her from Scandinavia. Since Lisa left, there have been conflicts between Rosa and her siblings, who find it problematic that Rosa has sometimes chosen to talk openly about Lisa's decision to travel to Syria. They believe it endangers the family in Scandinavia.

Jacob's narrative: Risking his life to get his daughters home again

'Jacob' came to Scandinavia from a war-torn Muslim country twenty years ago, with his young children and wife. He has several children and describes his family as normal

Scandinavians who lived a happy life without worries. This changed drastically when his daughters suddenly travelled to Syria to join IS. His oldest daughters had become part of a Salafi youth network some years before they travelled to Syria. He has since travelled to Syria several times to try to force them to return to Scandinavia. Jacob positions himself as the hero in the story, trying to save, in his own words, his “naive and brainwashed” daughters. According to him, being open about their story is a way to process that his daughters left. However, it has come with a price. He has received several unpleasant phone calls and has experienced physical attacks in his own home. Jacob fears he is being monitored by IS. The first time I contacted him, he requested that I send him a message with my phone number prior to the call. He does not answer the phone unless he knows the person behind the call.

Analysis: Can relatives’ stories explain why the women became foreign fighters?

I now move on to analyse the family members’ narratives. The analysis focuses on the insights gained from the narratives and the implication of this, to understand how family members should be included in efforts to prevent violent extremism.

The women as victims

In spite of the fact that these narratives show that every story is unique, the family members’ narratives have commonalities. The way they position the women in their narratives show that they blame people other than themselves and the women for their decision to join Salafi-jihadi groups. Rosa positions her niece as innocent, through saying that Lisa had lost her grip on life and that Lisa was ‘brainwashed’. Jacob also described his daughters as having been brainwashed: he portrays them as victims rather than as women with agency. He says:

Not all people can be brainwashed, but my daughters were sensitive and easy to brainwash. They travelled to Syria because they were brainwashed. When they travelled, they sent an email saying they wanted to help the Syrian civil

population. However, no one helps the Syrian civil population. I experienced myself that everyone kills them (...). After you become brainwashed, there is a well-established network helping you to travel to Syria. It is only a one-way ticket.

Alia does not understand why her sister travelled:

I don't know why she went. She didn't have any problems at home. She was talented. She grew up here (...) She wanted to become a lawyer to help people without a voice. It doesn't make sense that she just travelled that way (...) In Syria she worked as a volunteer in a camp, helping orphans.

The word 'brainwashing' is a simplified and reductionist explanation, positioning the women as victims rather than women acting of free will (Richardson, 2015). There are likely several reasons for why the family members position the women as victims. Portraying the women as victims is a coping strategy. Positioning is used to cope with difficult life situations (Harré and Langenhove, 1998). Employing 'brainwashing' and victimhood as an explanation resonates with the work of central critics within feminist studies, who highlight that women are usually portrayed as victims of violence rather than as perpetrators of violence (Auchter, 2012). These women may also be causing harm and their families seem to ignore that fact. The way the family members position the women as victims within their narratives is in stark contrast as to how IS and other Salafi-jihadi groups portray women. The groups emphasise that women are political agents, although they forbid them from taking part in combat (Aasgaard, 2017; Bloom, 2011; Hemmingsen, 2014; Lahoud, 2014). They are portrayed as essential for building the new state through being mothers and teaching their children about religion (Aasgaard, 2017; Hoyle et al., 2015; Smith and Saltman, 2015; Winter, 2015). The way the relatives solely position the women as victims demonstrates that the relatives' narratives are influenced by other interests or emotions rather than providing an objective explanation of the women's motivation for leaving.

The family members' narratives and explanations have been a way of coping with the fact that their female family member has left them. Through blaming others, families try to ameliorate their pain. However, this does not solely apply to women. As discussed previously, a report based on media analysis of the family members' narratives also revealed that family members tended to emphasise that "others" caused their children to become foreign fighters (Maher and Neuman, 2016).

Employing the 'victimhood rhetoric' can also be a part of the family members' defence mechanism, in case of later prosecution. According to Scandinavian law, women are perceived as active supporters, even if their primary role in Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups is to marry and raise children. These women face prosecution upon return to Scandinavia.

Although the family members position the women as victims, their narratives show that the women were actors in their own lives. This is especially apparent because the women travelled to Syria and did not want to return, in spite of familial pressure. This is in contrast with the way the family members position the women, and the family members' description of the women's actions. Alia uses her sister's own words to explain why she went:

Sara said: "I am doing well. I haven't come down here to harm anyone. I have come down here by my good heart. I want to help children who have lost their parents (...) I want to use the life I have left to help people." I asked her: "Have you been married there? Did you travel because of a man?" She swore: "No, I haven't", she said and repeated it several times. In our family, we only swear if we mean it. My mother cried and said: "Come back (...) what are you doing down there?" And then Sara said, "No, I am here now. I am doing good deeds. I am helping children (...) I really wish that you could forgive me. I know that what I did was wrong, but I did it for my own sake. I didn't do it to harm you." Alia: "At home my mother was very upset, causing her to become sick. I told Sara that she had to come back." Sara said: "No, I won't come back."

This part of the article has illuminated why it is problematic to use family members as a primary source when investigating *why* women join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Through focusing on the relatives' victimhood rhetoric and defence mechanisms, it raises questions when the media and research employ family members' narratives as a primary source in attempting to understand why youngsters become foreign fighters in Syria. The family members' narratives are influenced by their coping strategies in dealing with the often sudden departure of a beloved family member.

Standing on the outside

The women's contact with a Salafi-network in their home country prior to departure to Syria is an essential part of the relatives' positioning of the women within their narratives. Although relatives knew the women were a part of these networks, they were shocked when they realized the women had joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. In order to analyse why it was challenging for family members to discover the women's plans to eventually leave their families, I use Lindekilde and Bertelsen (2016) interdisciplinary theory about the mobilization of foreign fighters.

This theory combines three different theories: life psychology, social movement theory, and group psychology (Lindekilde et al., 2016; Lindekilde and Bertelsen, 2016). Life psychology makes it possible to examine the risk factors in the environment of foreign fighters. It is based on the assumptions that people seek to create a stable life, called 'life embeddedness' (Lindekilde et al., 2016). People experience threats to their life embeddedness if they lose their grip on life as a result of exclusion, non-recognition, loss of relatives or economic crisis. While most people who experience threats to their life embeddedness manage to re-establish embeddedness, these authors argue that in rare cases, "the search to re-establish life embeddedness can lead to political or religious radicalization" (Lindekilde et al., 2016, p. 861).

The social movement theory shows how contact between youngsters and an Islamist environment is established. It can be facilitated by three mechanisms: social selection,

organizational recruitment, and self-selection. *Social selection* occurs through social relations with friends or family who are involved in violent Islamist extremist groups and can offer individuals a means of re-establishing life embeddedness by joining the same group (Lindekilde et al., 2016). *Organizational recruitment* involves the recruitment of youngsters via different outreach activities, for instance through Quran lessons and social media. Lastly, the mechanism of *self-selection*, involves individuals seeking out violent Islamist extremist groups themselves, triggered by framing activities such as media influence (Lindekilde et al., 2016).

A final theoretical contribution is offered by psychological insights into the development of group dynamics. Group membership can bring about group polarization, as members increasingly align their ideas and beliefs (Lindekilde et al., 2016). Over time, group members become increasingly certain of their beliefs, making relations with people outside the group more and more difficult (Lindekilde et al., 2016). Membership in a group gives people a feeling of a belonging, reduced uncertainty and renewed life embeddedness (Lindekilde et al., 2016). This theoretical contribution illuminates why it can be challenging to understand group processes and dynamics, if you are not a group member yourself. It offers a new perspective on family members' lack of understanding of their relatives' decision to become a foreign fighter.

Applying Lindekilde's and Bertelsen's theory to family members' narratives reveals that their experiences provide some insight, although limited, into what caused the women to leave. Life psychology theory suggests that both Rosa and Alia's female relatives faced potential challenges to their sense of life embeddedness. Yet this does not seem to have happened to Jacob's daughters. Alia's sister lost her father early in her life and she experienced a dramatic divorce. Rosa believes that her niece sought out a religious environment because she had faced crises in life (in that she grew up without a father, and lost her mother and her home). However, as we have not heard Lisa's explanation it is impossible to draw any conclusion. Rosa says:

When her mother died, she felt guilty. I think that she tried to calm herself down, because she never grieved over her mother (...) She didn't have a job, and then she became homeless when her mother died (...) During one month, she lost her mother, and then she lost her home. She had no kindergarten for her son. Then there is no hope (...) Then you are easy to influence. She didn't cry at all when her mother died. She just closed down. She went to a Salafi-group for women on social media. At this time, she became more and more religious. She went into the Quran totally (...) She got in touch with these people, and also travelled to meet them physically (...) She broke contact with her previous friends (...) It was like she started a breakup, to be able to travel to Syria.

The social movement theory is applicable to these cases. Alia's narrative shows that Sara started attending the mosque because of a friend, with whom she also travelled to Syria. Jacob explained that one of his daughters started to attend a Salafi network, and that her little sister joined the group after some time. This is an example of Hafez's (2016) concept of *kinship radicalization*, in which family bonds can facilitate recruitment into violent Islamist extremist groups. Alia's and Sara's situations differ, in spite of the fact that they are sisters: Only Sara became involved in the network. There may be many reasons for this. Alia is older and the fact that she was a mother was important for her identity. In Lisa's case, *the mechanism of self-selection* brought her into contact with a group of Salafi. Rosa believes that Lisa established contact with them herself through a female Salafi group on Facebook.

Finally, the psychology of group dynamics help explain the women's decision to leave. Family members perceive that the women's encounters with these networks changed them prior to departure. All began wearing the Niqab and immersed themselves deeper into the religion. However, as the only informant in the study Alia became suspicious:

The only thing you could see were her eyes. You could not see her fingers anymore (...) She started to cover everything. I knew that something was going

to happen (...) I saw that she came to this mosque, where several people before her had already travelled to Syria. That mosque is not good. I know it is God's apartment, but there are people in the mosques with intentions that I do not support. Every time I mention it, I feel very cold inside.

Nevertheless, Alia does not understand why her sister made the decision to travel to Syria.

It doesn't make sense that she just travelled that way (...) We didn't know it was going to happen (...) However, once or twice I thought, and asked her: "Are you going to travel?" She denied it, saying: "I would never do that. Do you think I am crazy?" I told my mother to talk to her, warning her that she might be one of those travelling to Syria. My mother asked her: "Are you going to travel somewhere?" My sister said: "No, it is only my sister, who wants to create problems for me". Then I thought: "No, it is only me then, who is too worried".

Of the interviewed family members, only Alia had some insight into how the network that her sister was a part of facilitated her travel. She describes that it was due to her young age, because her sister was befriended by a girl and because of a particular man in the mosque. After her sister left, Alia was told that this man convinced and helped several women, not only Sara and her friend, to travel to Syria:

In this mosque, there was an Arab man who influenced the women. He brought the women to Syria. I call him a crazy man: he has seven, eight children (...) He didn't send his own children, but other parents' children (...). His children are still here. I call that egoistic (...) Of course; the police was keeping an eye on him. He said: "It is not me! It is only random that we were on the same plane." But here in Scandinavia, it is what it is like. If there is no clear proof, you can't get arrested.

Although the relatives saw that the women were exhibiting a more Salafi interpretation of Islam, the concrete events within the groups are unknown for the relatives and they did not realise the seriousness of the issue. As Lindekilde et al. (2016) show, departure to Syria as an option is likely established via mechanisms in the group interaction. As group dynamic developments involve closed group interactions, it is impossible for outsiders to understand its influence. For this reason, relatives did not discover the women's intentions to join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups, blaming themselves for not understanding it before it was too late. Jacob's quote highlights this:

They started wearing Niqab three months before they travelled. During this time, they became brainwashed. I understood something was wrong with them, but unfortunately, I did not understand what.

In fact, Jacob was uncertain about whether or how the mosque they attended influenced his daughters, and mentioned that the Internet likely played a role without providing any details.

This network is dangerous because they invite famous imams. I am not pleased with the way they hold lectures or discuss Islamic issues. My oldest daughter was active there for one or two years (...) Whether they knew or not (that the girls were going to travel), it is an institution which creates a good platform for recruitment (...) It is up to the authorities to make closer investigation, not me (...) However, mostly it was through the Internet.

It was therefore difficult for the family members to assess the influence of the groups. It is possible that these groups changed the women's perspectives on their lives to the extent that a life in Scandinavia was no longer perceived as meaningful, and that they therefore sought other alternatives.

An interesting factor is that the relatives did not have the experience that the women's

involvement in these networks caused isolation from their families. This contrasts with other published research (Bakker, 2006; Leiken, 2012; Lindekilde et al., 2016; Lützing, 2012; Roy, 2016; Sageman, 2004; Silke, 2008). Neither did relatives experience a generational revolt between them and the women, such as that described by Roy (2016). Instead, the relatives had the experience of the women trying to act normal and deliberately hiding the fact that they planned to leave for Syria. This may indicate a gendered difference between foreign fighters. In retrospect, Alia was the only informant who understood that her sister's strange behaviour the weeks before she left were acts of preparation for travelling to Syria.

Two weeks before they left, my sister and her friend bought many clothes (...). They said they were collecting donations for children in Syria, because at that time there was a snowstorm in Syria. I said: "Oh, you are so kind." But no. Their bags were packed in the other friend's apartment, as her parents were not at home. They had planned everything in her friend's home. If they had lived with me, I would have discovered their plan. The mother of the other girl said the same. "If I had only understood. I could not understand that this was going to happen."

So far, I have discussed why it is problematic that the family members' stories are used as primary sources to explain the motivation of foreign fighters by the media and in research. The first part showed that family members' narratives are influenced by coping strategies to handle the pain, caused by the women's departure. The other part analysed why it is difficult for family members to understand the process occurring prior to the women's departure. This should influence how media and research manage these occurrences, and how they used their experience in efforts to counter violent extremism.

The role of the family in efforts to counter violent extremism

As previously discussed, a second approach to family members is taken by political initiatives that increasingly aim to include families in effort to prevent violent extremism. To understand how the family members' lived experiences can be utilized to improve family-

directed initiatives in efforts to counter violent extremism, it is necessary to analyse how the women's travel influenced family members.

The family members claim that they opposed the women's travel decisions. Further, they say they would have done everything to prevent them from travelling if they had realized it in time. The three cases show that the family members were in despair as to the women's choices and it influenced the families severely. Jacob's family has fallen apart. For Alia's family, it was a stigma that the sister had decided to travel. Alia expresses that the family feels guilty, because they did not do anything to prevent the sister from travelling.

My family does not want to talk about it. I need to get something of it out (...)
It is a forbidden issue. My brothers do not even want to comment on it (...) It feels like we have all let her down. Maybe if we had opened our eyes, then we could have prevented her from going. In our culture, the boys have a lot of responsibility.

Rosa's family has turned its back on her since she spoke publicly about her story:

After I openly shared my story, my relatives turned their backs on me. My siblings don't talk to me. They have "terminated" our sisterhood. They believe that I am exposing them to danger (...) They think IS will hurt them. They say they will change their children's surnames.

Parts of the family members' narratives show that they have the potential to contribute importantly to efforts aimed at countering violent extremism. For instance, both Rosa and Jacob have decided to share their story to prevent others from travelling. Being open about their stories has been problematic. Both have experienced threats. Jacob says:

There is someone who is following and gathering information for IS (...) After they attacked our apartment, I decided to keep a low profile (...) Because it is not only about me (...) I can't afford to lose my son. I have already lost my

two daughters, so I can't also lose my son (...) After they attacked our apartment, my son got frightened. He is still afraid of visiting me.

These families feel abandoned by society. As the growing body of literature on family counselling shows, family support programs can be effective tools in helping families to prevent radicalization (Koehler, 2015a; 2015b; 2017; Ranstorp and Hyllengren, 2013). In the cases of the informants in this study, family members might have been able to prevent the young women from leaving if they had been included in programs aimed at preventing violent extremism. This suggests that families can do more than tell their story, but can actually help by intervening. The literature shows that support from authorities is necessary to help family members play a decisive role in efforts to counter violent extremism. Alia is the only one who feels that the authorities have tried to help them. She has participated once in a family support group, stating:

I participated only one time. I was not able to do it anymore. Because the others cried so much and were so sad. It also made me cry (...). It was hard to meet other people who have lost their family members to the war. Someone is still talking to his or her children, but they do not want to return. But when they say: "my child is down there. I have talked to him, but he does not want to come home." Then you get a knife in your heart. Imagine your child telling you: "I don't want to return. Forget me. Forget that I have existed." That is what they tell their parents. Imagine that your child tells you that.

Other family members in this study feel isolated. A support system for family members whose relatives have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups exists and works well in some cities, for instance Aarhus in Denmark. In other Scandinavian cities family members receive limited support, in spite of political initiatives paying increasing attention to families. Jacob explains:

It is disappointing that our authorities do not want to do anything to stop people from leaving. They have the capacity, but in reality, it is just like “go, go, I don’t see you.” My daughters went from the airport here. A young girl with Niqab travelling to Turkey, and you are a policeman. Then it is just to stop her, call me and say: “I have your daughter here”.

Although family members wanted to do everything in their power to stop their women from joining Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups, research shows that families have limited influence on family members after they have joined violent extremist groups (Sieckelinck and Winter, 2015). This was also the case for the family members interviewed for this study. These women decided to join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups against their families’ wishes, and they did not want to return. Both Jacob and Rosa have tried to encourage their female relative to return. Jacob has travelled to Syria, and Rosa has tried to raise funds. Jacob says:

I am willing to work hard, and I will not give up getting my daughters back home. I hope it will be very soon.

A very interesting aspect of Rosa’s story is that “sisters”, IS-supporters in Scandinavia, have contacted her on social media sites asking for news about Lisa or have given Rosa updates about her. These people know someone, who knows someone in Syria. On one occasion, one of these sisters wanted Rosa to send things to Lisa in IS-held territory in Syria. She reads one of these messages during the interview:

I am not going down, but a friend of mine is going to travel. I can’t say exactly when, because it will create problems for the sister. But, inshallah. Soon. Can you send the items with mail?

It is unknown how frequently relatives are in touch with IS supporters. However, it indicates that relatives gain a network, which domestic initiatives can engage with to prevent others from becoming foreign fighters. If relatives are encouraged to contact relevant governmental

institutions when they realize someone is going to travel, they have the potential to stop others from becoming foreign fighters.

Conclusion: Lesson learnt from the family members' lived experiences

This article has illustrated two ways the experiences of family members of foreign fighters are used in media, research and political initiatives and the problems that arise from such methodologies. Firstly, the narratives of family members are used as an empirical source by media and research to explain why people join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Secondly, political initiatives increasingly wish to include families in efforts to counter violent extremism. I discussed these two approaches through conducting a narrative analysis of the stories of family members of Scandinavian women, who have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups.

Although family members are important voices, the analysis of their narratives show that it is problematic to employ their stories when attempting to understand why youngsters join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. The family members' narratives should primarily be perceived as coping strategies for handling their pain, rather than as witness statements regarding why women join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. This is apparent from the way they depict the women as victims and have all been brainwashed. The family members are in a vulnerable position, coping with the trauma arising from their family member leaving. This influences their narrative. The analysis presented here further shows that family members have limited insight into why their female relatives joined Salafi-jihadi groups. This illustrates that it is problematic in media and research to increasingly rely primarily on interviews with family members to ascertain the motivation of those joining Salafi-jihadi groups.

The narratives explored in this article show that the family members experience sorrow, pain, broken family relationships and threats after their female family members join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. They feel that society has abandoned them. Hence, family members' narratives provide important information as to how it is to be in a family with a

person who has joined Salafi-jihadi groups, which is interesting in itself. Family members should not be seen as simply the source of understanding the foreign fighter phenomenon, but as unique research objects. They do have important experiences, which should inform efforts to counter violent extremism.

The article illuminates that the family members have complex lived experiences. The family members should therefore primarily be perceived as individuals in need of help and support. For this reason, it is important that the authorities try to get in touch with these families. They should ensure that their statements will not be used against them or their children, if their children return to the country and face legal prosecution. Family members can contribute to efforts to counter violent extremism through telling their stories. Ensuring that young people understand that their whole family would be emotionally destroyed and torn apart if they join Salafi-jihadi groups can be an important way of preventing them from actually doing it. Including them in family intervention and counselling programs increases the chance of succeeding in efforts to prevent violent extremism. By understanding the confusion and uncertainty that these families dealt with before their family member left, proactive programs for educational community outreach can be developed. These might give the families and communities tools for identifying serious situations of radicalization, and knowing when to seek outside, professional help.

Areas for further research

This article is a first step in a research debate. The relationship between familial factors and the fact that youngsters join violent Islamist extremist groups is a research area in need of more exploration. It is therefore necessary to interview more family members to draw conclusions as to what role the family plays, as a platform of support, criticism and mobilisation of individuals to counter violent extremism. Hence, there are several opportunities for further research. A useful point of departure is to continue the research on family members of foreign fighters, both in Scandinavia and other European countries. It is necessary to interview family members of male foreign fighters to be able to compare and

contrast the perspectives and highlight gendered differences. It may be useful to conduct interviews with family members, social workers and their friends. Comparing the lived experiences of those who have joined Salafi-jihadi groups with the family members' experiences may also provide new insight. This has the potential to illuminate the differences between the family members' narratives and the narratives of the foreign fighters, which can contribute to new critical perspectives.

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