FAMILY OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

An exploratory study on the role of family members of those who joined jihadist groups

Summary

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ISGA Report

Family of Foreign Fighters
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Summary

In 2012, intelligence and security services issued warnings about Dutch nationals who were leaving the Netherlands to join jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. In the following years, the number of Dutch foreign fighters increased significantly; from a few in 2012 to approximately 300 in 2018 (AIVD, 2018). Recently, a considerable number of (academic) articles has been published on the motives and living conditions of foreign fighters.[1] To date, however, far less research has been conducted into the social environment of these jihadist travelers and, in particular, their families. In this study, consideration is given to the following question: what role and significance do relatives play in the process of a foreign fighter preparing for, traveling to and returning from a foreign conflict where jihadist groups have been active? In addition, in this report, we reflected on the opportunities family members have to intervene and mitigate the risks associated with the process of traveling to and returning from a foreign conflict zone, and the way in which the government can support family members in this context.

Various information sources were consulted during this research. Firstly, a wide literature study was carried out into the possible roles of families in deviant behavior, radicalization and violent extremism. Secondly, consideration was given to national and international policy initiatives in the field of de-radicalization, disengagement and reintegration. Finally, the basis for the empirical part of this study consists of a series of interviews with relatives of (suspected) foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq, a small number of returnees and relevant professionals.

The role of families in radicalization and leaving the country in theory and policy

National and international research demonstrates that only a few studies have concentrated on the role families play when their relatives leave their own country to join an extremist or terrorist group in a foreign conflict. Against this background, we have, therefore, drawn on literature on the role of families in the radicalization and de-radicalization of left-wing, right-wing and jihadist extremists. In this context, we examined the potentially positive as well as the negative influence of families in radicalization, violent-extremism and de-radicalization.

From the literature analysis, it was evident that families can play a role in all phases of radicalization. For example, in early stages, parents can constitute a protective factor if they engage in discussions with their children; this is associated with an authoritative style of parenting. However, they can also foster the radicalization if they share an extremist ideology and pass it on to their children, or if they overtly and actively support their family member in the

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[1] In this study the term 'foreign fighter' refers to individuals who join a jihadist group and are directly involved in the armed conflict as well as to those who fill a more indirect, supportive, role within the group.

radicalization process by offering him or her so-called "moral oxygen". Furthermore, radicalization can be facilitated by absence of any support or control, as well as through actively avoiding the subject. Maintaining extremist ideology can, *inter alia*, be explained by the supportive role that relatives continue to offer the individual concerned. While, in contrast, families can play a protective factor in the de-radicalization process, provided they themselves receive sufficient professional support that offers guidance to both them and their radicalized relative.

Although there are a few academic insights available into the fostering and protective role families play in radicalization and de-radicalization, our empirical knowledge of the families of foreign fighters and returnees is relatively limited (relevant exceptions are Sikkens et al., 2017; Van San, 2017). This research seeks to fill this empirical vacuum.

In addition to the insights acquired from academic literature, the last few years have witnessed the development of an increasing number of (family-related) policy initiatives that focus on preventing and combatting radicalization (Gielen, 2015). For this research, we referred to a number of Europe's most well-known policy initiatives and programs; these policies and programs involved families in the prevention of radicalization, as well as in the stimulation of the processes of reintegration, disengagement and de-radicalization. In particular, attention was paid to policy experiences in which families were involved with the aim of discouraging people joining an (international) extremist movement but also during their return to society.

In first instance, existing programs and initiatives tend to focus on the radicalized individual. However, some also attribute an important role to the parents (and to a lesser degree to other relatives), as it is assumed that they can exert influence on their children. Within these programs, attempts have been made to support these families in various ways; for example, through networks and platforms where concerns can be shared, information meetings about radicalization, assertiveness training and support workers who can personally assist families. As, to date, only a limited evaluation of these programs and initiatives has been carried out, little is known about their effectiveness (Gielen, 2015).

An empirical study of the families of foreign fighters

In order to gain greater insight into the potential role played by the families of foreign fighters in current practice, part of our research involved conducting a number of semi-structured interviews with a total of seventeen relatives of individuals who sympathize (or sympathized) with the conflict in Syria and Iraq (N=2) or who had actually left the Netherlands to join one of these groups (N=15). The relationship between the foreign fighter and the family member being interviewed varied from one family to another. Interviews were carried out with fathers, mothers, and siblings of foreign fighters. In a number of cases, the foreign fighters had children

themselves. In addition to these interviews, we interviewed two returnees. Finally, we consulted two family files. While both interviews and files provided relevant supplementary insights into the role and importance of family members, gaining access to these sources in the short term proved problematic. We also interviewed a broad range of professionals. In total, we talked to 46 professionals from 14 different organizations and eight (academic) researchers who had knowledge and expertise in the field of radicalization and/or foreign fighters; knowledge and expertise that was deemed as very relevant to this research.

Although this research offers relevant empirical insights into a research group that is exceptionally difficult to access (also see Sieckelinck & de Winter, 2015), the methodological approach is not without its shortcomings. The first caveat concerns a selection bias. Relatives were approached on the basis of 'convenience' sampling, which means, *inter alia*, that we only spoke to those family members who were prepared to share their story and experiences with us. Those who we did not approach or, as the case may be, family members who informed us that they did not wish to cooperate with us, may well have had other experiences. Furthermore, a selection effect may have arisen in the context of language, as we only spoke to relatives who had a certain command of the Dutch language. These included Dutch families and Dutch families with a migration background (primarily with a Moroccan background). Consequently, we gained no insight into the role played by families who have no command of the Dutch language. Moreover, it should be emphasized that the research only involved interviews with a limited number of relatives and that these were not necessarily representative of all the families of Dutch (returned) foreign fighters.

In addition, it is important to state that these family members' experiences and stories constitute reconstructions. We asked family members to reflect on events that preceded their relative's decision to leave the Netherlands, as well as to events that occurred at the time of and after their departure. This gives rise to the question as to what extent the interviews with both the relatives and professionals provide a complete reflection of what actually happened. We therefore have focused on their experiences and the way in which each of those interviewed described their role and, in so doing, follow Sandberg's (2010) observation that such narratives are not merely about what is true and what is untrue.

An attempt has been made to overcome these limitations by making use of several data sources (triangulation). Furthermore, we noticed that during the study, a degree of substantive saturation was reached; in both our discussions with family members and the professionals, recurrent and comparable experiences and observations were noticeable. In addition, we learned that the experiences and observations of family members and professionals were frequently of the same nature. Finally, we submitted the research findings to a focus group of five family members and two professionals (of which one family member and one professional

had not previously participated in the research). Focus group members agreed with the research findings. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind the methodological choices made when interpreting the research findings.

The role and importance of families of foreign fighters in practice

The empirical section consists of a broad thematic treatise of the diverse experiences and stories of family members as well as of the professionals' insights in respect of the periods *prior to*, *during* and *after* traveling from the Netherlands to the conflict in Syria and/or Iraq. Due to the explorative nature of this study, this section cannot easily be summarized; consequently, a number of general insights are presented below.

A quick glance at the period *prior to* the departure illustrates that, in several of the cases, there was already a degree of separation (physical or emotional) between family members and the (suspected) foreign fighter. Although the causes differed, as far as most of the relatives were concerned, this separation concealed - in combination with a lack of knowledge - the extent to which the behavior of the foreign fighter had changed. From our conversations with relatives, it became apparent that the majority of family members did not suspect that a member of their family was actually going to leave the country to join a jihadist group, although they suggested that, in hindsight, there were sometimes indications. Moreover, they also suggested that, retrospectively, they most probably would not, on their own, have been able to prevent the person concerned from leaving. In only one case a foreign fighter might have been supported by a family member. Finally, a number of family members admitted that, at the time, they had expressed their anxieties about potential radicalization to other people. And, in some cases, this resulted in painful experiences with the authorities concerned. In the families' opinions, their cases were not always handled satisfactorily. However, at that time, the phenomenon of traveling abroad to join jihadist groups was still a relatively new concept as far as many of the authorities were concerned.

In the period *during* the individual's stay in Syria or Iraq, numerous family members experienced emotional stress. They feared the actions of their relative in Syria or Iraq, and even wondered whether he or she was still alive. In addition, some family members admitted they were concerned that other members of their family could also be radicalized. Furthermore, these relatives often had to deal with a range of practical matters, such as vacating a house or a flat, or cancelling all sorts of subscriptions. In most cases, there was some contact between the foreign fighter and his or her family during this period. In first instance, several family members explicitly attempted to persuade the foreign fighter to return home. However, this frequently led to a heightening tension and eventually to a more superficial form of contact. In this way, the family hoped to keep the door open for a potential return in the future. In two cases, we saw

that, at a later stage, family members used this contact to devise a plan for a homeward journey; a plan that was eventually realized. At the same time, we saw that in the period immediately following their outward journeys, some jihadist travelers tried to persuade other relatives (such as siblings and parents) to travel to Syria or Iraq; and in a number of cases they were successful. In other cases, they actively interfered with the behavior and manner of dressing (which in their view was indecent) of relatives they had left behind.

To date, only a relatively small group of foreign fighters, approximately 50, has returned to the Netherlands (AIVD, 2018). Consequently, any insights into the role of families *after* an outward journey are empirically limited. Most families said that they hoped that the foreign fighter would at some stage return, but were aware that when (or if) that happened a difficult period would ensue. On the basis of the experiences and observations of professionals, it is clear that the roles of families once a foreign fighter returns are extremely varied. The professionals speak of relatives who had very little contact, but also met other relatives who were a rock and refuge to - recent - returnees. These relatives cared for children and grandchildren, offered to help the returnee find an educational program or a job, and even helped arrange legal support and aid by contacting various authorities.

A continuum of three roles

On the basis of insights derived from literature, policy and practice, it appears that families can play three roles in the process of radicalization and traveling to a (jihadist) conflict zone. These roles can be placed on a continuum. At one end of the continuum, the family plays a negative, or *encouraging role*; to a greater or lesser extent, these relatives support the radicalization process or the outward journey or, at a later stage, actually impede their relative's return or reintegration. At the other end of the continuum are the families that form a buffer or act as a protective factor against radicalization or making the outward journey. On their return, such a *restraining role* can actually facilitate disengagement and reintegration. The *encouraging* or *restraining* roles played by relatives are a prominent theme in both literature and policy; similarly, in this study, professionals provided a select number of examples of both roles. In both roles, the influence of family members could be direct but also indirect. Direct influence involves actively and consciously steering relatives in a certain direction. Direct influence within the encouraging role can, for example, include ideological teaching or practical help from members of the family. While, on the other hand, indirect influence is more subtle and generally unconscious. Indirect influences within both extreme roles ensure a more or less fertile ground for an outward journey or an effective reintegration.

Although both roles (*encouraging* and *restraining*) did emerge in the interviews with professionals, in several the cases the role seemed to be more *latent*. This latent role can be

found in the middle of the continuum. Within academic literature considerably less attention is paid to the latent role of relatives prior to, during and after a relative travels to a combat zone. Such a role is characterized by ambivalence and suggests that the relatives only play a remote or concealed role. In such cases, there is a range of different reasons (including financial, relationship or health problems, in combination with physical separation) why the relatives find themselves unable to intervene effectively, or they do not know how to intervene.

These roles have a dynamic nature and, in the course of time, the role played by relatives can change. After becoming aware of the seriousness of the situation, a family member may, for example, attempt to exercise a restraining influence by trying to help their relative, more explicitly keeping an eye on him or her, or raising the alarm with aid agencies or the police. On the other hand, after having had negative experiences with certain agencies or the media, a family member may, for example, increasingly support the foreign fighter. However, sometimes the role development is static. For example, relatives who played a latent role prior to an outward journey, may continue to play this role both during and after the journey.

Intervention opportunities and support

In some cases, relatives were aware of signals that definitely indicated that an outward journey was soon to be embarked on. Against this background, it was possible to enter into a conversation with the individual involved, confiscate his or her passport, report the imminent departure to the police or seek help elsewhere. During our study, a number of situations were mentioned, primarily by professionals, during which relatives were able to intervene both during and after the outward journey. For example, a number of relatives played a relevant role when the foreign fighter returned to the Netherlands, as well as during the subsequent reintegration period. In these examples, not only did relatives provide practical assistance (such as arranging a lawyer, offering accommodation, caring for children and grandchildren), but they also offered an alternative social environment to the returnee. In addition, there are the interventions that may not have had a direct effect, but could very well have had prevented radicalization in the long run., This mainly referred to maintaining effective contact with the (potential) foreign fighter. Positive contacts and positive reminders of relatives can strengthen doubts associated with the radical choices opted for.

At the same time, the research demonstrated that few of the relatives were able to intervene effectively when confronted by a (potential) jihadist journey. Above all and in accordance with the literature (Koehler, 2016; Weggemans & De Graaf, 2017), it is apparent that the positive role that relatives can play is limited when the (potential) foreign fighter is unreceptive to any positive influence from other people. In some cases, parents may undertake momentary action, for example confiscating a passport or contacting government agencies. However, in general, it

would appear that, in the long term, family members cannot enforce de-radicalization or prevent foreign fighters leaving the country. Other identifiable obstacles regarding a relative's intervention opportunities include the limited field of vision (for example, the foreign fighter may no longer live at home or they may carefully conceal their way of life from their families); the limited amount of knowledge available at that time (to both families and professionals) about phenomena such as radicalization and traveling to a jihadist combat zone; the intimate relationships between family members (certain signals may be picked up differently by family members than by the broader environment) and an overall problematic family situation. Finally, interviewed professionals asserted that a small percentage of the relatives in the Netherlands simply did not want to intervene. One reason for non-intervention could be that they stood behind the relative's choice to become a foreign fighter (the encouraging role), but more frequently it was for precisely the opposite reason; they condemned the choice made to such an extent that they no longer wanted to play any part in the foreign fighter's life.

Insights from our study underline how important it is for agencies to make and maintain contact with families dealing with a relative who is becoming (or at risk of becoming) radicalized or a foreign fighter, and provide these families with support. One form of such support is the provision of information. In the first place, many relatives had very limited knowledge of matters such as traveling to a combat zone or being radicalized, nor did they know which agencies they can turn to for assistance. The majority had no relevant contacts who could help them tackling this situation. This corresponds to findings of previous Dutch research into the role of family members in the radicalization process (Sieckelinck & de Winter, 2015; Sikkens et al., 2017). In addition, relatives frequently had a number of questions about the period following a possible return to the Netherlands. And, to be able to fulfil a positive role in the reintegration process, it is essential for families to have knowledge of this phenomenon, as well as opportunities for intervention.

Providing psychological (social and otherwise) and practical support to relatives is vital if future risks are to be limited. On the one hand, such support could help to (partially) remove any prevailing indirect influences that form fertile ground for the radicalization of other family members or an impediment to successful reintegration. On the other hand, when a family member is radicalized or becomes a foreign fighter, this can have a significant practical and psychological impact on other relatives. Practical and psychological support from professionals, but also from people in the same situation or others in their social circle, could possibly moderate this impact.

Moreover, the research also underlines the importance of ensuring the families are more broadly embedded socially. People in a family's immediate environment – who may have greater knowledge or different information – may be able to help the family recognize the processes of

radicalization and preparing to become a foreign fighter. As is applicable in several fields, it is essential that the broader social isolation of families is also tackled in these cases.

It is important that involved professionals take time to consider the treatment of family members both in policy and practice. During this research, various relatives indicated that, over the years, they had had negative experiences with the agencies and professionals involved. Such experiences enhance distrust of government agencies and hinder a willingness to cooperate constructively. However, we would at this stage also like to acknowledge the difficult role of the various agencies that are formally involved. Ultimately, they have to guarantee security and, regularly, the family members concerned make their job far from easy (if not virtually impossible). Nonetheless, in any contact with relatives of foreign fighters and radicalized individuals, it is vital to acknowledge that, in most of these cases, these relatives are victims and not perpetrators.

To conclude

All things considered, this research has revealed that frequently, family members only have a limited direct influence on the (suspected) processes involved in traveling abroad. However, on the contrary, several situations made it apparent that, potentially, there was a high risk that foreign fighters could influence the relatives they had left behind. These relatives were regularly targeted by foreign fighters trying to recruit them to the cause.

In the coming years, it is important that future studies are conducted into the role relatives play and the influence they exert in the processes of radicalization and traveling to combat zones, in a changed and changing context. Currently, a great deal of attention is being paid to policy on foreign fighters, and the level of knowledge of the various agencies and professionals has risen significantly. Furthermore, the level of institutional contact with family members and radicalized individuals is increasing. The question is how such contact with these (difficult-to-reach) families can be given greater substance. Moreover, it is possible that the future will witness more examples of families who have directly encouraged a jihadist radicalization process or an outward journey to a combat zone. Consequently, in the next decades, it is important to carefully monitor potential intergenerational transfer of extremist ideals and behavior within Dutch families.

Finally, within this study, we have considered the role of the families of both men and women who, of their own volition, left the Netherlands to travel to a conflict zone in Syria or Iraq. However, the findings of this research could also be useful in the long term and are not exclusively applicable to the phenomenon of traveling to join a foreign jihadist combat group. Several findings are in line with the results of previous general research into radicalization and provide greater insights into the various roles and experiences of families during the

development of extremist behavior. This research contradicts the assumption that families automatically play a strong role that is either restraining or encouraging; in the future, we will have to acknowledge and deal with the generally latent role that families play.

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