



Pain, Confusion, Anger, and Shame: The Stories of Islamic State Families

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Executive Summary

- For every jihadist that has traveled to Syria, Libya, or other places where the group calling itself Islamic State (IS) has attempted to take root, there is a family affected by what their sons or daughters, brothers or sisters, husbands or wives, have done. Their feelings and reactions are the subject of this paper.
- Instead of simply documenting these stories, our aim was to find out if they can be generalized. Do families who have lost members to IS share certain experiences and emotions? Are there common themes and narratives?
- Based on 46 publicly available accounts of families from 17 countries, we were able to identify four themes. They are:
 - Pain
 - Confusion
 - Anger
 - Shame
- What becomes apparent is how universal – and universally negative – families’ perceptions of their relatives’ actions were, and how little it mattered whether a family was from Tunisia or Turkey, Britain or Bosnia. In many cases, their stories and reactions were interchangeable.
- The families’ determination and emotional strength was deeply impressive. Yet, throughout their experience, many of them also felt helpless, and few had received adequate support or knew of people they could turn to. To us, this seems like a missed opportunity.
- Fighters’ families are among the most powerful assets in the struggle against IS. Their stories highlight the pain and suffering that aspiring jihadists are causing to their loved ones. Families can be key to stopping their sons and daughters from leaving; encouraging them to defect; and helping them re-integrate once they return. They need to be empowered, not left alone.

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Introduction

“She should come back and face the music because she has let herself down. All of us, she’s let us down.”

Victoria Dare, mother of a female jihadist, January 2016¹

Since 2012, more than 30,000 men and women from over 100 countries have become foreign fighters in the Syrian civil war, leaving their home countries to join jihadist² organizations such as the group calling itself Islamic State (IS).³ Others have sworn allegiance to IS or made their way to countries like Libya, where the group is recruiting and training fighters from nearby countries. In terms of scope and numbers, this is the most extensive jihadist mobilization that has ever taken place.⁴

For every jihadist that has gone to Syria, Libya, or other places where IS has attempted to take root, there is a family affected by what their sons or daughters, brothers or sisters, husbands or wives, have done. Their feelings and reactions is what this paper is about.

Just like the stories of IS defectors, which we highlighted in a 2015 report,⁵ the voices of families have become louder and more frequent. Their accounts are often painful to read. With practically no exception, they are stories of anguish, betrayal, and loss. Many of them realize that they will never see their sons or daughters again.

Instead of simply documenting these stories, our aim was to find out if they can be generalized. Do families who have lost members to IS share certain experiences and emotions? Are there common themes and narratives?

Based on 46 publicly available accounts of families from 17 countries, we were able to identify four themes. They are:

- Pain
- Confusion
- Anger
- Shame

What becomes apparent is how universal – and universally negative – families’ perceptions of their relatives’ actions were, and how little it mattered whether a family was from Tunisia or Turkey, Britain or Bosnia. In many cases, their stories and reactions were interchangeable.

1 Cited in Tom Marshall, “Grandmother of ‘Jihadi Junior’ speaks of devastation after recognizing him in IS video”, *Evening Standard*, 5 January 2016.
2 For a definition of the terms jihadist and jihadism, see Peter R. Neumann, *The New Jihadism: A Global Snapshot* (London: ICSR, 2014), pp. 9-10.
3 See “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq”, *The Soufan Group*, December 2015.
4 See Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad”, *International Security*, 35(3) (2010), pp. 53-94.
5 Peter R. Neumann, *Assets, Perpetrators, Victims: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors* (London: ICSR, 2015).

The families' determination and emotional strength was deeply impressive. Yet, throughout their experience, many of them also felt helpless, and few of them had received adequate support or knew of people they could turn to.

To us, this seems like a missed opportunity.

Fighters' families are among the most powerful assets in the struggle against IS. Their stories highlight the pain and suffering that wannabe jihadists are causing to their loved ones.

Families can be key to stopping their sons and daughters from leaving; encouraging them to defect; and helping them re-integrate once they return. In our view, families need to be empowered, not left alone.

Methods

The sample that forms the basis of this report contains the public testimonies of family members of 46 individuals who have left their home countries to become members of jihadist groups participating in the Syrian civil war, and/or join IS (for a detailed breakdown, see Table 1).

Family members have shared their stories and experiences through national media or via family groups, which made it possible for us to collect and analyze them. All testimonies date from the years 2014–2016.

Just under two thirds of the cases are from Western countries (Western Europe, North America, and Australia). Virtually all others are from Muslim majority countries, including Tunisia, Turkey, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. The detailed geographical breakdown is as follows: United Kingdom (11 cases), France (9), Tunisia (5), Belgium (4), Sweden (3), Australia (2), Canada (2), Bosnia-Herzegovina (1), Denmark (1), Egypt (1), Jordan (1), Kenya (1), the Netherlands (1), Russia (1), Saudi Arabia (1), Turkey (1), and the United States of America (1).

Though it tends to be assumed that it is always mothers who speak out on behalf of their sons and daughters, our sample reflects a greater diversity. On their own, mothers provided testimony in less than half of the cases (19). Many testimonies involved fathers (10) and both parents issuing statements or sitting side by side (8). Also represented were siblings (4), spouses (2), and other relatives (uncles, cousins, aunts, grandmothers, and sons).

Limitations

More so than with our 2015 report, we are confident that the sample contains no duplicates and that all testimonies relate to actual, recorded cases of jihadists. Where possible, we corroborated accounts with information held in the ICSR database of foreign fighters. In cases in which the information was impossible to verify, testimonies were excluded.

Similar to the 2015 report, testimonies varied in length and quality. We emphasized collecting long-form visual evidence at the expense of newspaper articles and/or printed interviews, so we could form a better view of context and situation, and be less dependent on journalists' editorial decisions. Even so, in the vast majority of cases, it remained difficult to judge the totality of the testimony, and the coded results may therefore represent only a fraction of the speakers' intended views or feelings.

Furthermore, it is impossible to know how representative our sample is of the Syrian foreign fighter population and/or the views of their families at large. Though 46 is a respectable number compared to the anecdotal nature of individual stories, the more or less random method of collection (that is, googling key words,

following links, tracking key websites, etc.) makes it difficult to judge their significance.

That said, while Western cases are heavily overrepresented, the non-Western testimonies matched those of their Western counterparts. In fact, we were surprised by the extent to which the four themes – pain, confusion, anger, and shame – seem to be universal.

Coding

The coding process started with an empirical probe of 5 cases for which members of the research team were asked to describe speakers' feelings. Following discussion, several of the findings were grouped together (e.g. "shock" and "horror" were merged with "confusion"; "heartbreak" was subsumed under "pain") and a further two ("emotional" and "loss") eliminated for being tautological. The final result were four variables – "pain", "confusion", "anger", and "shame" – for which we (then) coded the entire sample.

Table 1: Overview of Cases

| # | Case ⁶ | Relationship | Country ⁷ | Theme | Source |
|----|-------------------|---------------------|----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| 01 | Abaaoud | Father | BE | Pain, Anger | NYT |
| 02 | Abase | Parents | UK | Pain, Confusion | VICE |
| 03 | Abdalla | Mother | KE | Pain, Confusion | CCTV |
| 04 | Al-Akari | Brother | TU | Anger | Al-Hurra |
| 05 | Al-Ghandour | Mother | EG | Anger | Al-Bald |
| 06 | Al-Jalasi | Mother | TU | Pain, Confusion | Al-Hurra |
| 07 | Al-Tuwaijri | Father | SA | Pain | Saudi Gazette |
| 08 | Asmal | Mother | UK | Pain | SAVE |
| 09 | Baptiste | Father | FR | Pain, Confusion | Stop Jihadisme |
| 10 | Begum | Sister | UK | Pain, Confusion | VICE |
| 11 | Bin Said | Parents, sister | TU | Pain, Anger, Confusion | France 24 |
| 12 | Bons | Mother | FR | Confusion | Stop Jihadisme |
| 13 | Boudreau | Mother | CA | Pain | ISD |
| 14 | Boutaliss | Father | BE | Pain, Confusion | BBC |
| 15 | Dalaeen | Father | JO | Pain | Al-Aan |
| 16 | Dam | Mother | DK | Pain | MSN |
| 17 | Ei-Bathy | Brother | FR | Pain | Stop Jihadisme |
| 18 | Elmir | “Relative” | AU | Anger | Daily Telegraph (AU) |
| 19 | Evans | Mother | UK | Pain | Channel 4 |
| 20 | Fadli | Father | TR | Confusion | IBT |
| 21 | Ghozlani | Parents | TU | Pain, Shame | ARD |
| 22 | Henneghien | Mother | BE | Pain, Confusion | CBS |
| 23 | Hussain | Son | UK | Pain, Confusion | ITV |
| 24 | James | Mother | UK | Confusion | Independent |
| 25 | Kamara | Mother | UK | Pain, Confusion | FAST |
| 26 | Khadijah | Grandmother, mother | SW | Pain | Evening Standard |
| 27 | Khan | Parents | US | Pain, Shame, Confusion | NBC |
| 28 | Lebon | Mother | BE | Pain | Spiegel |
| 29 | Letts | Parents | UK | Pain | Channel 4 |
| 30 | Lina | Mother | SW | Pain, Confusion | TV4 |
| 31 | Maguire | “Relative” | CA | Shame, Anger | CBC |
| 32 | Mahmood | Parents | UK | Shame | BBC |
| 33 | Muathana | Father | UK | Anger | BBC |
| 34 | Nadalha | Parents | NL | Pain, Confusion | Al-Aan |
| 35 | Nehai | Parents | RU | Pain, Confusion | Reuters |
| 36 | Nesemann | Aunt | SW | Pain | TV4 |
| 37 | Rezgui | Uncle, cousin | TU | Pain | AFP |
| 38 | Rhaeim | Wife | FR | Confusion | Stop Jihadisme |
| 39 | Saliha | Mother | FR | Pain | Stop Jihadisme |
| 40 | Sheglabo | Father | AU | Pain | Daily Mail |
| 41 | Shoaib | Husband | UK | Pain | Sky News |
| 42 | Unknown | Father | FR | Pain | TF1 |
| 43 | Unknown | Mother | FR | Pain, Anger | France 2 |
| 44 | Unknown | Mother | FR | Confusion | France Info |
| 45 | Unknown | Father | BH | Shame | Reprezent.ba |
| 46 | Unknown | Mother | FR | Pain | Stop Jihadisme |

⁶ The case name may refer to the family name, the first name of the person who left for Syria, or is listed as “unknown”, where none of these options are available.

⁷ Country names are abbreviated as follows: Australia (AU), Belgium (BE), Bosnia-Herzegovina (BH), Canada (CA), Denmark (DK), Egypt (EG), France (FR), Jordan (JO), Kenya (KE), Netherlands (NL), Russia (RU), Tunisia (TU), Turkey (TR), Saudi Arabia (SA), Sweden (SW), United Kingdom (UK), and United States of America (US).

Results

All 46 testimonies in our sample could be coded for one or several of the themes. The most frequent was pain (34), followed by confusion (19), anger (8), and shame (5) (see Figure 1).

We found no significant geographical variation: families in Western countries reported similar emotional experiences to those in non-Western countries. Even the distribution of “shame” – the variable which some might argue is most likely to produce variation – is in line with the overall sample.

Each of the four themes are explored in greater detail in the following sections.

Theme #1: Pain

Even when the media portrayed them as “monsters”, the families continued to see their loved ones principally as sons and daughters, sisters and brothers. Their immediate and overwhelming emotion was, therefore, a deep and agonizing sense of loss.

According to a father from the United States:

*It's very hard. Our family's not the same anymore... He was the life of our family and [now] he's not there. It's like the whole life has been sucked out.*⁸

This was echoed by an Australian father:

*His mother has not stopped crying since we learnt of this news. I have told her we need to forget about him now... But inside my heart is breaking.*⁹

The process of grieving often involved disappointment and sorrow. In the words of a Saudi father:

*There is nothing more painful in the world than seeing your dreams... turn into a deep wound in your soul... I [am] carrying with me my sorrow and that of my mother and wife.*¹⁰

Equally important was not wanting to see their children, siblings, or spouses being harmed – or be involved in harming others. According to a British mother:

*[If I could say one thing to our son, I would say:] Please come home, I don't want this to end badly, he's our only son.*¹¹

Paradoxically, many parents' emotional experience seems similar to bereavement – except that many of their children are still alive and involved in killing others.

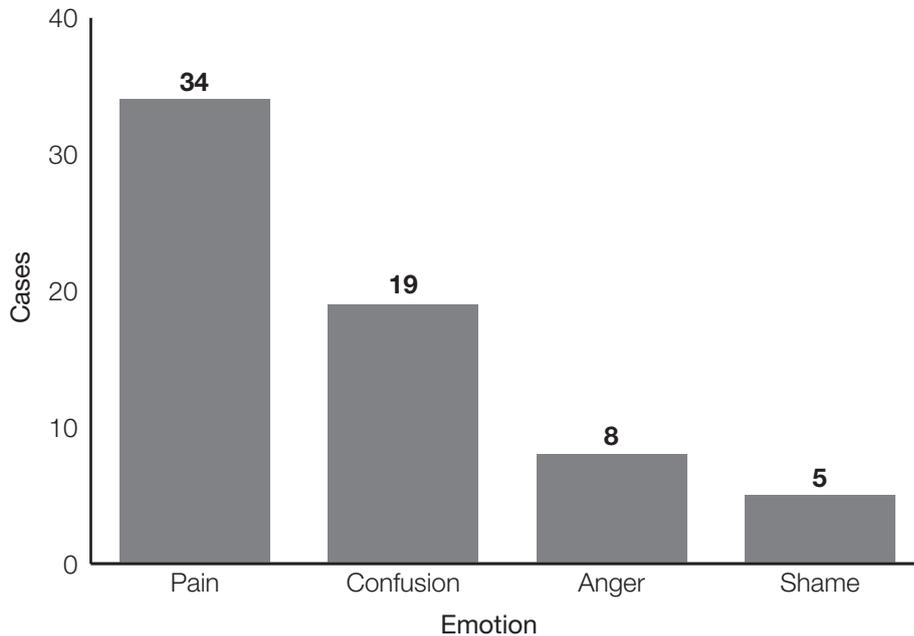
8 Cited in Tammy Leitner and Lisa Capitanini, “Parents of Alleged Terrorist Say Son Was Brainwashed”, *NBC News*, 14 May 2015.

9 Cited in Heather McNab, “His mother has not stopped crying...”, *Daily Mail*, 21 February 2015.

10 Cited in “I'm in sorrow, pain and shock: father of suicide bomber”, *Saudi Gazette*, 4 February 2016.

11 “Jihadi Jack: Parents give first interview”, *Channel 4*, 4 February 2016.

Figure 1: Themes



Theme #2: Confusion

For many families, their relatives' departure came as a surprise. Some of them knew that their son or daughter had been radicalized, but didn't understand what it meant or how far they had progressed. Others say they hadn't noticed at all.

The response was, in many cases, a sense of shock and confusion. In the words of a French father:

And suddenly he disappeared. He was gone. [Some days later] he called and said he was going to Syria... He abandoned us. We didn't understand anything.¹²

Some were in denial. They insisted that their relatives' actions were "out of character" – fundamentally different from the good-natured, kind person they had raised or grown up with.

The comments of a Tunisian mother are typical:

He was a good boy who made an honest living. I do not understand why he would do this.¹³

Others couldn't imagine their relatives being capable of joining a conflict thousands of miles away. According to a British sister:

She just did normal stuff that normal people do. Not in a million years did I think she was going to run off and join ISIS... My first thought was: what the hell is she doing in Turkey? She [didn't even] like to go by herself to ... buy a pint of milk.¹⁴

¹² Cited in "France's new anti-jihadi ads feature mourning families", *Associated Press*, 7 October 2015.

¹³ Cited in "Delusional Paradise", *Al-Hurra*, 5 October 2015; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPiUo_U-ns4.

¹⁴ Cited in "Sister of Jihadi Bride Speaks Out", *Vice*, 6 August 2015; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9ItYz1Ydd4>.

In many cases, feelings of shock and surprise were linked to a sense of helplessness and panic. Some were fearful of being implicated in their relatives' actions, while others went to great lengths to channel their confusion into seemingly constructive action. Among the testimonies in our sample, there are several stories of parents who travelled to Turkey to find their children and bring them back.¹⁵

Theme #3: Anger

For a smaller number of families, the response entailed anger. They were seeking to externalize their pain by blaming outsiders.

A popular accusation was that their relatives had been "brainwashed":

*I don't know who has contacted him, influenced him or who has put these ideas in his head. He has new friends who got him into this.*¹⁶

Others blamed radical preachers. According to a British father:

*Ask those sheiks to send their sons and daughters to fight! They only send other people's children, making a problem for the whole community.*¹⁷

More distant relatives expressed anger at the jihadists themselves. In the words of an unnamed Australian relative:

*What a stupid idiot... I don't know what these kids get into. They don't know how to fight... they should be getting an education and building this country up.*¹⁸

Regardless of target and direction, anger often served as justification and excuse. It may also have been a motivation for going public.

Theme #4: Shame

A handful of the families expressed shame. They felt guilty, humiliated, and – ultimately – considered themselves to be responsible for their relatives' actions.

In some of the testimonies, this was articulated explicitly. According to a British mother, for example:

*All parents want to be proud of their children, but sadly we now feel nothing but sorrow and shame.*¹⁹

A Tunisian father put it as follows:

*I am upset to see those victims. I feel the loss of the families so strongly. I feel like I have died along with the victims. I am so ashamed.*²⁰

15 See, for example, "The Belgian fathers who lost their sons in Syria", *BBC News*, 14 July 2014.

16 Cited in Leitner, "Parents of Alleged", op. cit. See also "Briton's jihad video leaves family 'heartbroken'", *BBC News*, 21 June 2014.

17 "Britain's jihad video leaves family heartbroken", *BBC News*, 21 June 2014.

18 "Aussie 'Ginger Jihadist' Condemned by his Own Family", *New Zealand Herald*, 22 October 2014.

19 "Family of Scots jihadist brand her bedroom radical", *STV*, 4 September 2014.

20 Cited in Rebecca Ratcliffe, "Father of Tunisian gunman Seifeddine Rezgui shocked and ashamed of son", *The Guardian*, 28 June 2015.

Others didn't use the word shame but voiced feelings of remorse. In the words of a Canadian relative:

*You cannot imagine how badly I feel that I did not realize or understand what was going at the time.*²¹

Indeed, the difficulty of expressing shame makes it likely that this experience was not limited to the five cases where we recorded it.

²¹ Cited in "Canadian John Maguire appears in new ISIS video", *CBC*, 8 December 2014.

Recommendations

Families are deeply affected by their relatives' radicalization, especially when it involves going abroad and joining a group like Islamic State. Their stories are highly emotional and often excruciating. They involve feelings of pain, confusion, anger, and shame.

An increasing number of families have chosen to go public and share their experiences. Their activism makes an important contribution:

- It highlights the devastating emotional impact on families and might serve as a deterrent to would-be fighters.
- It creates awareness of the risk of radicalization and encourages other families to seek help.
- It may prompt governments and civil society to give families a more prominent role in counter- and de-radicalization efforts.

Unfortunately, few of the families whose testimonies we studied seem to have received any systematic support or assistance. This, we believe, must change:

- Governments should recognize the value of families in prevention efforts, and systematically review their policies to see how they can be given a more prominent role. Families have the potential to become involved in a whole range of activities, such as peer to peer counselling and training.
- Where possible, governments should support new and existing groups such as Families against Terrorism and Extremism (FATE), which can help channel relatives' emotions into productive directions.

As with the IS defectors (whose stories we covered in a previous paper),²² the families' voices are strong and clear:

*There is no honor, no glory, no God at work in the cowardly massacre of holidaymakers, people at prayer... or an innocent man at his place of work.*²³

They need to be heard.

²² Peter R. Neumann, *Assets, Perpetrators, Victims: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors* (London: ICSR, 2015).

²³ Cited in "From Scottish teen to ISIS bride and recruiter", *CNN*, 24 February 2015.

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