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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A family affair? Exploratory insights into the role of family members of those who joined jihadist groups

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Abstract

Since 2012, thousands of individuals have traveled from Western countries to join jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. While much has been written about these individuals, only sparse attention has been paid to the social environment of these jihadist travelers and, more specific, the role of family members in their radicalization, joining and returning from jihadist groups. In order to gain greater insight into the roles of the families of foreign fighters, we conducted a literature analysis and interviews with both relatives of individuals who left the Netherlands to join a jihadist group, or who had plans to do so, and dozens of professionals who had relevant knowledge and expertise. Our findings contradict the assumption that families automatically play a strong role that is either restraining or encouraging. Rather, the results indicate that the influence of family members is often rather limited and can best be understood as latent and passive. We also found that radicalized individuals themselves regularly try to recruit their family members to the cause. These insights can be an important starting point for further policy development. It highlights that the prevention of radicalization and the fostering of reintegration is a collective effort—rather than an individual responsibility of families. We also conclude that, with the coming of age of the jihadist phenomenon in the West, it is possible that in the future we will witness more cases of families who have directly encouraged a jihadist radicalization process or a journey to a jihadist combat zone in the future. While it is still very uncertain how this will develop in the next decades, more research seems warranted on the intergenerational transfer of extremist ideals and behavior within families living in Western societies.

Keywords Forein Fighters · Radicalization · Jihadism · Families

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Introduction

Since 2012, approximately 4000 individuals have traveled from Western countries to join jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq (ICCT 2016). In the meanwhile, a considerable number of (academic) articles has been published on the motives and living conditions of these so-called 'foreign fighters' (e.g., Benmelech and Klor 2018; Hegghammer 2013; De Bont et al. 2017). To date, however, far less is known about the social environment of these jihadist travelers and, in particular, the role family members played in their radicalization and subsequent joining of jihadist groups. In this study, we sought to fill this empirical void by assessing the following question: how and to what extent do relatives play a role in the process of a foreign fighter preparing for, traveling to, and returning from a foreign conflict where jihadist groups have been active? Against that backdrop, we reflect 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.

The role of families in radicalization

A review of the literature shows that only a few studies have assessed the role families play when their relatives leave their home country to join an extremist or terrorist group in a foreign conflict (e.g., Awan and Guru 2017; Maher and Neumann 2016; Sikkens et al. 2017; Van San 2017). As the broader literature on the role of families in the radicalization and de-radicalization of left-wing, right-wing, and jihadist extremists, is somewhat more extensive, we will draw from this literature in sketching a background on the potential role and influence of family members.

Prior research—particularly on parental relationships rather than on sibling relationships—shows that families can exert influence in all phases of radicalization. For example, pedagogical studies show that parents can constitute a protective factor against extremist tendencies if they place limits and controls on the actions of adolescents as well as engage in discussions with them (referred to as authoritative parenting) (Gielen, 2015; Harris-Hogan 2014; Pels en De Ruyter 2012). Yet, in other studies it was found that parents can also foster radicalization if they share an extremist ideology and pass it on to their children (Duriez and Soenens 2009), or if they overtly and actively support their family member in the radicalization process by offering him or her the so-called "moral oxygen"—for example when family members share attitudes that legitimize terrorism (Bartlett et al. 2010; King et al. 2011; Post et al. 2003). Furthermore, existing empirical work reveals that deviant behavior (Baumrind 1978; Hoeve, et al. 2004), and radicalization in particular, can be influenced by general absence of parental support and control (Van San et al. 2013; Becker 2008). For example, in the study of Van San et al. (2013) which focused on young adults with extreme ideals in The Netherlands, young adults in studies by Van San et al. (2013) said their parents

barely responded or intervened when they radicalized. Even though some parents attempted to change the minds of their children, after a while their influence diminished. Most parents responded in an indifferent manner, perceiving their child's radical ideology, above all, as his or her own choice.

There is also a small number of publications touching on the role of families in processes of de-radicalization and disengagement (Koehler 2013; Sieckelink and De Winter 2015; Weggemans and De Graaf 2017). These studies give rise to the idea that families are often not a primary driver for leaving extremism behind, but that family members can be of importance in terms of offering support in disengagement activities. At the same time, it has been argued that anger and distrust of authorities (Awan and Guru 2017; Maher and Neumann 2016) as well as a lack of knowledge on the topic and a lack of professional guidance (Sieckelink and De Winter 2015; Sikkens et al. 2017) can inhibit effective support aimed at mitigating the risk of relapse.

In sum, so far only a few empirical studies have been conducted on the role that families may play in radicalization into (violent) extremism in general and the influence of family members on foreign fighters in particular. This research note seeks to address this academic void and make a first attempt to fill this empirical vacuum.

Methodological approach

This study took place in the Netherlands, where in the period 2012–2018 an estimated total of more than 300 Dutch nationals traveled to Syria or Iraq to join jihadist groups (NCTV 2018). In order to gain greater insight into the role played by the families of foreign fighters, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of seventeen relatives of individuals who left the Netherlands to join one of these groups ($N=15$) or who had plans to do so ($N=2$). The relationship between the foreign fighter and the family member being interviewed varied from one family to another. Interviews were carried out with fathers ($N=6$), mothers ($N=8$), and siblings ($N=3$) of foreign fighters (Table 1).

In addition to these interviews, we also interviewed two returnees (individuals who traveled to Syria), a total of 46 professionals working at 14 different organizations and a total of eight (academic) researchers who had knowledge and expertise in the field of radicalization and/or foreign fighters. The majority of the professionals had direct contact with family members of individuals who left the Netherlands or who had plans to do so (Table 2).

We were further able to access and analyze the files of two families maintained at the National Support Center for Extremism (LSE).

Following prior research (Cid and Marti 2012; Liem and Richardson 2014; Liem and Weggemans 2018), we used the narrative interview to identify how interviewees evaluated their role vis-à-vis their radicalized family member. For structuring the interviews, we used a predefined topic list, divided into three parts, namely the time period *prior to*, *during*, and *after* traveling from the Netherlands to join jihadist groups in Syria and/or Iraq. To obtain information about the time period *prior to*, we focused on the personal history of the individual of concern, the relationship

Table 1 Overview respondents (family members)

Pseudonym	Relation to traveler	Pseudonym traveler	Background	Year of departure
Amina	Mother	Malik	Dutch—Marokkaanse family	2015
Adil	Brother			
Aafke	Mother	Tamara	Dutch—Western family	2014
Barbara	Mother	Karlijn	Dutch family	2015
Mustapha	Father	Youssef	Dutch—Moroccan family	2014
Renate	Mother	Femke	Dutch family	2015
Nadia	Zus	Dania	Dutch—Moroccan family	2015
Jamal	Father	Ahmed and Bilal	Dutch—Moroccan family	2013 and 2014
Ali	Father and ex-partner	Erina and Fahima	Dutch—Moroccan family	2013 and 2014
Francien	Mother	Mirna	Dutch—non-Western family	2014
Lars	Brother	Stefan	Dutch—Western family	2014
Bram	Father	Nina	Dutch family	2015
Wouter	Father	Sanne	Dutch family	2015
Heleen	Stepmother			
Kees	Father	Leya	Dutch—non-Western family	2015
Hanny	Mother	Romee	Dutch family	
Margo	Mother	Joost	Dutch—Western family	

Table 2 Overview respondents (professionals)

Organization	Number of respondents
Custodial Institutions Agency (DJI)	2
National Support Center for Extremism (LSE)	8
Municipality	9
Youth Protection Services	4
The General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD)	4
Ministry of Justice and Security	4
Police	3
Probation Services	3
School	1
Child Care and Protection Board	2
National health service organization	1
Local health service organization	1
Other	4
Total	46

between the family member and the individual, and suspicions of signs of radicalization. For the time *period during*, we wanted to learn how they found out about their family member traveling to Syria and/or Iraq, the reaction on the stay of the individual in Syria or Iraq, and if (and how) they had contact with the individual of concern. For the time *period after*, we focused on the return of the individual and the relationship between the family member and the individual.

Conducting interviews on sensitive issues such as radicalization and extremist behavior of a family member is not an easy task, laden for many with feelings of shame, fear, and grief. Interviewees were contacted via existing networks of the researchers, via social media or on the basis of recommendations of those who already had participated in the study (snowballing). For all individuals who were contacted informed consent was used and participation took place on the basis that disclosed material would be made anonymous and unidentifiable. Most interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants and were approximately 2–3 h long, depending on the participant's responses. The interviews were carried out by one or two researchers. After the interview, the participants were de-briefed. All interviews were recorded and transcribed *ad verbatim*. The interviews were coded inductively. This approach fits with complex content of the interviews (Campbell et al. 2013, p. 303). Inductive coding entails close reading of the interviews and considering the multiple meanings inherent in the text (Thomas 2003). We identified meaningful text segments and labeled these to create different categories (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003). The categories were further specified to limit overlap and redundancy. Subsequently, the interviews with family members and professionals were coded for both timeframe (before, during, and after departure to Syria) and category (e.g., emotions, actions, reactions). We coded the transcripts using Atlas.ti software. The coding was tested by two researchers to ensure the reliability of the analysis. The same codes were used for text obtained from family files.

Findings were shared with a focus group of five family members and two professionals (of which one family member and one professional who had not previously participated in the research). Focus group members agreed with the research findings.

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, but rather, reflect the way in which they perceived their role. An attempt has been made to overcome potential recall and reporting bias by making use of several data sources (triangulation): First, by consulting the so-called family files, and second, by comparing social worker's accounts of family members with our own interview material with the same family member. In terms of data collection, we noticed that during the study, a degree of substantive saturation was reached; in both our discussions with family members and professionals, recurrent

and comparable experiences and observations became apparent. In addition, we learned that the experiences and observations of family members and professionals were frequently of the same nature.

The themes that arose out of the interview material can roughly be divided into two parts: The first reflecting the time period *prior to*, *during*, and *after* traveling from the Netherlands to join jihadist groups in Syria and/or Iraq. A second thematic classification concerns a three-fold division in the type of role family members can play in the radicalization process. We will discuss both below.

The role and importance of families of foreign fighters

Before departure

In the period *prior to* the departure, in several cases, there was already a degree of separation (physical or emotional) between family members and the radicalized individual. Sometimes, personal problems (divorce, financial problems, addiction, health issues) prevented family members from being aware of their relatives' behavioral change. For example, Tara's mother told us that during her daughter's radicalization she was seriously ill. The same holds true for Femke's mother, who told us that she had a lot on her plate at that time—she had to process her divorce, needed to find herself a new house, and was recovering from a series of medical operations.

In other cases, not closely monitoring their children's behavior was the logical consequence of growing up, increasing independence and children moving out of the parental home. Although causes differed, as far as most relatives were concerned, this separation concealed—in combination with a lack of knowledge about phenomena such as radicalization—processes of radicalization and preparatory acts to join a jihadist group abroad. Interviews with relatives and professionals—who were in close contact with family members of radicalized individuals—revealed that the vast majority of family members did not see "it" coming—i.e., almost none of them expected that a member of their family was actually going to leave the country to join a jihadist group. Mustafa exemplified this when he talked about his son, Youssef, who traveled to Syria at the age of 20. In the weeks prior to his departure, Youssef lived elsewhere because he got into trouble with criminals:

> "He's just a Dutch kid, going out dancing, smoking, partying. Until the very last moment. So there [abroad] he went into a different direction. Within two weeks, he was gone."

Similarly surprised, Tara's mother told us about her daughter, who was 19 and still living with her when she traveled to Islamic State's caliphate:

> "I thought, Tara's always doing crazy stuff and getting into trouble, with me helping her out. [I thought] this is yet another one of her phases. She was working on getting her driver's license, which she got just before she left. I thought [to myself], she won't be doing all this if she's having these intentions [to leave] and eventually…"

Apart from some family members being completely in the dark, others acknowledged that in hindsight, there were at times indications varying from changing social networks, social media behavior to increasingly heated political discussions unfolding in the family's living room. Other signals were rather practical and for example involved a woman urging her sister to help her find her passport. While she claimed she needed it for school registration, it turned out that it was the last thing she needed to leave for Syria and join ISIS. Occasionally, others picked up such signals, as Nadia, the older sister of Dana, who left for Syria in 2015, illustrated:

> "My cousins warned me and told me Dana was in contact with certain people via internet, and that she was clearly interested in what was going on in Syria. My cousins were familiar with those circles and hence interpreted the situation differently [than I did]."

Nevertheless, most family members said that, retrospectively, they most probably would not, on their own, have been able to prevent the person concerned from leaving; they were often unaware of what was really going on and lacked substantial knowledge about phenomena such as radicalization, extremism, and foreign fighters. In the end, most of the respondents state that when someone wants to leave, there is relatively little one can do at that point, as Karlijn's mother told us: "[…] I oftentimes wondered "where should I have stopped it?" But I don't think it would have mattered at all."

With one possible exception, none of the interviewed relatives supported (violent) extremist ideologies. Professionals report that the same holds true for the general population of family members of those who joined jihadist groups, as an intelligence officer stated:

> "When these individuals are at home with their parents, they behave nicely and follow the rules of the family, yet outside [the family realm] they can show a completely different side and can behave drastically differently. They may have discussed travel plans with friends, but at home they kept up appearances and did not say anything about plans to travel abroad."

Finally, a number of family interviewees admitted that, at the time, they had expressed their anxieties about potential radicalization of their loved one to others, including the authorities. In some cases, this resulted in what family members called "frustrating experiences" with the authorities concerned. In the families' opinions, their cases were not handled satisfactorily. Some were told by officers that there was nothing the police could do, others felt stigmatized by police indiscreetly visiting their homes, including Tara's mother. Her mother recalled:

> "So, I called the police, the general phone number, and I talk to this woman and I tell her: 'I feel my daughter wants to leave for Syria.' [Mimicking police officer:] 'How old is she?' '[Police officer:] 'Yes but ma'am then she can travel wherever she wants, you don't have a say about that.' So, then I said: 'Yes, but we're talking about people joining jihadist groups here, what we keep on seeing on the news lately.' [Police officer:] 'Oh I'll have to ask my boss.' They were supposed to call me back but suddenly there's two uniformed police offic-

> ers at the door, and I did not mean for that to happen either, I wanted help! Not that they would come and mess everything up and get the neighbors involved and all that."

At that time, however, both for individual family members as well as authorities, the phenomenon of traveling abroad to join jihadist groups was still a relatively new phenomenon and hence, organizational expertise was lacking, resulting in delayed and/or inadequate response.

After departure

The period *during* the individual's stay in Syria or Iraq was, for numerous family members, characterized by emotional stress. They feared for the well-being of their relative, the actions he or she was involved in, and frequently wondered whether he or she was still alive. As for example Francien, Mirna's mother, told us:

> "It was surreal. The week after she left. […] I didn't know anything. I was very afraid something would happen."

The mother of Karlijn, Barbara, told us that was very angry at that time, but also felt guilty:

> "I felt very sad. But also, very guilty. Something she already had explicitly mentioned in her letter: 'Mom, please don't feel guilty. You have been a very good mother and you could not have prevented this. This is something you just have to accept'. Also, later in her WhatsApp messages she wrote to me that I should not feel guilty. At some point I started to think 'Well. Ok'. And then you become angry. Something I still am."

In addition, some family members admitted they were concerned that other family members would also radicalize. Furthermore, these relatives often had to deal with a range of practical matters, such as vacating a house or a flat, or canceling subscriptions. In our study there was one respondent (Amina) who told us that she started to understand her son's decision to leave the Netherlands—we cannot tell, however, whether this was because she agreed with his ideological motives or if this might have been a coping strategy to deal with the emotional situation she was confronted with. The experiences and interpretations of professionals also reveal that there are only so many examples in which family members that were left behind supported a foreign fighter. They speak of family members expressing their pride or justifying a decision to travel to Syria or Iraq. They also gave the example of transferring money to a foreign fighter with the explicit aim of supporting the conflict.

In all cases, there was at least some contact between those who left and their family during their stay in Syria, Iraq, or later on—after the fall of ISIS—in Kurdish territory, which ranged from 10 months to 5 years. In the immediate period following departure, several family members explicitly attempted to persuade the foreign fighter to return home. However, this frequently led to a heightening tension and eventually to an increasingly superficial form of contact. By subsequently refraining from persuasion techniques, family members 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' continued efforts to convince the foreign fighter to return home and devised a plan for a homeward journey; a plan that in both cases was eventually realized. At the same time, we saw that in the period immediately following departure, 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 (N = 2) they were successful. In other cases, foreign fighters actively tried to—via social media and via telephone calls—modify behavior and manner of dressing (which in their view was indecent) of relatives they had left behind. Jamal—who has two sons and who joined an extremist groups in Syria—for example, explained that one of his sons, Ahmed, tried to convince him to also come to Syria. From the family dossier we also learned that Ahmed also tried to persuade his half-sister to join him. While initially, she was open to Ahmed's instructions on what to wear and how to behave, at some point she changed her mind because she felt uncomfortable. When Ahmed finds out that she stopped wearing a hijab, he contacted her and explicitly rejected her behavior.

The attempts of foreign fighters to recruit their own family members was also mentioned by a number of professionals. As for example health worker explains:

> "You frequently see that family members are pressured to also travel to Syria or Iraq. [...] First they try to justify their choices and the pain they have caused back home, then they try to convince their parents and the rest of the family to come over."

Upon return

It should be noted that to date, only a relatively small group of foreign fighters, approximately 55, has returned and more than 80 Dutch foreign fighters have died in a conflict zone in Syria or Iraq (AIVD, 2018; NCTV 2018). Consequently, insights into the role of family members *after* a journey to a jihadist conflict zone are relatively 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. Not only did they realize their returning relative would be imprisoned, but they also worried about their mental well-being. Erina traveled to Syria when she was 23 when she told her father that she wanted to live abroad—but in reality, she secretly traveled to Raqqa. Her father anticipated on her return, and reflected on how to relate to her:

> "If Erina returns, it will remain a difficult period for me […] I'd suggest [the authorities] to keep a close eye on her, even though she is, my daughter. It's hard to find yourself in between two fires, but in the end, I choose for [the well-being of] society, for the community. I am not choosing the bad side here just to stand behind my kids. I won't."

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. Professionals spoke of relatives who had very little contact with their family members, but also talked about other relatives who were a rock and refuge toreturnees. These relatives

cared for children and (foreign-born) grandchildren, offered to help the returnee in obtaining education and employment, and even helped arrange legal support and aid by contacting various authorities. A probation officer also highlights that family members can be an important element in the reintegration of a jihadist traveler, even though there is often a lot of frustration and pain involved:

> "I'm involved in the reintegration of a returned woman. Her family is still very angry that she travelled to Syria in the first place. They feel betrayed. She herself is angry at her family because of her bad childhood (..). But it remains important that at least someone in the family remains involved. Her relationship with her aunt is very good and provides her with lots of support and practical help."

At the same time, initial research has revealed that the influence of family members on the reintegration of returning foreign fighters is oftentimes rather limited—among other things because many of those who have returned from Syria and Iraq spend much away from their families (Miert 2017; CT Infobox 2016).

A continuum of three roles

Results revealed that families can play one of three general 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 a journey to a foreign jihadist group or, at a later stage, actually impede their relative's return or reintegration—for example by refusing help from authorities, providing moral and ideological support or by maintaining contacts with extremist networks. Such an encouraging role has also been reported elsewhere in the general literature on criminal and violent behavior (e.g., Farrington 2002; Van de Weijer 2014) as well as in publications on violent extremism (Andre and Harris-Horgan 2013; Asal et al. 2008; Harris-Horgan 2014; Post, et al. 2003). However, this study has found only very limited empirical evidence for this role.

The other end of the continuum is occupied by families that form a buffer or act as a protective factor against radicalization or joining a foreign extremist group—for example by picking up on radicalization or preparatory processes and maintaining contact with relevant organizations (e.g., the police or a municipality). Once foreign fighters return, such a *restraining role* can facilitate disengagement and reintegration. Family members cannot only provide a positive social environment as well as play a role in a variety of practical matters (e.g., housing, insurances, employment). This *restraining* role is also mentioned in studies on, for example, parenting styles (Harris-Horgan 2014; Sieckelink and De Winter 2015), de-radicalization and disengagement (Koehler 2016; Sieckelink and de Winter 2015;), and the reintegration of (suspected) terrorists (Weggemans and De Graaf 2017).

Although both active roles (*encouraging* and *restraining*) emerged from the interview material with both family members and professionals, in several cases the role rather appeared to be *latent*. Such a latent role can be found in the middle

of the continuum, and can be characterized by ambivalence, suggesting that relatives only play a remote or concealed role. In such cases, respondents mentioned a range of different reasons (including financial, relationship, or health problems, in combination with physical separation) why relatives find themselves unable to intervene effectively, or they do not know how to intervene. Here, family members did not actively encourage or restrain the radicalizing individual. In this role, family members may sense 'something is wrong' but cannot put their finger on what 'it' is exactly—or did not have any idea of what was going on in the first place. These roles have a dynamic nature, and in the course of time relatives' roles may 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, explicitly keeping an eye on him or her, or raising the alarm with social work or authorities. On the other hand, after having experienced encounters with certain agencies or the media, a family member can, for example, increasingly support the foreign fighter. For others, still, their role remained relatively stable. For example, relatives who played a latent role prior to a jihadist journey, can continue to play this role both during and upon return.

Discussion and conclusion

While existing studies have focused on the active role of families in radicalization processes, this research indicates that influence of family members is oftentimes rather limited. In many cases, their role could best be understood as latent and passive. However, it also became apparent that foreign fighters themselves can, in fact, negatively 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 (returning) foreign fighters, and the level of expertise of the various agencies and professionals has risen significantly. Furthermore, the level of institutional contact with family members and radicalized individuals has been increasing significantly. The question is how such contact with these (difficult-to-reach) families can be given greater substance. Moreover, while in this study it is argued that the number of families who directly encourage jihadist radicalization or a journey to a jihadist combat zone is still very limited, with the coming of age of the jihadist phenomenon in the West, it is possible that we will witness more cases of this in the future. While it is still very uncertain how this will develop in the next decades, more research seems warranted on the intergenerational transfer of extremist ideals and behavior within families living in Western societies.

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 (Sieckelink and De Winter 2015; Sikkens et al. 2017; Van San 2017; Koehler 2016) and provide greater insights into the various roles and experiences of families during the development of extremist behavior. Our findings contradict 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. This insight can be an important starting point for further policy development. It highlights that the prevention of radicalization should be considered as a collective effort—rather than an individual responsibility of families. In order to be effective, contact and cooperation between professionals and with families is of paramount importance. Furthermore, it can also help to improve the general position of families in preventative approaches. For instance, many relatives had very limited knowledge of matters such as traveling to a combat zone or being radicalized and did not know which agencies they could turn to for assistance. The provision of information and relevant contacts with the police, municipality of religious experts would be beneficial. Similarly, based on our interviews it could be argued that support in dealing with problematic family situations (e.g., financial problems, mental health issues, alcohol and substance abuse, etc.) could prevent potential breeding grounds for radicalization among young adults. Lastly, this study emphasizes the delicate relationship between security professionals and families. Relatives gave myriad examples of negative experiences with professionals involved, enhancing distrust of government agencies and hindering a willingness to cooperate constructively. It is vital to carefully approach family members and be aware of the fact that oftentimes the relatives of foreign fighters and radicalized individuals are, in their own way, victims rather than accomplices.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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