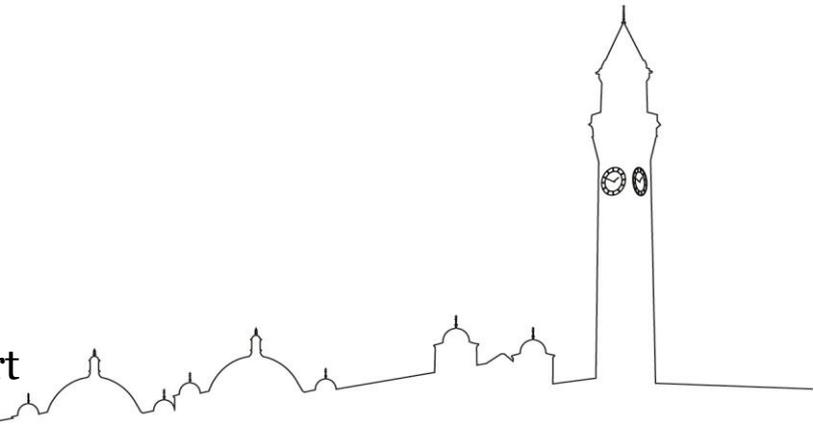




# Returning British fighters: reintegration through family support



## Executive summary

A number of British fighters in Syria want to return to the UK with their children. This brief outlines an ongoing collaboration between researchers from the University of Birmingham and practitioners to offer family-based support to their reintegration.

- Families are key in the prevention and deceleration of radicalisation, as well as in the promotion of de-radicalisation processes. Family-based interventions can also have an extremely important intergenerational impact by putting into place early help strategies.
- Strengthening the families of British fighters and helping them cope with psychological distress will create a safer and more resilient environment for the reintegration of British fighters and their children.
- The combination of research and practice to design, deliver, and evaluate a family-based program for families of British fighters can yield important methodological developments to ensure the durability and sustainability of such measures.

## Background

The ongoing debate over allowing foreign fighters from the so-called Islamic State (IS) to return to the UK has been heightened by the recent case of Shamima Begum. Days before giving birth to her third baby, Shamima was found in a refugee camp in Syria and voiced the wish to return to her home in the UK after having travelled to Syria at the age of 15 to marry an IS fighter. This led to the revocation of Ms Begum's British citizenship, which has caused discussions around the legitimacy of leaving Ms Begum and her new born son stateless in a Syrian detention camp. Jarrah, Ms Begum's son, subsequently died of pneumonia at three weeks of age, which seems to have fast-tracked concerns regarding bringing the children of British fighters in Syria back to the UK.

The influx of European foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq and their return to their home countries have left families devastated and not knowing where to get help. According to a Briefing Paper authored by Grahame Allen and Noel Dempsey and published by the House of Commons Library on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2018:

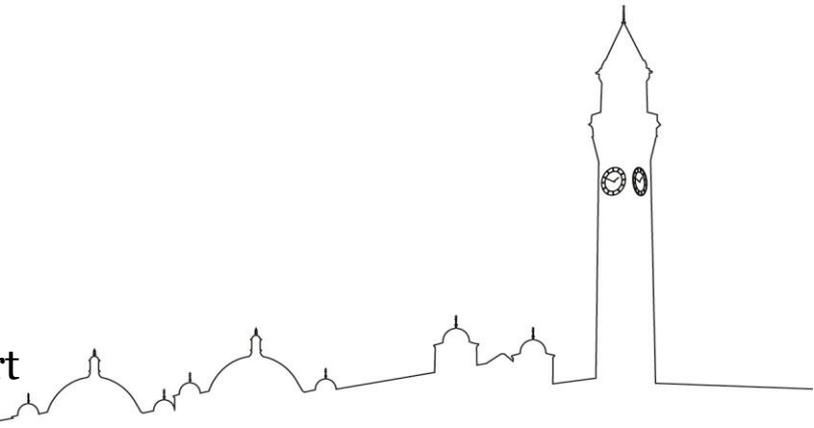
- The UK alone saw around 850 foreign fighters joining the conflict in Syria and Iraq.
- From these 850 individuals, around 400 are known to be back in the UK, including children and young people born and / or raised in conflict affected areas.
- Until the end of 2017 there were 412 terrorism related arrests in the UK and, between April 2016 and March 2017, 6300 individuals (including 415 children under the age of 10 and 1,424 children between the age of 11-15) were referred to Channel (Home Office Statistical Bulletin 06/18).

## A collaboration between the University of Birmingham and Families for Life

The research team, led by Dr Raquel da Silva, British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Birmingham, is working in close collaboration with Families for Life (F4L) to support the reintegration of British fighters and their children through family-based psychological support. The work of F4L, in the UK, is exemplary of the spread of family-based programs in the areas of extremism, violent extremism, and terrorism across Europe. However, very little is known about what such programs include and what impact they are having on families. Thus, more in-depth evaluations and methodological development are necessary to ensure their durability and sustainability. In this context, the research team aims to address this knowledge



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gap and to provide practical advice to practitioners, policy-makers, and stakeholders on how to provide support to families of returned British fighters and their children, and to prevent this type of transnational activism in the future.

### **Family-based interventions**

Family-based interventions have been proved to yield successful outcomes relating to the onset and continuation of criminal behaviour. As we know that individual radicalisation and extreme behaviour do not affect individuals in isolation, but also their family, friends, wider social circle and society, psychological support for families and the wider circle of individuals accused and/or convicted of terrorist offences is, thus, tremendously important. They build family resilience amid crisis, safeguard against recidivism and prevent young people from being drawn into terrorism and/or extremist ideologies. Therefore, families can be key in the prevention and deceleration of radicalisation, as well as in the promotion of deradicalisation processes, and family-based interventions can have an extremely important intergenerational impact by putting into place early help strategies.

The collaboration between University of Birmingham researchers and F4L is viewed as an opportunity to weave together knowledge generated through the research process with practitioner experience and expertise. It will be looking specifically at:

1. Designing and delivering a family-based intervention.
2. Evaluating the impact of the intervention on families focusing both on process research – qualitative analysis of the change process – and on outcome research – quantitative measurement of the efficacy of the intervention.
3. Reflecting on and responding to emerging research findings.

This democratic, iterative, co-designed process is also underpinned by the principles of participatory action research, which seeks to generate actionable knowledge and practical outcomes in collaboration with, rather than for, practitioners. Ultimately, the team hopes to provide real-world guidance to key policy-makers, practitioners, and stakeholders on how to support the reintegration of British fighters and their children through family-based programs. Results of the research will also be made available at the end of the research project via a project report which will be launched at a dissemination event in Birmingham in the spring of 2020.

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