



LUND UNIVERSITY
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Scandinavia's Daughters in Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups:
A Narrative Inquiry of their Relatives' Lived Experiences
and the Insight Gained from them

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Abstract

After the start of the Syrian civil war, the topic of Scandinavians joining Salafi-jihadi groups in the war has been high on the political agendas in the Scandinavian countries. These countries are increasingly focusing on the role of families to prevent people from joining these groups. However, research about the topic is limited, especially regarding women's families. This thesis seeks to remedy this gap, through investigating what insight can be gained from the lived experiences of relatives of Scandinavian women who have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. It examines two issues: firstly, through investigating to what extent the relatives' experiences reveal insights about the women's decisions to leave. Secondly, it investigates the role the family played. In this way, the thesis questions two paradigms regarding the role of families and violent Islamist extremism. Firstly, that family members and other secondary sources are used as witnesses in understanding why Europeans join Salafi-jihadi groups. Secondly, that the family is seen as part of the problem or part of the solution to the fact that their family members join violent Islamist extremist groups.

The thesis reveals that the relatives suffer from grief, sorrow and shock after the women joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. They blame others than the women themselves for their decision to travel, and portray them as victims rather than as agents. Furthermore, the relatives have limited insight into what happened before the women travelled. Thus, the thesis demonstrates that the relatives' experiences provide limited insight into why the women joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. It is therefore problematic that research increasingly uses relatives' narratives to understand why people join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups.

Although the relatives adopt different coping strategies to handle the situation, for instance through trying to help the women return, the thesis illustrates that the relatives should primarily be perceived as individuals in need of help. They are neither a part of the problem nor a part of the solution, but need to be approached as human beings in a complex life-situation. This knowledge is useful in the work with families who have experienced that a female family member has joined these groups.

Keywords: Violent Islamist extremism, foreign fighters, women, family, Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups

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1. Introduction

“It is like my daughters are dead, but not really”, a father, who I choose to call Jacob, tells me. His daughters suddenly one day left their hometown in Scandinavia and travelled to Syria to join the world’s most brutal Salafi-jihadi group, the so-called Islamic State (IS). His words reflect what this thesis discusses: the lived experiences of relatives of Scandinavian women who have joined Salafi-Jihadi groups in the Syrian civil war, and the insight gained from their lived experiences. To focus on the relatives’ experiences I employ narrative inquiry as a methodological framework.

Since 2013 more than 80 women from Scandinavia, which is the collective term for the countries Norway, Sweden and Denmark, have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups (Aasgaard 2015). Most of these women now live in the IS-held territory. Only a few have returned. They belonged to a wave of Sunni Muslims from the whole world, who went to Syria to fight against Bashar al-Assad in the civil war. In the beginning, these Muslims joined the different opposition groups, but as the civil war continued, Salafi-jihadi groups, such as Jabhat-Al Nusrah and IS obtained more and more new recruits. Both IS and Jabhat al-Nusrah are declared terrorist organizations by the UN and the US (Nuland 2012; UN 2016). Especially in 2014, after IS’ leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared a caliphate, the number of Muslim men and women who went to Syria to join IS increased. As IS, controls a territory expanding into Iraq, some of these also moved to Iraq. However, as the majority of the women joined Salafi-jihadi groups in Syria, I focus on Syria in what follows.

The topic of Muslim foreign fighters traveling to Syria to fight against Assad’s regime is high on the global political agenda. A range of different actors pay attention to it; the UN, European politicians, the academic research community and the global media. The issue has received massive interest in Scandinavia after the first Scandinavians joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Like in other European countries, the countries’ security services fear that returning fighters pose a security risk (PST 2015; Säpo 2015a; PET 2016). Several political efforts have been taken to investigate why Scandinavians join Salafi-jihadi groups in the Syrian civil war and how to counter this phenomenon through counter violent extremism efforts (CVE). The term refers to “non-coercive attempts to reduce involvement in terrorism”, and has become a popular term by researchers, governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Harris-Hogan, Barrelle, and Zammit 2016, 6).

Sweden, Denmark and Norway have launched national action plans against violent extremism, which pay attention to the role of the families of young men and women joining violent extremist groups, especially violent Islamist extremist groups (Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet 2014;

Regeringen 2016; Nationella samordnaren mot våldsbejakande extremism 2016). The countries are increasingly encouraging relatives and friends to contact the authorities if they fear that someone is considering joining Salafi-jihadi groups in the Syrian civil war and the neighbouring country Iraq.

1.1. Research Questions

CVE-efforts, media and the academic literature discuss the role of the family and violent extremism through two paradigms; firstly, family members and other secondary sources are used as witnesses to understand why Europeans join Salafi-jihadi groups. Secondly, the family is either seen as part of the problem or part of the solution to violent Islamist extremism. This thesis investigates these two paradigms through a narrative inquiry of the lived experiences of relatives of three Scandinavian women who have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. In this way, I address the following overarching research question:

What insight can be gained from the lived experiences of relatives of Scandinavian women who have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups?

In order to address the above question I have identified two sub-questions that will structure the following analysis and discussion:

- *To what extent do the relatives' experiences shed light on why Scandinavian women join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups?*
- *To what extent do families play a causal or preventative role in Scandinavian women's decision to join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups?*

1.2. Research Purpose

This thesis focuses on the role of the families of foreign fighters in general, and the role of the women's own families in particular. This is an understudied topic within a rapidly growing field of research in terrorism and radicalization studies that investigates foreign fighters in the Syrian civil war. This research field is influenced by limited empirical material. Through exploring the lived experiences of relatives of Scandinavian women who have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups, this thesis offers a new empirical contribution to the topic.

The thesis aims to increase the understanding of what life is like as a relative of a woman who has joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. As will be shown later in the thesis, researchers use the narratives of family members' and secondary sources to explain why people join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Through employing a critical framework to investigate the relatives' experiences, the thesis aims to shed lights on the potential and limitations of the insight, which can be gained from

relatives' narratives. In this way, the thesis questions common methodological and theoretical assumptions in the research field.

Through investigating the way the relatives perceive their own role within their lives, the thesis aims to illuminate the relationship between the role of the women's families and enrolment in violent Islamist extremist groups. I focus on the women's families because it is an understudied topic within the field of violent Islamist extremism. Increased understanding of the lived experiences of the women's families can contribute to insight about how to include them in CVE-efforts. It is possible to transfer these insight to CVE-efforts targeting families of both genders. Despite limited research, there are already several initiatives that aim to include and support families in CVE-efforts. For instance, the municipality of Aarhus in Denmark has launched a programme in cooperation with the local police, aiming to prevent violent radicalization and extremism among youngsters. This model is international recognized, and is now exported globally. In addition to supporting the youngsters in risk of radicalization themselves with mentors and personal support, a central part of the model involves support groups for their families (Bertelsen 2015). Another initiative is Hayat in Germany, (Hayat 2016) and Families Against Terrorism and Extremism, which states that "families are key to countering violent extremism" (FATE 2016).

1.3. Disposition of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into four main sections. In the literature review, I discuss available publications regarding how the family background influences the prospect of enrolling into violent extremist groups. In order to contextualise my later analysis, this is followed by a discussion of what role women play in Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. In the methodological section, I outline my approach to fieldwork, which was framed by narrative inquiry. This allowed me to focus on the relatives' lived experiences. In the theory section, I discuss theories allowing me to problematize what insight can be gained from the relatives' lived experiences. In the findings sections, I present and analyse the relatives' narratives individually and on a case-by-case basis to shed light on the relatives' lived experiences. In the analysis section I discuss the research question as a whole, drawing on insight from the individual narratives, the literature review and the theoretical section.

1.4. A Note on Terminology

This thesis seeks inspiration from different fields. Although it is beyond the scope of the thesis to go into a lengthy discussion of terminology, I find it necessary to define some of the terms I employ. I discuss the relatives' *lived experiences*. This expression entered the English language via

phenomenology and human science from philosophical German (Burch 1944, 132). Drawing inspiration from phenomenological research, Miles, Chapman and Francis (2015) say lived experience is a “reflective act” (290), which aims “to explore being-in the world” (287). It becomes a lived experience in the “process of selecting a memory” (290), “providing an understanding for the past, the present and the future” (293).

I use the terms Salafi-jihadi, jihadist and militant Islamism, which Hegghammer (2009) problematizes through saying there is no clear definition of them within the academic literature. I use the term *Salafi-jihadi* groups as a common terminology to define the groups the female relatives of the informants joined. Two of the informants have relatives who joined IS, while one of the informants’ relative likely joined a group related to Jabhat al-Nusrah. This was an Al-Qaida linked organization until they broke bonds in July 2016. I use Byman’s (2013) definition of Salafi-jihadi groups, who says, “Salafi-jihadi groups embrace the goal of establishing an Islamic state, overturning supposedly apostate governments and drive non local non-Salafi allies out of their region” (356). *Jihadi fighter* is defined as a person engaging in the so-called lesser jihad, which is a battle against Islam’ enemies (Bakker and de Leede 2015).

I use Hegghammer’s (2010) definition of *foreign fighter*, defined as “an agent who has joined, and operates within the confines of an insurgency, lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, lacks affiliation to an official military organization, and is unpaid” (58). When I use foreign fighter in this thesis, I mean non-Syrian Muslims who join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups, both men and women unless I specify the gender. However, it is important to note that research conducted by Smith and Saltman (2015) and Hoyle, Frenett, and Bradford (2015) on the social media accounts of women, who have joined IS, show that the women use the word *muhajirat(h)*, the Arabic word for migrants about themselves. This is because they have emigrated from Europe to start a new life in the IS-held territory. My thesis shows that the relatives use neither of these terms, but discuss them as “my daughter” or “my sister”.

I further seek inspiration from literature within the concept of radicalization, terrorism, militant Islamism, and violent extremism. These are all contested terms (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010; Southers 2013; Gemmerli 2015). I understand *violent extremism* as a group, who express “their ideological beliefs through violence or a call for violence” (Southers 2013, 4). In contexts when I only speak about violent Islamist extremism, I specify this. The latter is used interchangeable with *Militant Islamism*, which is “centred on a narrative, claiming that Islam and Muslims are constantly attacked

and humiliated by the West and corrupt local regimes in Muslim countries. Violence, including violence against civilians, is necessary and legitimate, and this fight is an individual duty and an emancipatory journey, which brings the fighter closer to God” (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, 3).

Radicalization is a wide concept, which is defined differently from context to context, and country to country. As I talk about a Scandinavian context, I am inspired by Gemmerli (2015), who defines radicalization as “a politically contrived concept, based on an attempt to understand, explain and prevent home-grown terrorism. This is the idea that people born in European welfare societies end up carrying out politically or religiously motivated violence.” The terms discussed in this section, is used in the next part where I elaborate on how the role of the families is discussed in research about violent extremism.

2. Literature Review

This literature review deals with two main issues. In the first part, I outline research discussing what role families play for enrolment into violent extremist groups. Thereafter I discuss research about families of foreign fighters joining Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. The second part of the literature review discusses women in Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups.

2.1. Family and Violent Extremism

2.1.1 The Role Families Play for Enrolment into Violent Extremist Groups

In this section, I start discussing research about family and violent Islamist extremist groups in Europe, Australia and the US, before discussing research about violent extremist groups in general. I solely focus on research about families in Europe, Australia and the US, because the cultural context is important. Research conducted with relatives participating in militant Islamist groups in the Middle East, shows that the whole family often supported and encouraged this activism, and were proud to be in the family of a suicide bomber (Schbley 2000; Orbach 2004; Speckhard and Ahkmedova 2006). The situation in Europe and the US is more dynamic, which this section highlights.

In Europe, Australia and the US multiple researches show that individuals are recruited to violent Islamist extremist groups through personal connections, such as network of friends and family (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008; Bakker 2006; Sageman 2004; Hafez 2016; Roy 2016; Harris-Hogan 2014). According to Hafez (2016) improved intelligence services make jihadi fighters

increasingly recruit relatives (15). Hafez uses the concept “*kinship radicalisation*”, explaining that family bonds facilitate recruitment into violent Islamist extremist groups because families often link individuals with the same beliefs (ibid). This seems to apply to the current wave of people from Europe, USA and Australia joining Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Bergen, Schuster, Sterman (2015) 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 (3).

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 the parents mostly oppose it (Bakker, Paulussen, and Entenmann 2013; Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol 2014). Furthermore, research shows that enrolment into violent Islamist extremist groups often causes isolation from their families (Roy 2016; Silke 2008; Leiken 2012; Lützing 2012; Bakker 2006; Sageman 2004). Dalgaard-Nielsen and Larsen (2015) explains 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 (20). Roy (2016) calls this rupture between the first and second generation of immigrants “a generational revolt”. He argues that the second-generation Muslims and native converts break the contact with their parents, their culture and religion. Parents oppose and try to prevent this revolt.

Roy (2016) further argues that a key in this generational revolt is that the parents fail to teach their children a culturally integrated religion. This is supported by literature, showing that families tend to leave the religious education to the mosque, giving their full trust to the religious education taught there (Andre, Mansouri, and Lobo 2015; Dalgaard-Nielsen and Larsen 2015; Ahmed and Weine 2012). As young Muslims lack religious education from their parents, they are unable to question extremists’ views if they enrol into a religious group, supporting such beliefs.

Research based on right-wing, left-wing, and Islamist violent extremism shows that problems in the family environment can make youngsters join violent extremist groups (Sieckelinck and Winter 2015; Lützing 2012). These problems include divorce, an absent father, lack of emotional support, psychiatric issues, violence, illness, or death (Sieckelinck and Winter 2015). Another contribution factor is an emotional distance and isolation between the parents and their children in their daily life

(Ahmed and Weine 2012; Dalgaard-Nielsen and Larsen 2015; Lützing 2012). Lützing (2012) demonstrates that young people in need of belonging find a surrogate family in violent extremist groups.

Although the previous discussion shows that problems in the family-environment is a factor for why youngsters enrol into violent extremist groups in general, and violent Islamist extremism in specific, CVE-efforts increasingly pay attention to the role of the family to counter it. For this reason, the family is seen as either part of the problem or part of the solution. However, research on CVE is limited. In a Palestinian context, Cragin et. al. (2015) argue that families are the greatest factor causing youngsters to reject violent Islamist extremism. In the context of IS, Maher and Neumann (2016) argue that families are the “key to stop their sons and daughters from joining IS”, and encouraging them to leave IS (1). Gielen (2015) discusses different approaches to support the families of foreign fighters. However, she also supports the idea that the families either is the problem or the solution through stating: “One should keep in mind that families can be part of the solution, or they can be part of the problem and so choosing family members to involve is crucial” (Gielen 2015, 37).

Therefore, there is a contradiction between the research about families and violent Islamist extremism and practical initiatives to counter the phenomenon. Research perceives families as a part of the problem, while very limited research and CVE- initiatives perceive families as a part of the solution. The conflicting roles the family is given; as either a part of the problem or the solution, is problematic, because it reduces human beings and complex lived experiences to binary categories.

2.1.2 The Research on Families to Understand the Motivations of Foreign Fighters

As gaining access to foreign fighters is challenging, the global media and researchers have turned to their relatives to investigate the motivation of foreign fighters. Dalgaard-Nielsen (2010) writes that interviews with relatives of militant Islamists can create new insight, and be less challenging than interviewing the militant Islamists themselves (812). I have systematically searched the major academic databases and think-tank reports about foreign fighters published between 2011 and May 2016. As a result, I have found 53 peer-reviewed academic articles and 65 think-tank reports in English discussing foreign fighters as the main topic. Most of the reports are based on an analysis of secondary sources from media or social media. Researchers use media analysis to create narratives

of foreign fighters without discussing its limitations (such as Christopher 2015; Zelin, Kohlmann, and al-Khoury 2013; Chmoun and Batrawi 2014; Shtuni 2015; Skidmore 2014; Holman 2014; Heinke and Raudszus 2015; Sandee 2013; Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol 2014). This reflects a problematic tendency within the whole research field of radicalization and terrorism, as access to the perpetrators is a major obstacle.

Research based on direct interviews with family members also does not problematize the insight, which can be gained from this form of investigation. I have found two reports using interviews with family members, among other sources, to investigate why men join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups (Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol 2014; Mercy Corps 2015). Mercy Corps (2015) highlights central factors that contribute to Jordanians' decision to fight for Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups: "peer influences, family connections, a desire for social status, and lastly the example or influence of a family member or friend" (9). This is mostly based on interviews with relatives and community workers, but they also mention that they interviewed foreign fighters themselves. Weggemans, Bakker and Grol (2014) use interviews with family members and people who had been in the close environment of male foreign fighters before they joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups to create fictive life stories of Dutch jihadi foreign fighters. They wrote fictive life-stories to show the complex motivational factors attracting a person to join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. This approach is problematic, as they do not discuss its limitation and validity.

The research focusing on relatives of women is limited. In a report Bakker and De-leede (2015) state they use interviews with relatives of women in Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups in addition to other secondary sources to investigate the motivations of the women who have joined Salafi-jihadi groups. However, the authors do not provide any information about these interviews, and in the report, they only provide references to research based on social media, academic articles and newspaper articles. For this reason, the report does not use interviews with family members. This shows that so far, no research is based on interviews with the family-members of the women. The three discussed reports are problematic, as they do not problematize the challenges of analysing individuals' motivations without interviewing these people directly themselves.

There is only one report, which uses the relatives' narratives to shed light on how it influences the families that the children join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. This is based on media analysis of

families of IS recruits from 17 countries (Maher and Neumann 2016). The report identifies how their children's travel to join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups influences the relatives (ibid). These are *pain*, caused by a deep sense of loss and bereavement. Secondly, *confusion* as their relatives' departure was surprising. Thirdly, a smaller number of families felt *anger*: they seek to externalize their pain by blaming outsiders. Lastly, some felt *shame* due to feeling guilty, humiliated and considered themselves responsible for their relatives' actions. The report argues that the families' perceptions of their relatives' actions are "universally negative" (1).

This section has showed that there is limited research discussing the role of families in the context of foreign fighters in the Syrian civil war. The role of the women's families is almost absent. As the thesis focuses on the role of women's families, it is necessary to discuss research about women joining Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups to contextualise the analysis of the relatives' lived experiences. This leads me into the next part of this literature review.

2.2. European Women in Syrian Salafi-jihadi Groups

In order to analyse the relatives' narratives, which I provide in the findings section, I outline relevant research discussing the role of women in Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Barrett, Berger and Gosh (2015) estimate that "between 27,000 and 31,000 people" have gone to Syria and Iraq to join Salafi-jihadi groups, especially IS, from at least 86 countries (4). The official number of Scandinavians who have travelled since 2012, are 286 Swedes, 135 Danes and 87 Norwegians (PET 2016; PST 2015; Säpo 2015b). One third of the Swedes are women, and 10 % of the Danes and Norwegians are women. It is a new phenomenon that women on such a large scale join Salafi-jihadi groups. Prior to the Syrian civil war, research shows that only a handful of European women joined Middle Eastern Salafi-jihadi groups. These women joined al-Qaeda in Iraq in the mid-2000s (Hafez 2006; Brown 2011; Von Knop 2007; Hemmingsen 2011a; Speckhard 2009b).

There is limited knowledge about why Scandinavian women join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Research about European women provides more insight, although it mainly focuses on IS. Like European men, European women joined different Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups in the start of the Syrian civil war. As the war continued, IS was the only group trying to recruit women, which also had a structure to host women. This contrasted the strategies of Jabhat al-Nusra, which conducted an insurgency war and because of this, did not try to recruit women (Aasgaard 2016, 168). This was caused by IS' aim about building an Islamic Caliphate in its territory, and reflected through massive efforts by IS to make both men and women migrate to its territory (ibid, 169).

Based on social media research, Hoyle, Frenett and Bradford (2015) and Smith and Saltman (2015) provide insight into why English speaking women joined IS. The women argue they travelled because they feel isolated socially or culturally, because *the Ummah*, the global “Islamic community” is under attack, and lastly because they want to contribute to building the new caliphate (Smith and Saltman 2015; Hoyle, Frenett, and Bradford 2015). However, this research is problematic, as it is based on social media research. The problem of empirically using social media is highlighted by Klausen (2014), who demonstrates that the main accounts of the Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups have a controlling role and also control the use of mobile phones and social media (2). For this reason, Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups likely control social media and it is not a neutral source of information.

The ideological literature about *Jihad* forbids women from taking part in combat (Lahoud 2014; Hemmingsen 2014; Aasgaard 2016; Bloom 2011). For this reason both IS and Al-Qaeda believe that the success of *Jihad* depends on the non-military support of women; for instance through encouraging their relatives to participate in fighting, as mothers of the new generation, and wives of jihadi fighters (Lahoud 2014; Aasgaard 2016; Hoyle, Frenett, and Bradford 2015; Smith and Saltman 2015; Winter 2015). Research based on social media and interviews with defector shows that women in IS can join the moral police, al-Hisbah, where the female wing is called Ketibet al-Khanassa (Hoyle, Frenett, and Bradford 2015; Smith and Saltman 2015; Speckhard and Yayla 2015). According to an unofficial document, written by Ketibet Al-khannasa and translated by Winter (2015), women are able to have non-domestic roles in some exceptions, such as if she studies theology, if she is a women’s doctor or teacher, and if a fatwa is issued stating that she can fight because the situation is desperate (8). Women in IS also play important roles in propaganda dissemination and recruitment of other women through online platforms (Smith and Saltman 2015, 6).

I have now discussed research about the role of family and violent extremism, with a focus on violent Islamist extremist groups, and women’s role in Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. The discussion regarding the role of families and violent extremism, showed two different trends. Firstly, problems in the family environment are seen as a reason for why young individuals join violent Islamist extremist groups. Despite this, CVE-efforts increasingly emphasise the importance of the family to

counter violent Islamist extremism. Secondly, as access to foreign fighters is challenging, researchers turn to the family as a source to understand the motivations of foreign fighters. This is mostly done through conducting an analysis of the relatives' statements in media.

This review showed that there is a lack of empirical studies on the family context the men and women joining Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups come from. The second part of my literature review showed that women play different roles in Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups compared to men. However, there is limited focus on the relatives of women in the literature about families and violent extremism in general and violent Islamist extremism in specific. It is essential to conduct research about the role of the women's families because women increasingly are participating in violent Islamist extremist groups. Through conducting research about the women's families, it is also possible to detect if there are gendered differences between men and women.

For this reason, the thesis investigates the lived experiences of relatives of women, who joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. The two paradigms discussed in this section - that the family is seen as part of the problem or the solution, and that the relatives are used to provide insight into why people join these groups provide valuable point of departure to discuss them from the perspectives of the women's families. To analyse this, I use different theories, which I elaborate on in the next section.

3. Theoretical Framework

Later in the thesis, I discuss what insight can be gained from the relatives' lived experiences. This section provides theoretical insight to conduct this analysis: coping strategies, the agent/victim dichotomy and thereafter an interdisciplinary theory by Lindekilde and Bertelsen (2016), which explains the mobilization of foreign fighters. These theories make it possible to discuss the research question.

3.1. Coping Strategies

As the relatives' narratives show in the findings section, it is a disruptive life event for them that their female relatives join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. To discuss how they handle this, I analyse their coping strategies, an important concept within psychology. Coping is conceptualized as people's response to negative events, and individuals take different coping strategies (Araya et al. 2007, 307). Coping shows how people handle stress and difficult life situations (Lazarus 1993, 234). As the relatives' lived experiences show they are suffering from emotions, such as anger, guilt, shame and sadness, which Lazarus (1993) defines as "psychological stress" (236). It is

therefore applicable to use theories about coping to analyse the relatives' lived experiences.

Despite that coping is a wide term, Araya et al. (2007) discusses three main types of coping: task-oriented coping, emotion-oriented coping and avoidance-oriented coping. Task-oriented coping involves to take direct action to change the situation or act on the environment (Dafna and Heiman 2005; Lazarus 1993). The emotion-oriented strategy involves to change the emotional response to the difficult situation, reframing the problem not to provoke negative emotional responses (Dafna and Heiman 2005; Lazarus 1993). This also means that a person denies or distance himself from the problem (Lazarus 1993, 236). As Lazarus points out, reframing the problem and the meaning of what is happening is a normal employed strategy for regulating emotions (238). Avoidance-oriented coping strategy involves avoiding the situation, denying its existence or losing hope (Dafna and Heiman 2005, 72). It is important to mention that coping strategies are changing processes, and it is therefore possible to encounter situations with different coping strategies (Lazarus 1993, 239).

Related to coping strategies is Goffman's theory of stigmatization (1963). Within the Scandinavian societies, it is stigmatizing that people join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. This also influences the relatives. I have talked to a mother, whose son died fighting for IS, who told that her relatives perceives her as the mother of a terrorist. Goffman highlights how stigmas are transferred through families, making all members stigmatized (14). Therefore, this theory sheds light on how the relatives cope with being in a stigmatized position. Goffman defines stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting", and therefore the stigmatized is "disqualified from full social acceptance" (13).

According to Goffman, society categorizes people on the basis of normative expectations – dividing the "normal" from the "deviants" (14–15). He discusses three types of stigma. The first is related to "physical deformities", such as mental illness and blindness (14). The second stigma concerns individuals with a defect. This is caused by mental disorder, homosexuality or radical political behaviour (ibid). The last stigma, "the tribal stigma", is related to race, nation and religion (ibid). All informants face the second stigma: an individual with a defect. As their relatives are members of Salafi-jihadi groups, and therefore have radical political behaviour, this stigma is transmitted to them. In the case of two of the informants, they also encounter the last form for stigma: "the tribal stigma", as they are Muslims immigrants. The last one is of Scandinavian origin, and do not face

this stigma. Employing Goffman's theory provides insight into how relatives cope with the social stigma caused by the fact that the women joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups.

Goffman describes that the stigmatized is either "discreditable" or "discredited" (14). When the stigma is discreditable, the stigma is not evident, unless the person reveals it himself. If it is discredited, the stigma is already evident and the person has been socially judged and marginalized by their surrounding social world (Ibid, 15). In the case of relatives of people, who have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups, the stigma is only obvious if the relative admits that one in their family has joined such a group. Goffman terms the decision about revealing the stigmatic quality or not, as a process of information control (57). One part of this is "passing", which refers to when a person with a stigmatic quality manages information so that they can partly or fully "pass" as a normal (ibid, 58). I use this concept further in my analysis to discuss the relatives' coping strategies, and how they handle to be in a stigmatized position.

Analysing the relatives' coping strategies allow me to problematize the two paradigms emerging from the literature review: Firstly, that the relatives are seen either as part of the problem or part of the solution to why youngsters join violent Islamist extremist groups. Secondly, that relatives are used as witnesses to understand the motivation of foreign fighters. Analysing the coping strategies used by the relatives discussed in this study, show that they blame the women's decision to join Salafi-jihadi groups on someone else. This leads me to the next part of the theory-section: victimhood and agency.

3.2. Victimhood and Agency

In my literature review I discussed how Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups, especially IS, emphasise that women play an essential role to build the new Islamic caliphate. These organizations emphasise the women's agency. Despite of this, the wider media discourse describes the women joining Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups as victims, through employing words such as jihadi brides, sex-slaves and brainwashed (Vinograd 2014; Dean 2016). With this as point of departure, it is essential to discuss how the relatives experience the women's agency and victimhood in their narratives.

Agency is a central concept discussed within all directions of feminism (Isaacs 2002). I define it as the "capacity to realize one's own interests against customs, tradition, religion or other obstacles" (Mahmood 2012, 8). As Mahmood argues, "women's agency cannot be emphasised enough",

especially as Western media continues to portray Muslim women as limited by religion and oppression (7). Agency is also an ambiguous term, which needs to be problematized. Gentry (2012) emphasises that agency by many feminists are used to “construct women as emancipated”, without troubling its significance and “what emancipation and agency are linked to” (81). Auchter (2012) criticises that researchers use agency to inscribe subjectivity to women without discussing its limitations (17).

Victimhood, which contrasts the concept of agency, is relevant to analyse the relatives’ lived experiences. Within the research field of violent Islamist extremism, there is a tendency to portray women as victims of a male-dominated system of violence (Auchter 2012, 126). Central works about women’s involvement in militant Islamist groups, such as Davis (2013), Bloom (2011), Cunningham (2007), Speckhard and Ahkmedova (2006) and (Speckhard 2009b), focus on that the women involved in these groups, solely are victims. They describe that a women’s motivation to, for instance, become suicide bomber, is that she has been abused, suffers from social stigmas, caused by childlessness or other social factors (Speckhard and Ahkmedova 2006; Speckhard 2009b; Bloom 2011). When Davis (2013) describes female suicide bombers in Iraq, she uses words such as “used by”, “employed by” the group, depriving them of their agency (281, 282). Men in contrast are described as being motivated by religious or nationalistic reasons (Jacques and Taylor 2008, 306).

I use the agent/victim dichotomy to analyse the relatives’ narratives. However, as Aucher (2012) points out, it is problematic to use a strict agent/victim dichotomy because it gives women either a role as a “victim of a patriarchal system or agent enabled to takeover that patriarchal system” (112). I do not employ the concept to discuss if the women joining Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups are agents or victims. I use it to highlight the dynamics in the relatives’ narratives to problematize their explanations for why the women joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups.

A word closely related to the concept of victimhood is “brainwashing”. As both media and the relatives in this study employ it, I briefly discuss the term. It has been a contested term within psychology, but it is beyond the scope of the thesis to discuss the debates, which has caused a rejection of the term (Richardson 2015, 210). According to Richardson it is impossible to “wash someone’s brain,” and the metaphor gives simplistic explanations of difficult events (ibid). The concept was used in the 1960s and 1970s in the US to explain why youth joined new religious movements (ibid, 211). The explanations were accepted by many as the idea, that youth made an informed decision to abandon American culture and institutions, was unthinkable for many,

especially disappointed parents (ibid). The term “brainwashing” was rejected by several scholars doing research about the new religious movements, who explained the youths’ participation through employment of proven theories from sociology and social psychology (ibid). By using the word “brainwashing”, the relatives describe the women as victims.

I use the concept of agent/victim dichotomy to analyse how the relatives position the women, who have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. This sheds lights on how the relatives experience the women in their narratives. It allows me to problematize the relatives’ explanations for why the women joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. In the next section, I discuss another theory allowing me to problematize the insight, which can be gained from the relatives’ lived experiences.

3.3. The Mobilization of Foreign Fighters to Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups

Through their interdisciplinary theory, Lindekilde and Bertelsen (2016) explain the mobilization of foreign fighters to Syria. The theory was first published in a Danish journal (Lindekilde and Bertelsen 2016), and later published in an English version (Lindekilde, Bertelsen, and Stohl 2016). I mainly use the latter as a source of reference. Although this theory focuses on the foreign fighters themselves, it provides insight into the potential and the limitations of relatives’ lived experiences. It demonstrates the challenges of understanding the processes occurring before individuals decide to join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups

The theory combine three different aspects: life psychology, social movement theory and group psychology (Lindekilde and Bertelsen 2016; Lindekilde, Bertelsen, and Stohl 2016). The first part is life psychology as introduced by Bertelsen (2013; 2015). Life psychology makes it possible to examine the risk factors in the environment of the foreign fighters. It is based on the assumptions that people seek to create a stable life, called “life embeddedness” (Lindekilde, Bertelsen, and Stohl 2016, 861). People experience threats to the life embeddedness if they lose their grip on life, caused by exclusion, non-recognition, loss of relatives or face economic crisis. This can cause self-uncertainty (ibid). Although, most people who experience threats to their life embeddedness manage to re-establish embeddedness, the authors argue that in rare cases, “the search to re-establish life embeddedness can lead to political or religious radicalization” (ibid).

The next part of Bertelsen and Lindekilde’s theory (2016) involves social movement theories. This shows how the 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, involves that social relations with friends or family who are involved in violent Islamist extremists group can make the individual join the same group to re-establish life embeddedness (Lindekilde, Bertelsen, and Stohl 2016, 859). *Organizational recruitment* involves the recruitment of youngsters via different outreach activities. Lastly, the mechanism of *self-selection*, involves that individuals contact the violent Islamist extremist groups themselves, triggered by framing activities (862).

The last theoretical part is psychological insight about group dynamics developments. This shows that membership in a group cause group polarization (Lindekilde, Bertelsen, and Stohl 2016, 865). Over time, the group members become increasingly sure about their beliefs, which makes the relations with people outside the group difficult (ibid, 866). Membership in a group gives people a feeling of a belonging, reduced uncertainty and renewed life embeddedness (ibid, 865). The theory shows how challenging it is to understand processes, such as group dynamics, unless you are a part of it yourself. It therefore provides a useful point of departure to discuss the insight, which can be gained from the relatives' experiences.

This section provided a theoretical framework to analyse the relatives' lived experiences. In this way, it is possible to analyse the paradigms discussed previously: That the relatives either are seen as part of the problem or the solution, and that they are used as witnesses in understanding the motivations of foreign fighters. Analysing the relatives' coping strategies shed light on both issues. Discussing the agent-victim dichotomy and the theory about mobilization of foreign fighters shed light on the potential and limitations of the relatives' narratives. To be able use these theories, it is necessary to investigate the relatives' lived experiences. In the next section, I provide a methodological framework for inquiring into their lived experiences.

4. Methodology

This chapter discusses the thesis' methodological framework, where I employ narrative inquiry. According to Riessman (1993) the concepts of reliability and validity do not apply to narrative inquiry (65). Instead of concentrating on reliability, it focuses on the work' trustworthiness (Webster and Mertova 2007, 5). Riessman (1993) highlights how trustworthiness is ensured, through "providing information about the research process" and through telling how "interpretations are produced" (68). I aim to do this through the methodological section as a whole.

I start discussing the design of the study, and then I provide information about the interviews, before discussing how I accessed my informants. Lastly, I discuss reflections regarding narrative research, ethical considerations and how I transcribed and analysed my data.

4.1. The Design of the Study

In order to investigate the insight, which can be gained from to relatives' experiences, it is necessary to employ a methodological framework focusing on lived experiences. For this reason, I employ narrative inquiry, which is a methodology for studying lived experience (Clandinin 2006). Narrative inquiry is a form of case-centred qualitative research, where "the case could be an individual, family or community" (Riessman 2012, 4). It privileges individual lived experience as a source of insight (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007, 69,37,49). However, within narrative inquiry, there are different methodologies, numerous interdisciplinary analytic lenses, all revolving around the interest for people living them (Chase 2005, 651). Therefore, I need to specify my approach. In this study I am inspired by Riessman (2008; 1993), who works with a broad definition of narrative inquiry. She uses it to conduct the whole research project: in the planning, conducting, writing up field data and conducting a narrative analysis of the findings.

A narrative can be a short story about a specific event, a story about an important aspect of one's life or a narrative of a person's entire life (Chase 2005, 652). The thesis focuses on a significant aspect of the relative's lives: the event that their female relative joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups, which was a disruptive life event for the relatives. As Riessman (2012) explains narrative inquiry is useful to study disruptive life events (697). For this thesis, it is suitable because it allows investigating the relatives' lived experiences from different angles, such as time, society and place.

4.2. Narrative Interviews

The research is based on narrative interviews with three relatives of women, who have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Jacob's two daughters and Rosa's niece joined IS, while Alia's sister worked for a group likely linked to Jabhat al-Nusrah. At the time of the interviews, Jacob's and Rosa's relatives were still alive, while Alia's sister most likely was killed. The numbers of informants allowed me to focus on their narratives in depth. As Riessman (1993) points out, narrative inquiry is "not useful for studies of large numbers of nameless subjects, is it requires attention to speech, organization of response, local contexts and social discourses" (69). As I only focus on few informants, I perceive them as a way of exploring the topic through case studies and the research is therefore not generalizable.

The interviews were conducted in Norway, Denmark and Sweden between December 2015 and February 2016, using the languages spoken in these three countries. The interviews took on average 90 minutes each and were placed in public coffee shops at the request of the participants. I asked for permission to record the interviews, and none of my respondents refused to be recorded, after I promised to not share it with others. The recordings were useful when analysing the interviews, as I used nuance and intonation to derive meaning from the interviews while listening back and analysing the material, such as advised by Hermanowicz (2002, 496).

Given and Ayres (2008) define narrative interviews as interviews “organized to facilitate the development of a text that can be interpreted through narrative analysis” (545). As this is my goal, I choose narrative interviews. Further, narrative interviews give the informants many opportunities to select and order events themselves (ibid). One way of starting a narrative inquiry, is through asking the participant to respond to interview questions (Clandinin and Huber 2010, 5). As the focus of the interview was a particular part of the informants’ life; their lived experiences of the fact that the women’s joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups, I employed unstructured interviews where the relative guided the conversations. The opening question was “Tell me about yourself and your relative, who went to Syria”, followed by follow-up questions when necessary. For me it was important to ensure that the following topics were explored during the interview: Firstly, the informant itself and how the relatives’ departure has influenced their lives. Secondly, the lived experience before and after the women joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Thirdly, the informants’ reflections of their own family, the role of religion and the role of the society. Inspired by Riessman (2008), I knew that one story can lead to another, and when a shift occurred I explored the new topic with the informant (26).

To ensure high quality of the interviews, I employed Hermanowicz’s (2002) advice for how to carry out great interviews. This was especially important in my case, as I was dealing with a sensitive issue. Experiencing that a relative join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups is shocking, and they constantly fear that they will receive notifications of the person’s death. To make the participation less challenging for the informants, I employed the insight from Dyregov’s (2004) article about bereaved parents’ experience of research participation. For instance, I decided to move on to new aspects, if I realized that, some issues were painful to talk about. It was important for me to show sympathy and compassion during the interviews, well aware of that our conversation would rip up

difficult memories. I told the informants several times that I was thankful because they wanted to share their story. Neither did I question their explanations during the interview.

4.3. Gaining Access

The process of gaining access was the most challenging part of my research. The relatives are through their relatives' membership in Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups influenced by an environment, affected by secrecy, suspicion and clandestine activity. The challenge of obtaining access to members of militant Islamists groups is discussed by several terrorism-researchers, such as (Speckhard 2009a; Dolnik 2013; Hemmingsen 2011b). For this reason, limited research about violent Islamist extremism is based on interviews with the people involved themselves (Dolnik 2013).

Access to relatives of women, who have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups was challenging for several reasons. During my research, I have read stories of relatives in the media, talked to networks of parents' organizations and to the authorities. What is clear is that most relatives do not want to talk; women in the IS-territory in particular threaten to stop contacting their families if they speak to someone about them. Some relatives have told their extended family-members that their children are studying abroad to avoid the shame, while others fear threats from IS. If the children are dead, grief makes talking difficult. Gaining access became more difficult as I focused on the women's families. Few women from Scandinavia have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups, and it appears more stigmatized that women join these groups.

A study by Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol (2014) based on interviews with family and friends of Dutchmen who joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups, reported the same obstacles; shame, sorrow and "fear that talking with researchers would lead to repercussions", either by the authorities or militant Islamists (103). Access was challenging in all Scandinavian countries. Between 2012 and 2014, the Danish National Centre for Social Research conducted a research project mapping 15 Danish extremist groups, including right-wing, left-wing and Islamist groups, aiming to increase the knowledge about the country's anti-democratic groups (SFI 2014). As Kotnis (2015) points out, this highly criticized and politicised Danish national mapping project have made access to informants in Denmark challenging as it created an atmosphere of suspicion (45). The access process was made even more complicated as Denmark and Sweden during my fieldwork introduced penalties for being in territories controlled by Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups (Justisministeriet 2016;

Riksdagsförvaltningen 2016). Norway introduced a new paragraph to its law in June 2013 and redefined it in 2016, making it possible to convict people to six years in prison for participating, supporting and recruiting for terror groups, such as IS and Jabhat al-Nusrah (Straffeloven 2016). During my research process, there were several court cases against Norwegian men who had fought in Syria (“Borgarting Lagmannsrett” 2016; Stokke 2016).

Dolnik (2013) suggests different approaches to gain access to terrorist- and clandestine groups, such as through counter-terrorism actors, local journalists, academics and NGOs (8). Initially I thought governmental actors and community workers would be good gatekeepers and I therefore contacted these in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Despite that some of them have established contact with family-members or foreign fighters in Syria, they were not willing to facilitate contact arguing with confidentiality, telling me they did not want to expose anyone or not willing to destroy the relationship they have built with them. The contact is sensitive because many relatives do not have any interest in talking to authorities as they feel they have received no support from them. I contacted support network for parents, which did not want to help me. After many unsuccessful attempts, I finally succeeded in getting in touch with three informants. One was through a journalist, one was through an NGO and one I met randomly at a conference. My research showed that the relatives had limited contact with each other. Therefore, employing a gatekeeper, such as suggested by O’Reilly (2012) did not help getting access to new informants. Focusing on Scandinavia as a whole increased the possibility of reaching informants.

In this regard, it is important to mention that the informants willing to talk to me belong to a specific group who had chosen to be open about their female relatives. From my informants I gained the impression that they wanted to share their stories to contribute to new research about the topic. Firstly, to highlight the consequences the travel had for the relatives and how to support them. Secondly, they hoped that their story would prevent other families from coming in their situation. I believe most relatives do not want to talk, because of shame, shock and sorrow. There are likely also relatives adhering to a Salafi-jihadi ideology, who encourage their relatives to join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Their story would have been different.

4.4. Performing Narrative Research

After obtaining my informants' contact information, I wrote them stating that I was a university student, who was conducting research for my master's degree thesis. I told them about my background and the aim of the study. As the informants already had showed interest through giving me their contact information, they already trusted me enough to meet after this initial contact.

To get a good interview, it was necessary to state my position. This is because the stories told, are affected by my position as a researcher and the relationship I developed with my informants. In line with Creswell (2009), I as a researcher recognize that my own background shape my interpretation, and position myself in the research to acknowledge how their interpretations flow from my personal, cultural and historical lived experience (8). I am from Norway, live in Denmark and I am taking my master's degree in Sweden. With respect to language, this helped me to conduct the research, as I speak Norwegian and Danish, and can make myself understood in Swedish. I have also studied and travelled in the Middle East for a decade, I speak good Arabic and my husband is a Muslim immigrant. I also needed to consider my gender. In the meeting with my two female informants, my gender was an advantage, as it created an immediate bonding. In the case of my male informant, my gender and our age difference felt like an obstacle in the beginning of the interview. However, after explaining my background, I gained confidence.

Although, I am an insider in Scandinavia, I was an outsider when meeting two of my informants, who were Muslim immigrants. I tried to overcome this difference, through clearly stating my position. When I told them about my husband, I believe the informants felt we had more in common as I have inside information about how it is to be a Muslim immigrant in Scandinavia. I did not face this challenge during the interview with my Scandinavian informant.

The relatives' narratives were likely affected by way they wanted to be understood. Riessman (1993) discusses how people narrate events in different ways, depending on the values and interest of the narrator, and their preferred identity (64). For instance, as shown in the literature review problems in the family environment can make people join violent extremist groups. The relatives did not reflect upon their own role prior to the relative's departure, nor did they discuss if they could have done anything differently. As the issue is emotional, it is necessary to consider that that the relatives did not reveal the most painful issues. Neither, did I want to ask into this, because of its

sensitivity. The time of the interviews affected the relatives' narratives. The informants' female relatives joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups two or three years ago. Although they still hoped that their relatives would return, it seemed like they acknowledged this would be difficult.

I perceive the study as a way to explore the topic of families and violent Islamist extremism. As Riessman (1993) states it is important to point out that "all forms of representation of lived experience are limited portraits" (15). For this reason I do not aim to generate general knowledge about the families' of Scandinavian women, who join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. I also want to highlight that narrative research does not aim to produce any conclusions, but to produce "well-reflected and supported findings" (Webster and Mertova 2007, 4).

4.5. Ethical Considerations

My research deals with several ethical considerations. As Kvale (1996) points out, a central aspect of ethical guidelines are "ethical codes, informed consent and confidentiality" (110). I obtained informed consent from the persons I interviewed. Inspired by Kvale I informed my informants about the research' purpose, told them about risks and benefits from participation, that they could withdraw their participation at any time and ensured anonymity (112). After finishing the interviews, I wrote the participants thanking for the participation and told them to contact me again if they wanted to add something, change what they said or needed support.

As I am researching a sensitive topic, I paid attention to ensure anonymity during the whole research project. Hemmingsen (2011b) highlights that protection the informants is "the core of the challenges arising from attempt to generate data on clandestine and stigmatized milieus through fieldwork" (1208). However, as O'Reilly (2012) states it is impossible to make a qualitative study completely anonymous, because in such a case not even the researcher should know who provided the data (69). To protect the informants' anonymity, I was inspired by Hemmingsen (2011b), and anonymized the informants in my notes and never wrote down sensitive information. In one case, the respondent told me "this is a secret", and I did not transcribe this information. The thesis as a whole focuses on Scandinavia to protect the informants' anonymity. It would almost have been impossible to make the relatives anonymous if I had focused on one country as few women have joined Salafi-jihadi groups from the individual Scandinavia countries. To protect the anonymity of my respondents, I have changed their names and other basic information that would make them easily identifiable, such as country of origin, current country and city of residence. I have also

removed the year their relatives travelled to Syria. Analysing the informants' narratives, show that the country of residence have minimal influence on their experiences.

4.6. Transcription and Narrative Analysis

Despite the issue is sensitive, the informants accepted that I recorded the interviews. After the interviews, I transcribed them. Recording and transcribing are essential to narrative analysis (Riessman 1993, 56), and it contributes to trustworthiness (Webster and Mertova 2007, 5). To ensure the initial meaning of the words were kept, I transcribed the interviews word for word in its original language. I translated relevant quotes in English to use for this thesis. I double-checked the transcripts to make sure they were correct. In cases when the recorded material was unclear, I noted this in my transcripts to ensure reliability. When transcribing, I made efforts to secure confidentiality and anonymity, taking notion of the issues I described in the previous section.

Following, I wrote the relatives' narratives as a narrative inquiry, inspired by the framework provided in multiple works by Clandinin (2006; Clandinin and Rosiek 2007; Clandinin and Huber 2010). This allowed me to highlight the relatives' lived experiences. Drawing on John Dewey's philosophy of experience, involving interaction and continuity, they build three commonplaces, which works as conceptual framework within narrative inquiry. These are *temporality*, *sociality and place*, and they need to "be simultaneously explored when undertaking a narrative inquiry" (Clandinin and Huber 2010, 3). *Temporality* involves to direct the inquiries towards the past, present, and events under study (Clandinin and Huber 2010, 3; Clandinin and Rosiek 2007, 69). *Sociality*, firstly pays attention to personal conditions, such as feelings, the environment and surrounding factors. Secondly, it pays attention to social conditions such as milieu and the conditions under which people's lived experiences and events are unfolding (Clandinin and Huber 2010, 3; Clandinin and Rosiek 2007, 69). The last feature is *place*, which draws attention to the places the inquiry and events take place (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007, 69).

Through this approach, I was able to investigate the complexity of the relatives' lived experiences and share them with the reader (Clandinin and Huber 2010, 3). This allowed me to enter a deeper level in their narratives, and enabled me to navigate between the relatives' voice and me as a researcher. In this way the criteria for narrative inquiry are fulfilled, such as "transparency, trustworthiness and reflexivity" (Speedy 2008, 56).

To analyse my data, I employed narrative analysis, which is "the systematic study of narrative data"

(Riessman 2008, 6). There are many forms of narrative analysis. I used narrative positioning analysis, based on the framework provided by Bamberg (1997). This form of narrative analysis, takes its departure in positioning theory. Positioning concerns how people locate themselves and others, and limits the possibilities of action (Harré and Moghaddam 2003, 5). It is useful in my research, to analyse how the relatives experience both their own and the women's position. This highlights the complexities of the relatives' lived experiences.

As Harré and Langenhove (1998), two of the founders of positioning theory, say positioning should be understood as the way people “dynamically produce and explain everyday behaviour” (29). According to Bamberg (1997) positioning analysis is a way to give more attention to how the narrator constructs his or her narrative (341). Bamberg focuses on three analytical levels of narrative positioning: the first level focuses on how narrators position themselves and others within the reported events (337). The analysis focuses on how the narrators construct characters within the story, for instance as heroes and victims (ibid). Secondly, Bamberg focuses on how narrators position themselves in relation to the audience, primarily the interviewer. This level analyses the linguistic means used. For instance, it analyses if the narrator excuses his actions and if he attributes blame to others (ibid). The third level focuses on how narrators position themselves to themselves (ibid, 338). The analysis focuses on the language the narrator uses to make his claims relevant.

As the literature review showed, researchers increasingly use narratives of relatives, mostly based on media research, to provide stories of the individuals joining Salafi-jihadi groups without discussing its limitations. Through employing positioning as a framework, I avoid this because it enables me to highlight how the relatives position the different characters in their narratives. This opens up for a critical reflection of how the relatives perceive the characters in their narratives, how it influences their lived experiences and the insight, which can be gained from them.

This section discussed how I use narrative inquiry as a methodological framework for my study. In the next section, I combine this insight to present the relatives' lived experiences.

5. Findings and Narrative Analysis of the Relatives' Narratives

In order to discuss what insight can be gained from the relatives' experiences, it is necessary to inquire into their lived experiences. In this section, I provide accounts of the lived experiences of

Alia, Rosa and Jacob, who have experienced that their female relatives joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. After an individual narration of their lived experiences, I proceed to analyse their narratives. Their stories are narrated individually to be able to explore and pay attention to each individual's unique story. This is an important element of narrative studies, as it relies on extended accounts that are "treated analytically as units" (Riessman 2008, 12). To be able to explore the relatives' lived experiences, I pay attention to *temporality*, *sociality* and *place*, defining factors within narrative inquiry. Based on Bamberg's (1997) framework for positioning analysis I have identified four different levels in the relatives' narratives: the narrator, the families, the women and networks. Despite the fact that the narrators travel in time, society and place, I have decided to present their narratives revolving around these four levels for the convenience of the reader.

Following an account of the relatives' lived experiences, I analyse their narratives through discussing temporality, sociality and place. Then I employ Bamberg's (1997) analytical level of narrative positioning to analyse the way the relatives position themselves, the women and the wider context within their stories. I start with Jacob's story.

5.1. Jacob's Story

After Jacob's two daughters secretly joined IS some years ago, his life has focused on how to get them to return to Scandinavia. Jacob was a child soldier in his country of birth and came to Scandinavia twenty years ago with his young children. He has five children, but only one remains in Scandinavia. After his daughters left, his wife brought his two youngest children back to their home country.

5.1.1 The Narrator

Immediately after Jacob realized his daughters were on their way to Syria, he followed them in an attempt to get them to return home. It was a hopeless effort. The first weeks he spent in Turkey, but the girls had already crossed the Syrian border. He has travelled several times to Syria in the subsequent years, aiming to get them back. Once he found one of the girls, but was imprisoned by IS:

They gave us five minutes to meet my daughter, before I was imprisoned by IS. I can't describe it. It was the worst hell on earth, both mentally and physically. (...) Several times they told me to admit that I was a spy. I didn't. In the end I managed to flee. (...)

Despite his other travels, he has not been able to meet his daughters again. As most other women who have joined IS, Jacob's daughters married after their arrival. He explains that he has helped other Scandinavian women from leaving IS, but that he has not been able to get his daughters to leave. He claims that the one of the daughters wants to go home:

She wants to go home, but it is difficult. (...) It involves that she risk her life: The smallest sign that you are not pleased with being in IS, you become history.

Jacob was open with his story, but he has paid a price and risked his personal safety. The first time I contact him, he tells me to send him an SMS with my phone-number. He does not answer phone calls unless he knows the numbers. He fears that IS' supporters want to hurt him. Several times, he has experienced threatening phone calls and physical attacks in his home:

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.

Jacob feels that the society has left him alone in his battle to get his daughters home:

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". (...).

This quote demonstrates that Jacob feels the society should have stopped his daughters from travelling in the first place.

5.1.2 The Family

The fact that the women joined IS has destroyed his family. He emphasises that they used to be a "normal family":

We were a very social family, like a normal Scandinavian family. We used to do sports and hike together. We went to theme parks, travelled (...). I had a good job, so I had

a good income. We used most of this to enjoy life. My daughters were well integrated. (...) They had more Scandinavian friends than friends from our country. (...). They had a future here. (...). They were good in school. I have been that kind of dad who tried to respect the children. “I want to do this dad”. Then I would tell them: “I am behind you. I support you”. I have to get them back. I won’t give up. I want to get them back. And then, suddenly, everything changed to chaos. What happened? Everyone who knew us, became shocked. (...) And all the signs, I felt it, but the problem was that I didn’t expect it to happen.

In this part of the narrative, Jacob emphasizes the normality of the family. After his daughters left, the authorities started investigating the family, and considered to place his two youngest children into foster-care because they believed something was wrong with his family. He explains that his wife is suffering, and that her heart is broken.

5.1.3 The Women

One important aspect in Jacob’s story is to seek explanations as to why the daughters left. One term he uses several times is “brainwashing”:

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.

Jacob blames himself because he did not realize that the women wanted to travel before they left:

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.

Jacob’s quote highlights how difficult it was for him to discover his daughters’ plan about travelling to Syria.

5.1.4 Network

The oldest daughter had become a part of a Salafi-network in their hometown one or two years before they travelled. Jacob does not know if and how they influenced the daughters. Other women travelled from this mosque.

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 investigations, not me. (...) However, mostly it was through Internet.

Jacob's story is about pain, physically and emotionally, a struggle to get women home and broken family-relationships. He still has hope:

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

This shows that Jacob will continue his battle to get the women home. In what follows I analyse his narrative.

5.2. A Narrative Analysis of Jacob's Story

I analyse Jacob's narrative through discussing temporality, sociality and place to highlight Jacob's lived experiences, before employing Bamberg's (1997) framework for narrative positioning analysis.

Regarding temporality, Jacob dreams about the happy days he used to share with his family. It was destroyed the day his daughters decided to join IS. Jacob's present life is affected by his daughters' departure. He hopes to restore the life he once lived, which can only be achieved if he manages to get his daughters home. This affects his future actions: his battle to get them back. Discussing sociality, which focuses on his feelings and conditions in the environment, highlights how Jacob feels grief and sorrow because his daughters left. The feeling of sorrow is strengthened by the way he feels abandoned by society. There are two important places in Jacob's story: Scandinavia and Syria, and he travels between these two places in his narrative.

Employing Bamberg's framework (1997) shows that Jacobs positions four characters in his story: Firstly, himself, he is the hero, the caring family father who is trying to solve the situation the daughters have ended up in. The second level is the family. He emphasizes that his family is a normal family. The third level is his daughters, whom he portrays as victims. This is clear in the way he uses "brainwashed" as an explanation for why they joined IS. The fourth level is the networks the daughters were a part of, but he lacks insight into the role these networks played.

In order to strengthen his arguments, Jacob shows an incredible knowledge about IS. Rather than giving up, Jacob is trying to help his daughters get home. Through positioning his daughters as victims, he attributes blame to strangers. Blame is also a part of Alia's story, which I present in the next narrative.

5.3. Alia's Story

Alia, a woman in her twenties, is a busy mother. We spent several months to find a time to meet. We finally succeed and meet in a café, in a big Scandinavian city. She tells her story in a gap between school and picking up her children from kindergarten. Her makeup is perfect, and her clothes match her Hijab in a fashionable way. Her family came to Scandinavia from a war-torn Muslim country when she was a child, and they grew up in a family of six children. Although Alia's parents divorced during her childhood, she describes a happy childhood with caring parents. She and her sister had a special relationship with their father. This happiness was disrupted six-seven years ago when their father died from cancer. Alia herself is a devoted Muslim and respects her father for the way he taught them about Islam and the importance of respecting other religions. Alia's sister, Sara, unexpectedly went to Syria some years ago and the authorities have told her that she likely was killed four weeks later. When talking, Alia navigates between different segments of her stories; from her sister's death, the departure and their life together.

5.3.1 The Narrator

When Alia starts telling her story, she talks about her sister as if still is still alive. However, during her story she gradually changes to describing her sister as dead. She repeats her sorrow several times, discussing it from different angles. Sometimes she says she still has hope. Other times not:

It is like a dream for me that Sara is not here anymore, probably not in this world. I will never talk to her again. When I am sleeping, she still comes up in my dreams. It

is like a nightmare. But it is not. This is the reality. This has happened; we cannot do anything about it.

The quote shows that Alia is suffering after Sara decided to travel to Syria and that she is in the process of grief.

5.3.2 The Family

Alia repeatedly tells that her family support themselves financially and do not exploit the welfare-system in her country. Instead, she focuses on the fact that her siblings were highly educated with stable income jobs. The family was shocked when they realized Sara travelled to Syria. Alia explains her family's reaction:

My mother cried: "Come back here. (...) What are you doing there?" Then Sara said: "No, I am here. I am doing a good deed. I am helping children (...) I really want you to forgive me. I know what I did was wrong, but I did it for my own sake. I did not do it to harm you". My mother was upset about it. She got sick (...). I told Sara: "You have to come back". Sara says: "No, I am not coming back."

Sara is a taboo topic in Alia's family. Only Alia's children speak about her, when they ask when their auntie is returning. She shares her story with me, because she expresses that she needs to talk about it:

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 all have 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.

5.3.3 The Woman

Alia describes that Sara had a good heart, and that she was talented and had top grades. She compares herself to Sara, emphasising that Sara has many of the qualities she lacks. Alia states she does not understand why her sister decided to go to Syria. However, she recalls how she at one point became suspicious. In her story Alia seeks explanations for why her sister went, saying:

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. (...) 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 will never do that. Do you think I am crazy?” I told my mother to talk to her, warning 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”.

Alia tells how her sister as a 16-year old married a religious Arab. They had met in a mosque. She divorced him, when she realized that this man was already married and had a child. Alia says:

That was fine enough. My family didn't like him. She was too young, she was studying. He was too old for her. And he was very religious. She was not.

An interesting part of our conversation is when Alia starts talking about the weeks before her sister left. Sara did everything she was able to hide travelling plans from her family:

The weeks before Sara went; she and her friends bought many clothes. (...). They told they were collecting donations to 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. The day before she went, we sat together and talked about everything. (...). Our mother was going to come home the next day. She says: “I will miss you” “What do you mean?”, I ask. She said: “When our mother comes home, I will stay with her the next four days.” I said: “That is right.” She wanted to tell me she was travelling. She left five o'clock in the morning, saying that she was going to the mosque, to organize the clothes to Syria.

Sara travelled to Syria with a friend, who introduced her to the mosque together with a group of Salafi women. This friend's husband was already in Syria. When the family realized Sara was on her way to Syria, they contacted the police to get her home. The police told them they could not do much. After her sister left for Syria, they were in touch for three weeks through the social media site Viber:

When Sara was in Syria, she used the camera on Viber to show me around. She showed me children playing (...) She worked as a volunteer in a camp. She helped orphanage children (...) She 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.

5.3.4 Network

Alia describes how her sister started attending a Salafi mosque with a friend a year before she went and how she gradually became religious. In some ways, Alia respected this change:

She started to become religious and to learn about our religion, our *diin*, became very important for her. (...) That is fine enough. I would also like to learn more about our religion. (...) Four months later, she travels.

One part of this religious manifestation was that Sara stopped going to the gym with Alia. Sara also started covering herself in Niqab. Alia again start discussing the mosque saying:

The only thing you could see was 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.

Alia seeks explanations for why her sister started attending the mosque and for why she left: She describes that it was due to her young age, because her sister was befriended with a girl and because of a particular man in the mosque. According to Alia, 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 in the same plane.”. But here in Scandinavia,

it is what it is like. If there are no clear proofs, you can't get arrested. (...) I have proof.
My sister is gone.

Alia's story is about the pain caused by her sister's departure. However, it also gives insight into the time before Sara went to Syria. I analyse the meaning of her story in the next section.

5.4. A Narrative Analysis of Alia's story

After telling Alia's story, I now analyse it. In Alia's narrative the analytical lenses within narrative inquiry are all intertwined: temporality, sociality and place. Her story reveals how painful it is to lose a relative in Syria.

Regarding temporality, Alia glorifies the past she shared with her family, especially with her sister and father. Presently, the grief caused by the loss of Sara influences her life. However, as the family never has received final proof about her sister's death, she still keeps hope for the future. Regarding sociality, focusing on Alia's feelings, shows that she is in a process of bereavement. She repeats it in different ways. Alia discusses different places in her narrative: her hometown in Scandinavia, her country of birth and Syria. Her country of birth fills an important part of the narrative as she dreams to visit it some time. The way Alia describes Syria contrasts the way she describes her birth country.

Employing Bamberg's framework (1997) for positioning analysis on Alia's narrative highlights different levels in Alia's story. She positions herself as the rock in her family: The one who takes responsibility for her own family and her sister. However, her grief makes her powerless. The second level is her family, which she emphasizes as a normal family and about which she states that they all have good jobs. Sara is another level in her narrative. Alia positions her sister as everything she herself is not. Sara was kinder than her, she was prettier than her, her grades were higher than Alia's. To some extent Alia portrays her sister as a hero, also after she went to Syria. This contrasts the media discourse concerning these women, which describes them as "Jihadi brides" and "lured". Alia feels abandoned by Sara, as she just suddenly left them. She seeks explanations for why her sister left, but at the same time, these reasons are not as important as the fact that Sara likely died.

There are contradictions in Alia's story. Especially regarding why Sara decided to travel to Syria. In the beginning of interview, she says that she did not understand why Sara went. At other times, she describes that Sara went there to help the Syrian civil population. And lastly, she blames both a man in the mosque and her sister's friend because they convinced Sara to travel. In this way, she

positions her sister as a victim. However, Alia uses quotes from Sara in her interview where Sara states that she went to Syria voluntarily and that she was not influenced by anyone. This highlights the complexity of Alia's narrative. Alia uses quotes from her sister and her family, to support her arguments and to convince me as the person interviewing her. It is almost as if I can follow the events taking place.

While Alia's story is about grief, Rosa constantly fears to receive the same message as Alia has: a death notification. I tell her story in the next section.

5.5. Rosa's Story

I meet Rosa on a cold winter day in a small Scandinavian city. She is of Scandinavian origin and has children herself. Rosa's niece, Lisa, joined IS some years ago, bringing 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.

5.5.1 The Narrator

Rosa spends time worrying about Lisa, longing to hear news about her. Once, she shared her story publically, but not without consequences. Rosa tells that her social media account was hacked and that she received strange phone calls from a secret number. The person who called did not say anything. Rosa says:

I am not afraid of anything anymore. If IS had perceived me as a threat, then they would already have tried to do something.

Depending on Lisa's internet access, Rosa has contact with Lisa through social media. Therefore, she has insight into the lives of women in the territory. Rosa and her family have tried to help Lisa return to Scandinavia. Rosa explains:

We had gotten so far, that we knew she still had her passport and visa. Then we decided to collect money, but suddenly she changed her mind saying that she was not going to leave (...). When we later asked if she was okay or if she needed anything, then she said everything was okay. It was just bullshit (...) I wanted her to tell the truth. I have seen women sitting down there. They are under surveillance, so they can't write what

they want. Later Lisa published a picture of her son on Facebook, where he was standing under a flag with the confession of faith and a weapon. (...) Lisa publishes photos like this as a provocation, in order to get attention.

5.5.2 The Family

After Rosa publically shared her story, the rest of her family abandoned her. They fear that IS will start threatening the family.

After I openly shared my story my relatives turned their backs on me. My siblings don't talk with 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.

5.5.3 The Woman

Rosa tries to find explanations for why her niece joined IS. She says:

I think she left because she wanted to belong somewhere. She didn't have anyone here. Her mother died. She was looking for an identity. In Syria she became someone.

After her mother died from cancer, Rosa believes Lisa faced a life crisis. Lisa's mother was a convert, but Lisa was not a practicing Muslim before her mother died.

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 in 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 the contact with her previous friends. (...) It was like she started a breakup, to be able to travel.

One day Lisa told Rosa she was going on a vacation alone to Turkey with her son because she needed to "think things through". However, she travelled into the IS-held territory. Rosa told how

Lisa's support for IS was apparent on her social media profiles, where she had published an IS-flag. However, at that time Rosa did not know what this meant.

We did not receive proofs that she was alive, before the end of August. Then Lisa's son called his dad. (...) The son said he loved him. (...). Then the son told that the dad should forget him, because he was not going to come back home. (...) Then the boy stopped the conversation. Following we were on the Internet, trying to figure out what was going home. When we heard from Lisa some weeks later, they were in the IS-territories.

After Lisa left, she told Rosa that she got to know a man through the internet before travelling. They married when she came to the area. Rosa believes Lisa's son at least at one point has been sent to an IS training camp for children. Rosa is obviously fascinated by this story. During the interview, she shows me IS propaganda videos on the internet, showing an IS training camp for children. She shows me pictures of Lisa's son: a beautiful 4-years old boy.

5.5.4 Network

What is interesting with Rosa's story is that "sisters", IS-supporters in Scandinavia, have contacted her. They have either asked for news about Lisa or given Rosa updates about her. They communicated through social media sites, and she shows me some of the messages. These people know someone, who knows someone in Syria. At one occasion, one of these sisters wanted Rosa to send things to Lisa in the IS-held territory in Syria. However, she never sent the items. 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 or what?"

When I met Rosa, she had not spoken to Lisa for months. However, on my way home, she sends me a text message: "I have just heard from her. She is alive".

5.6. A Narrative Analysis of Rosa's Story

I now analyse Rosa's narrative. When describing the past, Rosa seeks explanations for why Lisa joined IS. She focuses on Lisa's difficult life. Presently, Lisa's travel influences her life. She is trying to help Lisa and her son to return to Scandinavia. For Rosa it is challenging that they spend

months without contact. For the future, Rosa hopes Lisa will return. In terms of sociality, Rosa is affected by the fact that Lisa joined IS, and she constantly fears to receive sad news. Scandinavia and Syria are two important places in her narrative.

Analysing Rosa's story through Bamberg's (1997) positioning framework shows that there are no heroes and no victims in her story. However, she positions herself as a caring aunt trying to help her niece. The second level she discusses is her family. Her relationship with her family was destroyed, after Rosa shared her story publically. The third level in her narrative is Lisa. To explain why Lisa joined IS, she says that she was lost in life. Sometimes Rosa disclaims what Lisa says. For instance, once Lisa told Rosa that she was doing "okay" in the IS-territory. As a reply, Rosa said "bullshit". Another level in Rosa's story is networks. She has frequently been in touch with IS supporters in Scandinavia. This shows that a network of IS-supporters seek active engagement with the families.

Rosa supports her arguments by showing messages she has written to Lisa and other IS supporters in Scandinavia. Through showing me IS' propaganda videos she demonstrates that she seeks to increase her knowledge about the group. Rosa's story is about how a Scandinavian woman, without any ties to neither Islam nor the Middle East, suddenly became affected by IS. Despite this, she does not judge Lisa, but just wants her to return home safely. The relatives all share this.

The relatives' lived experiences highlight that they are suffering because the women joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. They were against the women's decisions and did not realize their plans before it was too late. It was surprising, shocking and caused sorrow. Both Jacob and Rosa have experienced threats after being open about their stories. The women's travel destroyed their families. Jacob's son is the only one remaining in Scandinavia, as his wife returned to their country of birth. Rosa's family have turned their backs on her, because she has talked publically about her story. Alia's family lives as before, without mentioning the sister, who is a taboo in her family. She expresses that her family feels guilty, because they did not do anything to stop her sister. Both Jacob and Rosa experience abandonment by the society, saying that the authorities did not do anything to help. Alia is the only one who feels that the authorities have tried to help them, although the authorities told them the chances were slim. In the following section, I discuss the significance of this insight further.

6. Analysis: The Insight Gained from the Relatives' Lived Experiences

Although the previous narratives show that each story is unique, the relatives have shared lived experiences. Based on the individual narratives, I have identified two tendencies: firstly, the relatives are suffering because the women joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Secondly, the relatives blame others than themselves and the women for why they their female family-members joined these groups. They lack insight into what caused the women to join these groups. These two issues conflict with the insight emerging from the literature review regarding the role of families and violent Islamist extremism. Firstly, that families are used as witnesses to understand why youth join Salafi-jihadi groups. Secondly, that families either are seen as part of the problem, or part of the solution. In what follows I discuss the two paradigms closer, drawing on the theoretical framework, insight from the literature review and the relatives' lived experiences. In this way, I analyse the thesis' research question: *What insight can be gained from the lived experiences of relatives of Scandinavian women, who have joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups?*

6.1. Witness in Understanding the Women's Motivations?

Academic research, mostly based on media analysis, uses the families' stories to explain the motivations of foreign fighters. This section analyses this through two approaches: firstly, by discussing how the relatives position the women within the narratives. Secondly, by analysing the relatives' experience of the time before the women joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. In this way, I discuss the first sub-question identified in this thesis: To what extent do the relatives' experiences shed light on why Scandinavian women join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups?

6.1.1 The Women as Victims

The way the relatives position the women within their narratives shows that they blame others than the women for their decisions to join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. As Harré and Lagenhove (1999) say positioning is used by people to cope with the situation they find themselves in (17). For this reason, the way the relatives position the women shows their coping strategies. Blaming other than the women is an emotion-oriented coping strategy. It appears to be a way of removing the guilt from the women themselves and from the families. As the theory about coping showed, this way of reframing the problem is a normal strategy to handle difficult life-situations (Lazarus 1993). The relatives' experiences show they are facing a traumatic life-period.

Rosa positions her niece as lost in life and states one time that she is "brainwashed". Jacob says his

daughters were “brainwashed”. Alia blames her sister’s friend and a person in the mosque for why her sister travelled. As discussed in the theory-section the term “brainwashing” offers simplified and reductionist explanations implying victimhood. This way of positioning, the women show that they perceive them as victims rather than as agents. “Brainwashing” is also a common term used to portray the women joining Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups within the media discourse. Employing “brainwashing” and victimhood about the women as an explanation resonates with central critics within feminist studies, about how women are portrayed as victims of violence rather than as perpetrators of violence (Auchter 2012). For this reason, the way the relatives’ position the women as victims reflects a common tendency.

However, in their own narratives the relatives reveal a hidden agency in the way they describe the women. The fact that the women travelled to Syria on their own contests that they lack agency. More importantly, Alia and Rosa state that the relatives did not want to return home, despite the wish of the family. Alia uses quotes from her sister in her story, where Sara explains that she went because of her own will and that she did not want to return. During that time, in contrast to today, it was possible for women to leave Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. However, the narrators deny their female relatives an agency and perceive them to be victims. This shows a binary in the relatives’ positioning of the women and the relatives’ descriptions of the women’s actions.

The way the family members’ position the women as victims within their narratives contrast how IS and Al-Qaeda portray the role of women. Both Al-Qaeda and IS emphasise that women are political agents, but forbid them from taking part in combat (Lahoud 2014; Hemmingsen 2014; Aasgaard 2016; Bloom 2011). As the literature review shows, women in the IS-territory are portrayed as essential for building the new state through being mothers and teaching their children about religion (Smith and Saltman 2015; Hoyle, Frenett, and Bradford 2015; Aasgaard 2016; Winter 2015). Therefore, the way the relatives position the women as victims, contrast how they position the women within their narratives and the way Jihadi-organizations portray the role of women. In the two latter cases, they are positioned as agents. The way the relatives solely position the women as victims, demonstrates that the relatives’ narratives are influenced by other interest than giving an objective explanation of the women’s motivations.

Discussing the agency/victimhood dichotomy demonstrates that the relatives deprive the women of their agency, despite that other factors indicate they have agency. This can also be a way to

externalise their pain by blaming outsiders. It is necessary to mention, that blaming outsiders is not solely a gendered phenomenon. Maher and Neumann (2016) reported that a smaller number of families in their open source sample, were externalizing their pain by blaming outsiders (12). The relatives' narratives and explanations are a way of coping with the fact that their female relatives left them. It is a way of protecting both themselves and the women. Although women primarily marry and raise children while participating in Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups, the wider social, political and legal discourse in Scandinavia perceive them as supporters. Due to Scandinavian terror jurisdiction, they face prosecution if they return home as it is illegal to be present in the territories controlled by IS and Jabhat al-Nusra (Justisministeriet 2016; Straffeloven 2016; Riksdagsförvaltningen 2016). In my opinion, this can be another reason for why the relatives positioned the women as victims, rather than active supporters of Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups.

This discussion demonstrates that it is problematic to use the relatives as witnesses to shed light on why the women joined these groups. Other factors influence their narratives. This also resonates with a central debate within the Middle Eastern studies: It is important to talk with the Muslim women, and not just about them (Al-Ali 2000; Mahmood 2012). In the next section, I discuss further, why it is challenging to use the relatives' lived experiences to understand why the women joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups.

6.1.2 Standing on the Outside

The women's contact with a Salafi-network in their home country before they left is an essential part of the relatives' positioning of the women within their narratives. Despite that, the relatives knew the women were a part of these networks; they became shocked when they realized the women had joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. In order to analyse the implications of this, I use Lindekilde and Bertelsen (2016) interdisciplinary theory about the mobilization of foreign fighters.

Employing, Lindekilde's and Bertelsen's theory on the relatives' narratives show that the relatives' lived experiences provide some insight, although limited into what caused the women to leave. All women were parts of a Salafi network before they travelled. The way Rosa positions Lisa, can indicate that Lisa faced threatened life-embeddness. Rosa thinks her niece sought the religious environment because she faced a life crisis. Lisa grew up without a father, and she lost her mother. Loss of a dear one can pose threat to life embeddness. However, as we have not heard Lisa's explanations it is impossible to draw any conclusions. It is also impossible to conclude in the case

of Jacob's and Alia's relatives.

The relatives' lived experiences give some insight into why the women became parts of religious groups: Alia's narrative shows that Sara started attending the mosque because of a friend, with whom she also travelled to Syria. Jacob told how 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*, entailing that family bonds can facilitate recruitment into violent Islamist extremists groups, because families often link individuals who share similar beliefs. Alia's and Sara's case differs, despite that they are sisters. Only Sara became involved in the network. There can be many reasons for this: Alia is older and is responsible for her children. In Lisa's case, *the mechanism of self-selection* was important for the way Lisa came in contact with a group of Salafi. Rosa believed Lisa established contact with them herself through a female Salafi group on Facebook. However, only Alia had some insight about how the network her sister was a part of, facilitated her travel.

The concrete events within the groups are unknown for the relatives. As Lindekilde, Bertelsen, and Stohl (2016) show, departure to Syria as an option is likely established via mechanisms in the group interaction (866). As group dynamic developments involve closed group interactions, it is impossible for outsiders to understand its influence. For this reason, the relatives did not discover the women's intention to join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Therefore, their travels were shocking and surprising, and the relatives blamed themselves for not understanding it before it was too late. In fact, Jacob was unsecure about if and how this network influenced his daughters, and mentioned the role of Internet without providing any details. Alia was at some point impressed by her sister, who gained deeper knowledge about Islam and tried to follow her religion. Rosa's narrative about how Lisa got in touch with a network is also ambiguous.

An interesting factor is that the relatives did not experience that the women's involvement in these networks caused isolation from their families. This contrast research about the phenomena (Roy 2016; Silke 2008; Leiken 2012; Lützing 2012; Bakker 2006; Sageman 2004; Lindekilde, Bertelsen, and Stohl 2016). Neither did the relatives' experience a generational revolt between them and the women, such as described by Roy (2016). Instead, the relatives experienced that the women tried to act normally and the women deliberately hid the fact that they planned to leave for Syria.

This indicates a gendered difference between men and women.

I have now discussed the way the relatives position the women and their participations in networks within their narratives. The relatives position the women as victims, rather than as agents. It is a way to externalise their pain and must be perceived as coping strategies. Analysing the relatives' positioning of networks show that the relatives have limited insight into why the women joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. For these two reasons, it is problematic that families are used as witnesses to understand the motivations of foreign fighters, which is frequently done as methodical approaches within the research field. The families lived experiences of what happened have limited ability to shed light on person's motivations. This raises the question: what can be learnt from the relatives' lived experiences? I discuss this in the next section.

6.2. Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?

Although the relatives' narratives give limited insight into what caused the women to leave, it is essential to discuss the insight, which that can be gained from relatives' lived experiences. I do so, through problematizing another paradigm within the research field of violent extremism: that that family is seen a part of the problem to why their family members become enrolled into violent extremist groups. Either this is caused by problems in the family environment or that family-members increasingly recruit each other. In contrast, political CVE-initiatives, such as the Arhus model, claim that families are essential to counter violent extremism. These two interests are conflicting. In this section, I discuss the relatives' lived experiences from these two perspectives, before analysing its implications. In this way, I discuss the second sub-question: To what extent do families play a causal or preventative role in Scandinavian women's decision to join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups?

The relatives' narratives challenge the fact that family members are a part of the problem. The relatives were against the women's decision and would have done what they could to stop them from travelling, if they had detected it in time. It was surprising, shocking and caused sorrow. Although research indicates that problems in the family environment can make people join violent extremist groups, two of the relatives' narratives indicated the opposite. Only Rosa revealed that Lisa experienced a challenging life. Problems in the family environment are also one of the stigmas the relatives of those joining Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups face. Within the political Scandinavian discourses, it is stigmatizing that people join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Goffman (1963) highlights

how a stigma is transmitted through families, influencing all family members (14). In fact, two of the informants, Alia and Jacob face a doubled stigma; one due to their status as Muslim immigrants, another after their relatives joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Unlike most relatives, the informants have decided to reveal their stigmatized quality through being open about their stories. In this way, they negotiate themselves away from the stigma. Further to “pass as normal”, in Goffman’s terms, Alia and Jacob focus on their families’ normality by emphasising that the family members had good jobs and was not supported by Scandinavia’s welfare systems.

The relatives’ narratives also show that it is problematic to see the relatives as a part of the solution to counter violent Islamist extremism. As shown in the previous section, the relatives explain why the women left through an emotion-oriented coping strategy. However, to cope with the fact that the relatives travelled, they use other coping strategies. As Lazarus (1993) states it is possible to encounter situations with different coping strategies (239). Despite that, all three relatives suffer, only Alia handle this through an emotion-oriented coping strategy. In contrast, Jacob and Rosa’s positioning of their own role, show they handle the suffering with a task-oriented coping strategy. They try to help the relatives return home. While Jacob has physically travelled to Syria several times, Rosa has gathered money. This shows that the relatives have the potential to be a part of the solution. However, several issues make this challenging. Both Jacob and Rosa feel that that they have not received any help to get their female relatives back home. If the relatives are to be a part of the solution, they need extensive help and support during the whole process. Perceiving the relatives as a part of the solution requires that the society is willing to help them in time. The support system for relatives who have experienced family members joining Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups is improving in some cities, such as Aarhus. Yet relatives in most other Scandinavian cities are left on their own.

Help from the authorities is not enough. Although the relatives would have done everything to stop the women from joining Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups, research shows that the family has limited influence on their family members after they become involved in violent extremist groups (Sieckelinck and Winter 2015, 32). This was the case with all three relatives. The women decided to join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups against the families’ will, and at least two of them did not want to return. Lastly, the relatives’ lived experiences show that they pay a price if they actively engage themselves in CVE-efforts. Jacob and Rosa, who have talked about their stories, have experienced threats.

The relatives' experiences show that it is problematic that research and CVE-efforts perceive the family to be either part of the problem or part of the solution. Employing narrative inquiry as a methodology highlights the complexity of their lived experiences. The relatives are human beings, trying to cope with a difficult life situation. They take different coping strategies, depending on when they position themselves and the women in the narrative. Although Jacob and Lisa make efforts to get the women home, like other relatives who have experienced that a relative joins a Salafi jihadi-groups, they are facing a life crisis. This is also the case with the relatives studied in Maher and Neumann (2016) report based on media analysis: it shows how relatives of foreign fighters are suffering from pain, confusion, anger and shame. As this report mainly focuses on men, there is no gendered difference between the universal negative perceptions of the youngsters' decision to join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. The relatives' life crisis is likely why it was impossible for me to gain access to relatives through using community workers as gatekeepers. They acknowledged the vulnerability of the relatives. However, one should not exclude that there likely are relatives, who do not come forward, who support the fact that relatives join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups.

The relatives' lived experiences show how difficult it is that a relative joins Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Despite that, they cope with the situation, through making efforts to help the women return home, the authorities should encounter them as human beings in vulnerable positions. Therefore, it is problematic that relatives are placed in two conflicting categories: part of the solution or part of the problem. It is also misleading that relatives are used as witnesses to explain why young people join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups: their narratives are influenced by their difficult life situation. This leads me to the final part of the thesis: the conclusion.

7. Conclusion

This thesis explored the lived experiences of relatives of Scandinavian women, who have joined Salafi-jihadi groups. In this way, it discussed the insight arriving from the relatives' experiences. It did so through two focuses: firstly, through investigating what insight the relatives' experiences revealed about the reasons for why the women joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. Secondly, it investigated the role the family played. Hence, it questioned two paradigms regarding the role of families and violent Islamist extremism: that the narratives of family members are used to explain

why Europeans join Salafi-jihadi groups, and that the family is seen as part of the problem or part of the solution to the fact that their family members join violent Islamist extremist groups.

Although relatives are important voices, the analysis of the relatives' narratives demonstrated that it is misleading to use their narratives to understand why youngsters join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. This is clear in the way the relatives positioned the women and the networks in their narratives. The analysis showed that the relatives position the women as victims. This is a way to externalise their pain by blaming outsiders. The analysis highlighted that the relatives have limited insight into what caused the women to join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. The relatives' narratives should therefore be seen as coping-strategies to handle the pain, rather than as witnesses in understanding why women join Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. When telling their stories, they have other agendas than providing an objective picture. This highlighted that it is problematic that research increasingly uses interviews with family members, mostly based on media-analysis, to investigate the motivations of men and women joining Salafi-jihadi groups.

The cases explored showed that the relatives suffer after the women joined Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups. This is in form of sorrow, grief, broken family relationship and being threatened. They feel abandoned by the society. For this reason, the relatives' experiences reveal valuable insight about how it is to be a family member of a person who have joined a Salafi-jihadi-group. Employing narrative inquiry as a methodology highlighted that that relatives have complex lived experiences. For this reason, it is contra-productive that the academic literature and CVE-initiatives point out that relatives are either part of the problem or part of the solution. This approach reduces the relatives' composite lived experiences to binary categories. Further, it hinders an effective system for supporting the relatives and CVE-efforts.

It is traumatizing to experience that a female family member join a Salafi-jihadi groups, and the families should primarily be perceived as someone needing help and support. However, the relatives can contribute to CVE-through telling their stories. Making youngsters realize that joining Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups destroy a whole family can provide important tools in preventing young people from joining these groups.

As this thesis discussed, the role the family play in relation to enrolment into violent Islamist extremism is an understudied research field, especially concerning women's families. This thesis was a starting point to explore the topic. It is therefore necessary to include more relatives to draw

any conclusions. There are consequently several possibilities for future research. A valuable point of departure is to continue researching the families of foreign fighters, both within Scandinavia and in other European countries. It is necessary to interview relatives of male foreign fighters to be able to compare the perspectives and highlight gendered differences. Conducting interviews with family members, community workers and people in the surroundings would also provide more insight. It would be valuable to compare and contrast the lived experiences of the people joining Syrian Salafi-jihadi with the experiences of their family members. This would shed light on the differences between the families' narratives and the narratives of the foreign fighters, which can offer new critical perspectives.

Another approach is to conduct research about families and CVE-efforts. This is a field under development, which is limited based on research. It would be prosperous to compare the experiences of families who have been involved in CVE-programs and those not. A starting point would be to conduct a study with family members, who have attended family support groups, for instance as a part of the famous Aarhus-model against violent extremism. In conclusion, there are several possibilities for future research, which would provide new insight into the significance of the family environment in relation to violent Islamist extremism. This thesis demonstrated the need of inquiring further into this important topic.

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