

APPG on Trafficked Britons in Syria
Written evidence of family members of UK nationals detained in Syria

Introduction

The families of several UK nationals currently detained in northeast Syria (NES) provide this submission as written evidence to the inquiry of the All-Party Parliament Group on Trafficked Britons in Syria. The purpose is to provide evidence on the impact of the ongoing arbitrary detention of British nationals in NES on their families, as well as of the actions and inactions of the UK Government. In particular, the family members seek to focus on four specific issues:

- opportunities missed by authorities to prevent the trafficking of their loved ones;
- the conduct of police investigations and the response to the families' requests for assistance;
- the lack of British justice and issues of citizenship stripping; and
- the emotional impact experienced by family members as a result of these events.

The information contained in this submission was provided to Reprieve through several interviews with family members. In light of the sensitive nature of the subject matter, the continuing insecurity faced by their family members in Syria, and the harm the families continue to suffer as a result of their experiences, they have chosen to contribute this information anonymously (pseudonyms are used throughout).

Opportunities missed by the authorities to prevent trafficking

ISIS employed sophisticated grooming techniques to target individuals in situations of vulnerability. Family members of those groomed by ISIS describe what they believe were significant missed opportunities to disrupt ISIS trafficking operations and prevent their loved ones from being trafficked to Syria.

Stella and Jane were girls under the age of 18 when they travelled to Syria from the UK. Both were known to law enforcement before their travel but authorities did not tell their parents of the dangers to their children. Both were trafficked to ISIS, faced years of sexual exploitation and abuse, and remain in a detention camp in Syria.

As her family member describes, Jane had a friend who travelled to Syria weeks before she did. Although the police interviewed Jane about her friend's disappearance, they did not alert her parents to what was going on. The family cannot understand why the police never directly contacted them, despite weeks passing between Jane's friend's departure and Jane's own travel. Jane travelled on the passport of a relative, and the family are incredulous that this escaped the attention of border authorities.

Stella came to the UK as refugee, and her family describe her as quiet and extremely close to her mother. Some months before she left the UK for Syria, Stella was questioned by the police in relation to a friend who had run away. The family member who was with her was told to watch Stella, but was given no further details; she assumed it was a typical teenage runaway case, rather than something far more serious. Family members now agonise over whether the case related to Syria and if, had the police been more forthcoming, they could have saved Stella.

Subsequently, Stella was stopped at an airport trying to leave the UK with an adult who was not related to her. Border authorities – based on information still not known to the family – stopped them and

refused to let them board their plane but, like in Jane's case, did not inform Stella's family. They took Stella's phone but did not take her passport. Her family member remarked that she "would have thought that the police would take their passport and call their mum." The next day, Stella left the UK by bus with the same adult. The family only learned much later what transpired and that an opportunity to stop Stella was missed. Her family member wants the Government to explain to her, "If you knew she was a child, and you had enough to take her phone, why did you not contact the family?"

Some families reported that their adult relatives had requested support from police and social services prior to their departure from the UK. These families feel that they were in situations of vulnerability and that the risks to them were known to authorities. The families also believe that nothing meaningful was done to stop their loved ones from being trafficked to Syria.

Sara, the sister of a young mother now detained in Syria, recalls that her sister was in a violent, abusive relationship for years before she left the UK. Sara later learned that the violence her sister and her children were experiencing was known to social services but they did not intervene and, in her view, "failed her". Sara is angry about how her family was subsequently investigated by police after the authorities failed to take action to safeguard her sister both from domestic abuse and then trafficking: "They scrutinise us and talk about what we do but they didn't do anything. They could see that she ... couldn't get away from him." The family now believe that her sister met someone online who claimed to be able to help her to escape.

Another family reports how their loved one, now detained in Syria, met a man on a dating website. The man was abusive, and it later emerged trafficked a number of women to Syria. The family question why more wasn't done to protect their relative, who was very vulnerable.

In many cases, family members immediately alerted the police when they discovered their relatives had gone missing. However, many families now feel that the authorities failed to take steps to locate them or to prevent their entry into Syria. The former head of the Metropolitan Police's Counter-terrorism Command has described how locating individuals on their way to Syria, for example in Turkey, was crucial to ensuring a "good possibility of being able to bring them home to their families".¹

Pippa is the sister of a young girl who was trafficked to Syria. As soon as she went missing, the family alerted the police, who only later informed the family that they believed her sister was in Turkey. Pippa now believes that the police must have been immediately aware of where her sister was going as her teenage friend had travelled to Syria several weeks before, unbeknownst to the family. Pippa's family then wanted to reach out to the Embassy in Turkey but were told not to by the police because this was already being done. However, Pippa later learned that the UK government representative in Turkey who should have been trying to locate her sister was on leave during the period her sister was in transit, and no one else was covering for him. She now regrets trusting the police and says that, once the police got the information they wanted from the family, they "washed their hands" of them.

In a similar case, the family of a young woman felt that more could have been done to locate her in Turkey and to stop her from being taken into Syria. In particular, the young woman called her family from Turkey, after they reported her missing. The family don't understand why the police did not trace the phone call, or otherwise take action arising from this contact. They later learned that she spent an entire week in Turkey, but do not believe any efforts were made to track her down in that country.

¹ BBC News, Three UK schoolgirls 'travelling to Syria', 20 February 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-31554844>.

Police investigations and authorities' response to families' calls for help

Several family members report that, after police began investigations into the disappearance of their relatives, they were often left without information about what had happened to them. Several family members believe that the police were aware of where their relatives had gone, but did not inform the families as a tactic to gather more information from them, thereby prolonging their agony. Moreover, many family members feel that despite offering full cooperation to the police, they were themselves treated with suspicion and subject to criminal investigation. Family members repeatedly said that, in conjunction with the investigations, they wished they had been offered information and support by authorities to navigate the situation they were confronted with.

Sara reported her sister missing immediately, but was left feeling that the police would not help her. Sara describes the police taking an aggressive, adversarial approach with the family. Sara believes that the police knew where her sister was but would not tell the family: the situation "was so much to bear with and the police they knew [where my sister was]; they were waiting for us to tell them so they could gather evidence. It was a missing person's case and they didn't deal with it that way." Sara concluded, "They should have assigned support for the family... we were completely alone. The people you are supposed to go to for help wouldn't help us."

Others such as Margaret describe having a similar experience. She thought her teenage relative had run away but the police later told the family that her relative had left the country. "As time went on", the police told her about ISIS, which led her to believe they knew from the beginning what had happened to her loved one but "kept the family in the dark." She felt that the police "always knew more than they were letting on" and treated her more as a suspect than someone in need of support. Eventually, her contact with police dwindled. When her family member was found in Kurdish detention, years later, Margaret reached out to the police again because she "didn't know where else to go." A new case officer spoke to her once, but subsequently did not reply to any of her questions and did not return any of her phone calls.

Laith also felt that the police were more interested in building a case against his loved one than helping the family. When his relative went missing, Laith's family immediately reported this to the police and told them they would give their full cooperation. They also asked for the police for advice, but "their view was that the situation was [her] responsibility" and they did not offer support. Laith explained that he expected that he would be given a contact, "someone we could reach out to or who would reach out to us and there would be a clear process if the police needed something from us. I thought I could go and see them if I needed information or had questions for them and I thought I would get answers from them." Ultimately, Laith concluded that "they only care about the situation in Syria, they don't care about the people left here or about being helpful to them. They'll get as much out of you as possible and they don't care about you after that."

The lack of meaningful communication with the authorities has also left family members in the dark about the welfare of their loved ones. John reports feeling a lot of frustration about the extent to which he has been "left in the dark" by authorities. He said that the police never told them at any stage where their family members were after they went missing.

Similarly, Nabil recounts that after his brother was reported by media to have been detained by Kurdish forces, they have been largely unable to find out any information about him or his well-being. He has repeatedly requested help from the UK Government, but has received none. Nabil describes how they just want to know if he is ok and is safe. Nabil said that the fact he isn't told which prison his brother is in "is scary" and thinks this is "because conditions are so bad that they don't want anyone to know about it." His experience trying to get help has led him to believe that the authorities think

the families are “irrelevant”. He feels failed as a British citizen: “we are left here, and we have to just continue with the fact that he is over there, not knowing if he is okay”. He now worries that he will next get a call telling him that his brother is dead.

Several family members report being the subject of unannounced police searches of their homes, despite cooperation with authorities at the time, which they describe as extremely invasive and disruptive. They describe how, at times, searches felt punitive and even violent. Overall, some family members, such as Lena, describe feeling as if the Government was “punishing the whole family”. Sara describes her experience of a house search as follows:

“They came at 6 AM and got everyone out of their beds and said we couldn’t go into our rooms or take anything with us. ... They went through everything and took what they wanted. They were in there all day. We were allowed back in at 8 or 9pm. But it didn’t feel like our home. It felt like a crime scene. It was such a violation.”

Similarly, after Margaret’s family reported their relative missing to police, a small number of police officers came to their home. Suddenly, hours later, “hordes of police descended”. Margaret didn’t understand why so many police officers would suddenly appear in relation to a missing teenager, and concluded it must be because her relative was dead. However, rather than explaining the change, police then removed the family members from the home and conducted a search. They were only later shown a legal warrant for the search. It was only later that day, in the evening, that the family were informed that the police knew that her relative had left the country.

Margaret still does not understand why the police did not explain the process of their investigation in a way that the family could understand: “they could have explained the situation, step by step, instead of just coming and raiding the house.” She sometimes wishes the family never spoke to the police.

Nabil also described a two-day search of his home by police. The police confiscated his family members’ phones, passports, and electronics, and went through “every inch” of his house to such an extent that “it was like the house had been burgled.” Police inspected extremely personal belongings, such as a letter he wrote to his wife when they first met, which felt like a violation. Nabil said he felt like a criminal and realized that his suspicions that he was being surveilled were correct. Prior to the search, he had noticed a pick-up truck parked outside his house but didn’t think much of it; then, during the search, it was parked in his drive with the other police cars.

The impact of the police search and surveillance on Nabil was profound. After the search, he asked for his property to be returned every few months but was repeatedly told to wait. Eventually, he “just gave up” trying to get it back. As he summarized, “The authorities come in, cause problems and then they just leave you to it.” Nabil said that the search of his house, especially when his young children were home, “put him in a very dark place”, and made him to feel that the police were always watching him. Eventually, Nabil felt that his only option was to move house “in order to feel a little bit of sanity.”

Family members also reported misconduct by police during home raids. One family member told Reprieve that the police took around £1,000 from their home, which had been saved up and put aside for a child’s birthday; this was returned much later. In addition, “replacing everything they took cost thousands of pounds.”

A number of family members have been stopped at the airport after traveling, which they understand to have been under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act 2000, although some remain unsure of the legal basis. Nabil was stopped as he returned from holiday with his wife and young children. He said the police asked him questions, the answers to which “were already all over the papers.” He was told he

had to answer or he might have to go to court and began to worry he might be incarcerated. When Nabil asked to speak to a solicitor, the police officer replied, “now you’re starting to sound a bit dodgy.” Nabil finds it hard to understand the cause of such treatment: “I don’t have a criminal record, I pay my taxes, I have little kids”, but feels he has been “branded” as a criminal because of his brother.

One elderly relative was stopped on her way back from a holiday and had her phone searched. When they returned it, the police had forgotten to take out the cloning SIM card they had put in her phone to copy her information and put her own SIM card back in. A member of her family concluded, “they assumed we were hiding something. They could have just asked. They are implying that we have done something bad. To stop someone and search through their bags and take their phone suggests that they have information that they have been hiding. Their approach is to force information out of us without our permission, despite our full cooperation. They treated us like we were criminals.”

Several family members have been exposed to significant media scrutiny because of the trafficking of their relatives and feel that police actions have often either exposed them to or worsened this scrutiny. Families feel that the police should have done more to shield them from media exposure or assisted them to navigate what was happening. The significant and negative media attention has led to many families feeling threatened and unsafe.

For instance, in the days after Pippa’s sister’s disappearance, her family describe feeling pressured by police to participate in a media appearance without warning them of the impact this could have. The family did not want to engage with the media but felt pressured to do so by the officer on the case and were told that a public appeal would help locate her sister. Despite Pippa agreeing to act as the sole family representative, a photo of her whole family was subsequently circulated to the media.

Due to the significant media scrutiny this generated, Pippa said that friends warned her that she could be targeted, so she has changed her appearance to be less recognizable. She has had to shield her young child from journalists, pretending it is a game. Her mother has learned to stock up on food in her home, so that she does not have to leave in case there is a development in the case and media surround the house. Pippa said that the family later learned that journalists were going to schools where young member of the family were attending, offering students money to give them information and point out the children.

Sara also describes threats to involve the media in order to force information from the family, despite offering full cooperation. Sara recalls how, when her sister first went missing, she was in contact with the missing’s persons unit. However, she was then contacted by an officer from what she understood was the “fugitive unit” who told her that if she didn’t cooperate with the investigation, they would involve the media. Sara said the family didn’t know what to do, “I didn’t need to be harassed and I was being harassed.”

Nabil highlighted the detrimental impact of significant media attention he received following a police search of his home. Nabil feels that the police only decided to search his and his relative’s home after his brother was reported by British media to have been detained in Syria, four years after he had left the UK. He says that the police made no effort to preserve the family’s privacy, such that journalists were able to take pictures of the house being searched. Nabil said that the media started “knocking on neighbours’ doors. Gossip was rife and as a result [my elderly relative] went into a depression, worrying about the negative attention.” Following the search, Nabil’s describes how his family has received extensive and extremely negative commentary online and worries that they could be targeted.

The lack of British justice and citizenship deprivations

Many family members report that they can understand why the Government may want to investigate the cases of their family members detained in NES, but cannot understand how the Government could leave them in detention without charge or trial. As Nabil explains:

"I understand we have laws, and that where there is evidence of crimes people should be prosecuted in a courtroom. If that happened with my brother, I would accept that. At least then I would know he was safe and being fed. I would know he has a chance to make his case. But the British government won't take responsibility for him. I would like MPs and Lords to ask: if Britain is such a strong country, why can't it bring its citizens home and give them a fair hearing?"

Other family members echo this sentiment, not understanding how the Government could deprive their loved ones of citizenship without having to prove that they had committed any crime. John, for instance, said that he finds the situation really shocking: "Usually people are innocent until proven guilty but it seems that everyone in this situation is guilty and we have to be the ones to prove them innocent." Like Nabil, John understands that the Government may need to prosecute some people, but notes that "the majority of people [in the detention camps] are victims who need a lot of support."

John is especially frustrated that the British government has met with his family member in the camp but did not take any further steps on the case, as far as he is aware. He feels that this should have been enough for the Government to act: "Intelligence services met with them and had access to the camps. They could have realised they were victims and could have brought them back. They didn't charge them with any crime."

Like many other family members, Nabil says that the situation has led him to conclude that there is a "two-tiered system": "I think you can be a British citizen and retain your religious beliefs...but the authorities act like this isn't true." Pippa said that her family feels like they have to "prove" that they aren't extremists.

Family members also described feeling that the manner in which the Government deprived them of their citizenship and informed family members was punitive or even cruel. Pippa's family, for instance, describes how they were given assurances from the Metropolitan Police that legal action would only be taken against individuals suspected of committing a crime, and that those who had travelled to Syria as children would be tried as children. Pippa was then shocked to hear that her sister had been deprived of citizenship, without having been accused of committing a crime, and without explaining the decision to the family who had been cooperative with authorities throughout. Pippa herself speculates that the decision to strip her sister of citizenship was motivated by negative media coverage since the Government took this action only after media reporting on her sister's case.

Sara describes feeling angry by the secretive, summary process by which her sister was deprived of citizenship:

"In December 2019 they told us they were taking away [my sister's] citizenship ... They had deprived her in November and only told us a month later in December. You only get a month to appeal...They put the citizenship deprivation decision in a drawer and then told me a month late knowing that time was an issue. I felt like it was a game they were playing with people's lives ... it was Christmas when everyone is with their families. Everyone talks about Christmas spirit but...we didn't have that."

Sara's family then had to engage in lengthy litigation to demonstrate that the Government had illegally stripped her sister of her citizenship. She recounts the toll this took on her, and the isolation she felt, having to pursue the case:

"I can cope with it but with [mum], we couldn't tell her, she wouldn't have understood it – we told mum when [my sister] got her citizenship back and it had been dealt with – that took two years.... None of my friends knew during the process, my partner didn't know. I had to give evidence and I had to attend court sessions. The day we got her citizenship back we couldn't celebrate it. It was a silent win and I couldn't tell anyone."

Some family members have also noted the injustice of depriving people of their citizenship when the state failed to safeguard them from grooming and exploitation by ISIS. The family member of a young girl who travelled to Syria as a child asked, "How could you wash your hands of her when you had every opportunity to stop her from going?"

Several family members noted the impact of being prohibited by UK law, as they understand it, from providing humanitarian support to their relatives in detention. Sara notes how stressful it is, not knowing "what was legal or not." At first, the family was not even sure if they could speak to her sister when she was able to make contact from Syria. Sara is frustrated by the fact that her sister would be assured basic necessities if she was detained in the UK, but the family cannot do the same for her in NES: "People in prisons here get money and stuff, and she has kids. How is it illegal to help kids survive? To give money to kids to help?"

Lena similarly describes the stress she feels from being unable to send small sums of money to her sister to help her care for her children. Lena said that it is devastating that she cannot help her sister buy milk, eggs, and shoes for her children, noting "Not being able to help your own sister is something that kills you."

Laith summed up the feeling of many family members about their inability to help their family members who are suffering:

"You can't even help the children which is the worst part. They won't even allow you to help the children, who are still British. ... There are children who we can't help as uncles, brothers, family members. ...The Government refuses to allow us to support the children and is blackmailing their parents by saying they will bring the children back if their parents will separate from them. The only way for the children to get back safely is for them to separate from their parents and the Government is using that. It makes you lose faith in humanity."

The emotional impact on family members

Families of those detained in Syria describe the trauma they have experienced due to their family member's trafficking: first coming to terms with the disappearance of a loved one, then understanding the fact of their trafficking, the conditions to which they are subject in detention, and the uncertainty if they will ever see them again. They describe the severe emotional and mental toll this has taken on them over a period of what is now several years.

Sara described the emotional impact of not knowing whether her sister was safe when she was being kept by ISIS in Syria:

"I kept reading the news and seeing airstrikes. I was waiting to see 'British family killed in airstrike.' If it had been a death you could grieve. We couldn't grieve. I know what it feels like when someone goes missing now. You can't grieve them. We had no groups to support. We didn't know what to do."

Lena said the situation "puts her down so much" and she "can't be normal" around her own kids on the rare occasions she is able to speak her sister, because she is so upset. The situation also affected her mother's health, who she feels "could have lived for another ten years" if it weren't for the stress of her sister's disappearance and detention.

Several family members reported the damaging impact on their mental health not only from their family member's disappearance but also from their interactions with the authorities. For instance, following the police search of her home, Sara describes experiencing severe stress, becoming anxious at every noise outside her house, and suffering from insomnia. She describes a constant fear of police returning to her home.

Sara also told Reprieve of the impact of citizenship stripping on her family, and in particular on her mother. Sara's mother has suffered with her physical and mental health and "struggles" with her sister's disappearance: "Whenever she sees the news she asks me – she thinks I'm not doing enough, [Mum] doesn't understand why [my sister] can't come home." Sara said she feels the weight of having to fight for her sister, over years, virtually by herself, "You have to sacrifice your own happiness and freedom because you can't trust people and I have to protect her."

Nabil describes being in a similar position, having to keep his brother's situation to himself and bear the pressure of trying to help him alone. Nabil said that he and his family "have lost a lot of years trying to get him back." He tries not to be pessimistic and lose hope, but "the chances are that the next day everyone will carry on living their lives...My mum will get old, he will get old. We have already lost a lot." Margaret feels the same burden as the main family focal point for her relative's case, and said that the situation has affected her really badly. She has developed an anxiety issue and now requires medication for the repetitive shaking that she experiences.

Life upon return

All of the families continue to hope that their family members will come home one day soon, and believe strongly that children must come home with their mothers in order to avoid causing further, significant harm. Families describe the safe and supportive family environment they have waiting for them.

Sara said, for instance, that her sister's "family is waiting for her. [My sister and her children] are coming home to [their grandmother] and things are in place so that we can take care of them." Sara has moved out of her family home but is still saving her old room, keeping the furniture there, hoping her sister can come back to live in it.

Likewise, John said that his family member "will have plenty of support", noting that they have a big family in the UK, and that they "are all behind" her. Margaret also described the support system her loved one has waiting for her, joking, "her mum won't let her go!" Margaret recalls how her relative was, prior to her detention in Syria, "passionate" about training to work in health care, and hopes that she might have the opportunity to do so on her return.