

What do you think the attraction is for young women to travel to Syria?

> We believe that for some of the young women and girls who travel abroad in the hope of marrying fighters, or to join the fighting, they are looking for a sense of purpose, something meaningful, brave, perhaps rebellious, and daring. Some want to do something that their parents won't agree with - they can be very intent, full of purpose, and seeking a sense of belonging - they want their lives to add up to something. Some have very strong humanitarian or religious beliefs that draw them towards travelling.

Do you think there is an element of excitement involved when young women choose to travel to Syria, maybe a kick back against parental control?

> I think that there is a bit of that - many of the cases that we have seen involve young women and girls at an age when they are trying to discover who they are, what they want to be, and they want to do something that seems less normal, less run of the mill. Some see their futures as constricted, some see that constriction coming from family expectations.

How important a role do you think social media and internet propaganda play in all of this?

> I think social media and propaganda on the internet is a huge problem. I think people see items that are posted by people like them, and they are very convinced by what they see. It can be persuasive, and very, very damaging and dangerous. We take down over 1,000 items of terrorist content a week at the moment - there is a lot of material out there that breaches the Terrorist Act and even more that seeks to manipulate people.

Do you think that parents need to be more aware of the danger posed by social media, because a lot of radicalisation takes place online?

> I think parents are becoming increasingly aware of the danger posed by social media, and that if they know their child is sitting secretly in their bedroom on social media for hours at a time, I would urge them to sit down with their child and look at what they have been browsing through. Talk to them about their feelings about what they have seen, because there are signs and symptoms shown by those who are thinking of travelling to Syria, and often spending long periods of time on the internet is one of them.

Do you think families can play an important role in combating this type of radicalisation?

> Certainly yes - we are all human beings; we love our parents very dearly. We have sisters and brothers, friends and families who care for us. If a young woman or girl is thinking of travelling to a conflict zone such as Syria, she won't want to say what she intends to do but she will be doing things to get approval for travel, making preparations to say goodbye to those that she cares for. That is another sign to look out for. Families are the people who are going to be able to most effectively persuade girls and young women not to travel - the heartbreak that we have seen from families where young women have travelled is so awful, they are completely devastated - so I do hope that families will feel able to come and talk to the Police, talk to people in the community, talk to their local doctor, or a teacher about their concerns because they can get the help that they need.

When spotting the early signs of radicalisation, some parents may feel unsure about what steps to take, what would you suggest? Would you encourage them to open a dialogue with their child?

> Yes absolutely - parents might think that their child is getting very angry with things, they might be agreeing with what they are seeing in Syria, agreeing with the violence, they might be becoming more secretive, starting to say goodbye. I think families who are noticing these types of things could open a conversation with their loved one, ask them what's going on in their lives, tell them what they fear and please do come and seek help from a range of different people and agencies, not just the Police - there is help out there for those that need it.

In terms of the push factors for travelling to Syria, it has been claimed that some young women feel that they suffer discrimination and that there is a lack of opportunity for them in the UK - do you agree?

> Whilst I understand this viewpoint, I do not agree with it. I think that there are wonderful opportunities for young women growing up in Great Britain today. The range of things available to women is enormous; they will be able to have fantastic and fulfilled lives here. Replacing a perceived lack of opportunity here in the UK with a genuine lack of opportunity in Syria seems to me to be a false argument.

I'd say, if you stay, you'll have to work hard, to find what you're looking for and then take responsibility for getting it. You'll most likely experience failure, probably repeatedly. But what you will get, if you stay here and fight for what you want, is the most unbelievable satisfaction and pride when you do get it. Because you did it. Because here in the UK, there is opportunity.

Is the situation in Syria different to the way that young women and girls are led to believe it is through the images that they are seeing on social media?

> It is a lot different - the images that they see, and the life depicted on social media is certainly not the reality of it. In many ways, the life that you are promised isn't as it seems. What are you going to do with the rest of your life there? What are the opportunities open to you in Syria? Who are you going to be in life? - these opportunities are so much smaller and circumscribed in Syria than if you remained here in the UK.

What would you say to a young British woman who sees Syria as a positive environment for her to be, or a place where she could raise a child?

> I would say that it is clear having seen all of the awful acts being committed by ISIL and other terrorist groups in Syria that it is not a positive environment to be in. If a young woman or girl makes a decision to go and join that, then that is a disastrous decision for her. If she makes the decision to take a child with her, then that is not just disastrous, but is actually putting that child in danger and she mustn't do that - so I would appeal to all of them to think twice, three times, and not to go.

In terms of young women and girls who have returned to the UK from Syria having now realised that they had made a terrible mistake, should they still be seen as a threat to our safety?

> Everybody would expect the Police to investigate people who are coming back to the UK from Syria and other conflict zones. The first thing we would need to do is find out whether they are people who are deeply radicalised, have been trained as dangerous terrorists or whether they are people who have made a mistake and are coming back and want to leave that completely behind them. So I would appeal to people to be in touch with the Police, allow us to investigate - at the same time as we are doing that, we will support the person themselves and also their families.

If a woman was to return having realised she had made a terrible mistake, would the Police automatically sign them off as being a terrorist, or would you work with them, in turn showing them that there is still hope for them to rebuild their lives here in the UK?

> There is certainly hope for them to rebuild their lives. If a young woman is in that position and wants to come back, we would be able to talk to them and their families. Of course we would have to investigate what has happened - we would want them to be as open as they possibly could be with us. However if at the end of the day, after we have worked with them and conducted our investigation, if all that they have done is made a mistake and they want to put that right, then they will be given the opportunity to carry on with their lives here.

Given the recent events in Paris and Copenhagen, and the connection between those involved and with what is happening in Syria, is it true to say that anybody returning from Syria will at first be seen as a threat to UK security?

> For public safety everybody returning from Syria will be investigated by the Police, and that's the best way for us to keep everybody safe. But that certainly isn't a bad process for somebody to go through as there are lots of protections in place. Whilst carrying out our investigation, we will also be working closely with the family and the person themselves.

Do you think that families can be blamed if their children are being secretive? Everybody knows that when teenagers reach a certain point in their lives they kind of stop talking, they don't reveal their intentions - is it right to blame a family for that - for not being able to spot the early signs of radicalisation?

> We certainly wouldn't blame a family for not spotting the early signs of radicalisation; however if we can explain to families what the signs and symptoms are, then they are more equipped to spot them, and what I would hope they would then do is come and find someone that they can talk to about it. There is a range of different help that we can give to a family and to the person who is thinking of travelling that could help them to change their mind.

Do you think that women within a family can play an important role, as sisters or mothers, in stopping those young women and girls that are thinking of travelling to Syria?

> Yes we know that they do, particularly mothers. So for those women who are thinking of travelling, I think mothers will pick up early signs and symptoms of that, and I think that they can be enormously influential in persuading their daughters not to go.

For families who have experienced a loved one going to Syria, there can often be the subject of criticism, be it from within their community or the press, questioning how they could have missed the early signs of their loved ones being radicalised. How do we reach out to families like that, to say to them that it is not their fault - do you think it is an important message for everybody to understand?

> Yes I think it is - I would want to say to the families that the Police view is very different to this - we know that there have been cases where the family were completely astounded when someone travelled, and when we looked at it, they had been completely secretive, and had planned very carefully so there were no obvious signs that they intended to go. We want to work with families who are in that position, and we know that families are turning to us to help them. We would encourage more to do so.

Other than immediate family members, are there others - friends, people at school or college, members of the community itself for example - that can play a vital role in helping to spot vulnerable young people who are being radicalised?

> Absolutely - these vulnerable young people are part of all our communities. They work along side us, they go to school and college alongside us, and there are friends who are devastated because they didn't spot something happening. Everyone I think is able to spot signs and symptoms, to develop the relationships with people so that they tell them what their plans are and I just hope that they would have the confidence to come and tell somebody about it and get that help and support.

Do you think it is a legitimate excuse for girls and young women out there who want to come home to say that they didn't really know what we were getting into - do you think that they are hiding behind that or do you think that there are genuine cases of girls thinking 'I had no idea what this was going to be like'?

> I think in the early days that would have been very legitimate - some people travelled with a very romantic notion of what life was like there, and there wasn't much information around to counter it. People who have travelled more recently, have gone open eyed as to what is happening over there - they have made a decision to go and join it, and support the awful atrocities that people over there are committing so they have made a decision in full knowledge of the facts. But that's not to say that if they want to come back that they should stop - I would still encourage them to come back, but I don't think that anybody could hide behind ignorance anymore.

Do you believe that it is a role just for the Police to reach out to people if they want to come home, or if families know that their child wants to come home and that they have made a terrible mistake?

> No, it's not. Lots of friends and family members that are in contact with people who have travelled and are urging them to come back. I think everyone should be willing to keep those contacts in place and should be consistently saying 'please come home, please come home' - it's important that when someone is coming back to the UK that the Police are told about that as we will need to start our investigation as soon as possible, but we will also be there to provide support to the family involved.

Is it important to keep a dialogue open with girls and young women in the hope that they might change their minds about going, or if they are already there, encourage them to return home?

> Yes absolutely - it is important to keep dialogue with everyone that is over there and to consistently be trying to persuade people to stop what they are doing, to come back and leave Syria, which at the moment is not a place where people ought to be.

Finally, what do you think the future is for girls who say they regret going - what is the process that returnees are likely to have to face?

> Every case will be different, and each investigation will take a different course. I wouldn't want to go into the details of precisely what we would do, but in every case that the Police are told about we would investigate to see what that young person had been doing whilst they were abroad, who they had been in touch with, what their views were now about what they had been doing, whether they had committed any criminal offences, and we would investigate, but at the same time we would be supporting them and their family.

You've obviously spoken to families and at times it must be quite distressing to hear the stories of loved ones who have travelled to Syria, often with their fate unknown, does this drive you on to do all that you can to try to make sure that other women and families do not have to go through the same thing?

> Yes - it is important to me as a woman and a police officer, and important to all families, friends, communities and so many other people who have been affected by this. There is nothing worse than the sadness of a family and set of friends when someone that they love has chosen to go to go abroad to a war zone, maybe get involved in terrorism, it is a dreadful thing to happen.