



GRAZIA
AGENDA

'MY BROTHER JOINED

What if someone you love became a terrorist?
Richard Kerbaj – producer of a new documentary on
the subject – meets the women with a terrible burden

Celebrations after ISIS militants seize an air base in Raqqa, Syria. Far right: Konika Dhar was devastated when her brother joined the terror group. He tweeted this picture of himself with his baby son



ISIS'



AS A CHILD, KONIKA DHAR idolised her big brother. She remembers sitting by him on the living room floor of their North London home when he was a teenager, painting each of his fingernails a different colour. It's one of the warmest memories she has of Sid, her once gentle and protective sibling, who loved Arsenal and sang along to his favourite bands, Nirvana and Linkin Park, in the bedroom next to hers. However, the brother she once considered a 'teddy bear' is gone, transformed into an Islamic extremist who has become a senior member of the ISIS terrorist network in Syria.

'It's completely heartbreaking,' says Konika, 28, of Sid, who changed his name to Abu Rumaysah nine years ago when he converted to Islam, before travelling to ▶

Syria to join ISIS last year. She adds, 'Dealing with the reality of my brother's decision has made me withdraw from my own life. It's impacted on me emotionally and professionally [Konika is studying to become a lawyer in London], and for a long time it made me stop socialising. I'm scared people might say my family and I were somehow to blame for Sid's departure, but he'd shut himself away from us when he converted and became almost impossible to speak to.'

Konika only had partial contact with her brother after he converted and became a follower of an extremist cleric, who is alleged to have radicalised him. Before he disappeared from their lives, Sid angrily urged his family, including Konika, her sister and mother, to turn their backs on their Hindu heritage and follow Islam. They refused, hoping they could pull him



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back from his radical transformation, but the reversal never came. Konika didn't hear from him again, and in November 2014, five months after ISIS established a caliphate – an Islamic state – that spans parts of southern Syria and northern Iraq, Sid fled Britain to join the terror group, taking his pregnant wife and four children.

The first his sister knew of him leaving Britain came weeks later, when a newspaper featured a picture Sid had tweeted of himself clutching an AK-47 assault rifle in one hand and his newborn boy in the other. It was the only time Konika has seen her youngest nephew, and the picture still haunts her. 'My family is forever tarred by Sid's extremism, even though we totally oppose his views. He's been brainwashed,' says Konika, who refuses to call her brother by his Islamic name and remains baffled by Sid's willingness to shun his love for music and basketball to become a devotee of anti-Western preachers. 'I can't understand what he's done, and I worry constantly that people have a different impression of me



Abu Rumaysah (left) during an Islamist protest in London in January 2014, before he left for Syria. Bottom: British jihadist Thomas Evans and his mother, Sally

since all this came out. I feel emotionally devastated that I'll always be associated with his actions.' Konika's brother also published a 46-page manual for aspiring jihadists in May, in which he threatened Britain, saying ISIS will reach London to 'spill your blood... erase your history and, most painfully, convert your children'.

Sid is among more than 700 aspiring jihadists who've left the UK for Syria and Iraq to join ISIS since 2011. Another 50 have left to join al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda-affiliated terror group, in Somalia. While most are probably aware of the security threat their fanaticism poses to the UK, and that they'd be arrested should they return home, not many consider the impact their extremism has on their family's emotional well-being. In many cases, the parents and siblings of British jihadists have isolated themselves, severing contact with the outside world – including extended family and friends – because of the shame they feel.

Sally Evans, a mother-of-two from High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, understands that feeling all too well. For years after her eldest son Thomas left the UK for Somalia, Sally was too ashamed to tell anyone. Her son became radicalised after converting to Islam at 19. When he left the country, in June 2011, he told his mum and younger brother Micheal, 23, he was going on a short trip to Egypt to study Arabic. Instead, he was planning to join al-Shabaab.

Sally didn't hear from her son again until January 2012, when he called home to say he was fighting alongside al-Shabaab – and, horrifyingly, that he'd married a 13-year-old girl. 'I was devastated,' Sally

says. 'I couldn't understand why he would have wanted to leave the life he had here to go there.' That devastation continued when, on a Sunday evening this June, Micheal found a picture of his brother online – he was dead. Thomas, 25, was lying on the ground among 11 other al-Shabaab fighters, killed by the Kenyan authorities as they attacked a military base.

The news can, at least, allow the Evans family to move on, but for Konika, whose brother is still at large, life remains in limbo. 'I'm scared I'll always be viewed as the "sister of an extremist",' she says. 'But ultimately he's my brother, and I'm very worried about him and his family.' ■ *Richard Kerbj is security correspondent for 'The Sunday Times' and producer of 'My Son The Jihadi', which will be screened at 9pm, 22 October, Channel 4; @richardkerbj*



Photos: Reuters, SundayTimes/News Syndication, National News & Pictures, Corbis, BBC, Channel 4