

Of Fathers and Son Documentary: The Immersion of Young Generation into Salafi Jihadi Ideology

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Abstract

The issues of radicalization, terrorism, and extremism must be addressed to ensure the restoration of peace. However, if the younger generation continues to be nurtured within this extremist culture, living according to its false narratives, the vision of a peaceful and stable civilization will remain a utopian dream. The documentary *Of Fathers and Sons* by Talal Derki provides a rare and deeply immersive look into this reality, capturing how children are indoctrinated into jihadist ideology under the influence of Jabhat al-Nusra, a Syrian faction linked to Daesh. By infiltrating a radical Islamist family under the guise of a pro-jihadist photojournalist, Derki offers an unprecedented glimpse into their daily lives. The insights from this documentary highlight how extremist beliefs are instilled in children, emphasizing the urgency of global intervention to prevent the perpetuation of such ideologies. This paper analyzes key scenes from the documentary, contextualizing them within existing literature on Salafi-jihadi ideology and radical religious extremism. Through this analysis, the study aims to enhance understanding of the mechanisms of radicalization and underscore the importance of proper education in safeguarding the future well-being of the ummah.

Keywords: Radical Religious Extremism, Movie Review, Children Education, Jabhat al-Nusra, Daesh

Introduction

The issues of radical religious extremism (RRE) and Islamophobia have been extensively studied, particularly in the aftermath of the unprecedented 9/11 attacks, which led to the collapse of the World Trade Center towers in Washington. These events heightened global awareness of RRE movements, prompting extensive media coverage and scholarly research on their ideologies, histories, and operational structures. Osama bin Laden emerged as a globally recognized figure, widely regarded as the mastermind behind the attacks. In the years that followed, a series of violent incidents linked to various extremist groups continued to occur across different regions. Despite more than two decades passing since 9/11, radical movements persist, causing countless casualties and demonstrating their continued influence.

The documentary *Of Fathers and Sons* (2017), directed by Syrian filmmaker Talal Derki, provides a rare and deeply immersive look into the indoctrination of children within jihadist families. One of the most chilling statements captured in the film is, “*This war will go on for a long time,*” illustrating the enduring nature of extremist ideology. Derki embedded himself within a jihadist family for two years, posing as a pro-Jabhat al-Nusra photojournalist. Through his lens, he documented the lives of Abu Osama and his sons, particularly Osama and Ayman, offering an unfiltered glimpse into their daily existence. Notably, Derki refrains from direct commentary or criticism, instead allowing the audience to independently assess the reality of life in such an environment.

Of Fathers and Sons was produced in 2017 after Derki returned to Berlin and has since garnered over 20 international awards for its ground-breaking storytelling (IMDb, n.d.). As a documentary, it does not rely on special effects or a structured plot but instead focuses on powerful visual storytelling and thematic exploration. The 1-hour and 39-minute film condenses 330 days of Derki’s undercover experience within a jihadist family and society, offering invaluable insights into the mechanisms of radicalization. In the scene occurring at minute 1:11, Derki’s commitment to authentically documenting the realities of war is clearly manifested. The footage captures him visibly frightened, positioned behind one of the documentary’s main figures while the latter engages in active combat by shooting at an enemy. This moment highlights Derki’s immersive approach and the personal risks he undertook to portray the conflict with unfiltered situation.



Figure 1 Derki and Abu Osama in a battlefield

The documentary vividly portrays how children are systematically educated and motivated to embrace extremist beliefs, providing a compelling explanation for the persistence of RRE movements despite extensive global deradicalization efforts.

While extensive literature exists on the causes and spread of RRE, most studies tend to focus on ideological discourse, recruitment tactics, or macro-level political events. However, there is a significant lack of empirical engagement with the micro-dynamics of indoctrination, particularly how radical beliefs are transmitted within family structures and affect children's psychosocial development. Existing research often overlooks the lived experiences of children raised in jihadist environments, leaving a critical gap in understanding the intergenerational continuity of extremism. This study aims to address that gap by analysing the documentary *Of Fathers and Sons*, which uniquely captures the day-to-day process of ideological grooming. By contextualizing the visual narrative within the broader scholarly discourse on RRE, this paper offers a novel contribution to understanding how radical ideologies are normalized within domestic spheres, thus reinforcing the need for targeted intervention and education strategies.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach to analyse *Of Fathers and Sons*, focusing on human behaviour, ideological indoctrination, and lived experiences without the use of numerical data (Hammersley & Campbell, 2013). The primary method of analysis involves an in-depth review of the documentary through repeated viewing to identify key themes, narrative techniques, and ideological messages conveyed throughout the film. This iterative process ensures a comprehensive understanding of the documentary's content, allowing for a detailed examination of how radical religious extremism (RRE) is embedded within family structures and transmitted to younger generations.

To strengthen the analysis, this study utilizes thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method for identifying patterns and recurring themes within a dataset (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Key scenes from the documentary are categorized based on their relevance to RRE narratives,

child indoctrination, and the psychological and social mechanisms that sustain extremist ideologies. These themes are then cross-examined with existing literature to contextualize the findings within broader academic discussions on radicalization.

Additionally, this study relies on secondary sources to supplement the documentary analysis. These sources include books, journal articles, and reports from scholars who have extensively studied RRE movements, particularly in the context of jihadist groups. The integration of scholarly literature helps to validate the documentary's depiction of radicalization processes and provides a theoretical framework for understanding how extremist ideologies are perpetuated across generations.

Furthermore, recorded interviews with Talal Derki found on YouTube channel serve as an additional data source, offering first-hand insights into the motivations behind the documentary, the challenges faced during its production, and Derki's personal reflections on the individuals he documented. These interviews provide valuable contextual information, allowing for a deeper interpretation of the documentary's narrative and its implications for studying radicalization.

By combining documentary analysis, thematic analysis, and secondary literature review, this study adopts a triangulated approach to ensure a holistic examination of *Of Fathers and Sons*. This multi-faceted methodology not only enhances the credibility of the findings but also allows for a nuanced exploration of how extremist ideologies are ingrained within family units and passed down to the next generation.

Discussions

The Endless Cycle of War and Political Instability in Syria

The war-torn landscape depicted in *Of Fathers and Sons* reflects the devastating consequences of prolonged conflict in Syria. The rubbles, dust, and poor infrastructure showcased in the documentary highlight how the ongoing war benefits no party, leaving civilians trapped in an endless cycle of violence. Since the 1950s, conflicts between Sunni and Shi'ite Alawites in Syria have resulted in thousands of deaths, preventing the nation from experiencing long-term stability. The situation worsened in 2011 with the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, as President Bashar al-Assad's regime faced opposition from various militant factions. The involvement of foreign fighters further intensified the conflict, with Ayman al-Zawahiri urging Iraqi militants to intervene. This led Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to send fighters, resulting in the formation of Jabhat al-Nusra by Abu Muhammad al-Joulani. However, Jabhat al-Nusra later distanced itself from Daesh and instead aligned itself with al-Qaeda (Mohd Hizam Hanafiah & Zamihan Mat Zin, 2017).

Despite global awareness and intervention attempts, Syria remains in turmoil. Various factions, including the Assad regime, Free Syrian Army, Daesh, al-Qaeda, and foreign powers such as the United States and Russia; have competing interests, making it difficult to identify a single enemy (Brave New Films, 2019, 22:11). Even the United Nations has struggled to propose an effective resolution, with its humanitarian efforts limited to assisting affected communities. UN Special Envoy for Syria, Gear Pedersen, acknowledges the severity of the crisis, stating, "*The situation in Syria is untenable and to carry on in the same manner defies humanity and logic*" (United Nations News, 2023).

Indoctrination of the Young Generation into Jihadist Ideology

Through the lens of Talal Derki, *Of Fathers and Sons* provides an intimate look at how radical ideology is passed down from father to son. The main subject, Abu Osama, a devoted Jabhat al-Nusra fighter, raises his sons with unwavering jihadist beliefs. Notably, he names his children after infamous militant leaders, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri; symbolizing his ideological commitment. He takes great pride in the 9/11 attacks, even viewing them as a divine blessing, expressing his hope that his sons will follow in the footsteps of jihadist martyrs.



Figure 2 Screenshot showing the ambition of Abu Osama towards his children

Abu Osama's influence over his children is profound. Despite his close bond with them, he does not hesitate to prepare them for battle. After losing his leg while handling landmines, he remains committed to jihad, ensuring that his children receive military training. This dedication reflects the deeply ingrained belief that sacrificing one's life for the cause is the highest form of devotion.

The Normalization of Violence in Childhood

One of the most disturbing aspects of the documentary is the normalization of violence among children. At minute 5:05, Abu Osama's children proudly report to their father after killing a bird, saying:



Figure 3 Moment shows interaction between Abu Osama and Osama
 “He (Khatab) put the knife on the bird’s breast, and it started squeaking. We put its head down and cut it off, like how you did it, Father, to that man” (Derki, 2018).

Instead of condemning their actions, Abu Osama praises them, reinforcing the notion that killing is honorable. This scene starkly illustrates how exposure to violence at a young age shapes the worldview of these children. They not only witness their father’s activities but also actively seek his approval and pride in committing similar acts. At minute 38:40, Abu Osama further deepens their involvement by teaching them how to make homemade bombs, a skill he specializes in.

Through these moments, the documentary highlights how extremist ideologies are embedded into everyday life, making it nearly impossible for children to develop a moral compass separate from their father’s teachings. The repeated exposure to violence, paired with religious justification, fosters an environment where brutality becomes second nature.

The Psychological Dissonance of Radicalization

Despite being immersed in jihadist ideology, the children in the documentary still display moments of innocence. Osama, one of Abu Osama’s sons, embodies this internal conflict. He undergoes military training, learns how to use firearms, and listens to Salafi Jihadi lectures. However, at minute 21:18, he is also seen huddled under a blanket with his brothers, solving math riddles, an image that wholly contrasts with his militant conditioning.

This conflict aligns with Festinger’s Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Metin & Camgoz, 2011). According to this theory, individuals experience psychological discomfort when their actions and beliefs contradict each other. To resolve this dissonance, they may either change their behaviour or alter their cognitive framework to justify their actions. In Osama’s case, his natural inclination toward childhood innocence clashes with the violent ideology imposed upon him. Instead of rejecting violence, he resolves this internal conflict by accepting his father’s justification for jihad, thereby adopting radical beliefs as part of his reality.

In contrast, his younger brother Ayman rejects the military path and chooses to remain in school. This decision highlights how different individuals respond to indoctrination in varied ways. However, their eldest brother fully embraces the jihadist lifestyle, further perpetuating

the cycle of radicalization. This pattern suggests that while some children resist extremist ideology, many succumb to familial and social pressures, ensuring the continuation of radical movements across generations. However, there is no definitive guarantee that the younger brother will remain steadfast in his current decision, as the environment in which he is raised continues to exert a significant influence, potentially increasing the likelihood of him eventually joining the force of the fighters.

The Societal Consequences of Generational Radicalization

The long-term consequences of radicalizing children extend far beyond the immediate impact on individual families, posing profound and lasting effects on the broader social fabric and future stability of entire societies. In the context of the Syrian Civil War, the widespread destruction has not only crippled the nation's economy and educational infrastructure but has also disrupted the psychosocial development of an entire generation. The documentary poignantly captures this reality, particularly in a scene at minute 25:33, where young boys are depicted playing amidst the ruins of bombed-out buildings and experimenting with the creation of makeshift explosives using common household chemicals. This disturbing imagery reflects an environment in which violence is not only normalized but celebrated, fostering a culture where militarization becomes an integral part of childhood socialization. Such conditions risk embedding extremist ideologies at a formative age, making future deradicalization efforts increasingly difficult. Furthermore, the erosion of formal education and the absence of protective societal institutions contribute to the entrenchment of radical worldviews, thereby undermining prospects for peace, reconciliation, and national rebuilding in the long term.

Education, a crucial tool for de-radicalization, is severely compromised. Abu Osama prevents his children from attending formal schooling, prioritizing military training and religious-political-ideology classes over formal academics. This lack of education deprives children of critical thinking skills, making them more susceptible to extremist propaganda. Moreover, economic instability forces many young men into armed groups, as seen with Syrian government soldiers who are often motivated by financial incentives rather than ideological commitment.

In articulating the objectives of Islamic education, Abu Osama in the documentary appears unable to provide his children with the foundational value of balanced development. The younger generation depicted is not nurtured toward attaining a holistic and integrated personality, as conceptualized in the *JERISAH* framework, an acronym representing *Jasmani* (physical), *Emosi* (emotional), *Rohani* (spiritual), *Intelekt* (intellectual), *Sosialisasi* (social), *Alam* (environmental awareness), and *Hamba Allah* (servitude to God as His vicegerent) (Salleh, 2009). This well-known and comprehensive model emphasizes the essential Islamic educational aim of producing individuals who embody equilibrium across all facets of human development. However, the children shown in the documentary are systematically socialized into a one-dimensional identity centered on militancy and martyrdom, while critical elements such as emotional maturity, intellectual inquiry, and social empathy are neglected or entirely absent.

Such an imbalance contradicts the holistic vision of human development prescribed by the Qur'an and Sunnah, which advocates for a harmonious cultivation of the body, mind, and

soul. In the absence of this balance, individuals may grow up with distorted understandings of religious duty, misinterpreting the role of *Khalifatul Allah* (God's vicegerent on earth) as one rooted in aggression rather than stewardship, compassion, and justice. This failure to embody the integrated principles of *JERISAH* not only hinders the development of a sound Muslim personality but also prolongs cycles of extremism that are contrasting to the true spirit of Islamic education.

The documentary subtly warns that if no intervention occurs, this radical ideology will persist across generations. Osama, as the eldest son, is likely to pass down the same beliefs to his own children in the future, creating an unbroken chain of extremism. Without effective counter-radicalization strategies, this cycle will continue to shape the political and social landscape of Syria and beyond.

Suggestions and Conclusions

The strength of any civilization is determined by the quality of its youth. A crucial aspect of societal stability lies in providing a nurturing environment and an educational system that fosters a balanced and ethical worldview. *Of Fathers and Sons* (Derki, 2018) poignantly captures how radical groups view children as the foundation of their future struggles, ensuring that the next generation is indoctrinated with extremist ideologies. This reality presents a significant challenge to global communities in shifting the current paradigm and countering the cycle of radicalization.

Education (both formal and informal) must be revised and strengthened to prevent ideological stagnation and ensure that future generations have access to a broader, more inclusive perspective. While deradicalization and rehabilitation programs have been implemented worldwide for former RRE members, there remains an urgent need for specialized programs targeting children raised in extremist environments. Structured interventions could help reshape their worldview, steering them away from inherited violence and providing them with alternative narratives that emphasize peace and coexistence.

Furthermore, humanitarian organizations offering aid to war-torn regions should take a more proactive role in directly engaging with and educating vulnerable youth. By providing psychosocial support (Wu et al., 2013), mentorship, and alternative role models, these organizations can play a crucial role in easing cognitive dissonance and fostering resilience among children exposed to extremist teachings.

This research concludes that *Of Fathers and Sons* serves as a valuable case study in understanding the lives of RRE-affiliated individuals, offering insights into their upbringing, ideological indoctrination, and potential pathways for intervention. Although Syria's civil war has endured for decades and the road to peace remains uncertain, hope persists for future generations. By investing in education, ethical values, and humanitarian efforts, we can work towards a world where children are empowered to live with dignity, free from the shadows of extremism.

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