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What It Feels Like to Lose Your Kids to ISIS

- **SIMON COTTEE**

Oct 12 2016, 7:05pm

In Trinidad, I met the father of two children who were abducted and taken to Syria.

In February of 2015, three east London schoolgirls absconded to Syria and vanished into the block caps of international headline news. Less than three months earlier, in November of 2014, Qadirah and Muhammad Roach just vanished. The three east London schoolgirls prompted a global outcry, and not a little hysteria about the power and potency of Islamic State propaganda. But Qadirah and Muhammad – whose journey to Syria began from the Caribbean Island of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) – didn't even make it onto the front page.

There are reportedly 400 Trinidadians in Syria, living under the so-called "caliphate". The official number given by the government of T&T is 120. This is well below the 1,800 from France and the 760 from Britain. Yet T&T, with a population of 1.3 million, including 104,000 Muslims, is top of the list of western countries with the highest rates of foreign fighter radicalisation. This is one of the big untold stories of the war in Syria, and it's why I had come to Trinidad in February and June this year.

It is remarkable just how many lives the war in Syria has touched. It is also remarkable just how far its deadly embrace has reached. In late November, 2014, it came for Marvin Roach in Trinidad, and his only two children, 15-year-old Qadirah and 11-year-old Muhammad.

In 2011, Marvin divorced his wife and was awarded full custody of the children. As part of the custody agreement, his ex-wife was allowed to have the children one weekend a fortnight. When she took Qadirah and Muhammad on Friday the 21st of November she told Marvin they were going to Tobago for a short break. But she was lying, and instead took them to Guyana, and from there to Syria, joining her new husband, who had left Trinidad just weeks before.

The day I returned to England from my second trip to Trinidad, Marvin sent me a photograph of the two children together, sitting in the back of his car. Qadirah is wearing a white hijab, with a large daisy attached to it, and two more on her top. Muhammad is in a blue shirt, with the beginnings of a smile on his face. They look confident, with strong features, and full of promise.

Mark Bassant, an investigative TV reporter in Trinidad, put me in touch with Marvin, who agreed to speak to me about his ex-wife and her abduction of Qadirah and Muhammad. We met in a food court above Frederick Street in Port of Spain, T&T's capital, near where Marvin works in a mobile phone store. It was June, and still

Ramadan, and hot as hell. Carelessly, I asked Marvin if he wanted a drink. He politely declined: he was fasting. Marvin, like so many black African Muslims in Trinidad, is a convert. Born in 1974 in San Juan, just outside Port of Spain, he was 19 when he converted from Christianity to Islam. His teenage years, he told me, were "a little wild: liming, partying, having fun, carnival". It wasn't a straight conversion because his first introduction to Islam was via the Nation of Islam, the controversial African-American religious group led by Louis Farrakhan. But after visiting a "real mosque" in Trinidad and "seeing what it's really like", he soon discovered that "they [the Nation of Islam] were preaching stuff that contradicts the true Islam, which is the racism stuff". This was the Nur-E-Islam mosque, in El Socorro, San Juan, one of the largest in the country, and the same mosque attended by Shazam Mohammed, who was among the first cohort of Trinidadians to join ISIS, in July of 2014.

The reason I offered Marvin a drink is because when he approached me his eyes were crimson and wet, and I didn't know what else to say. At Kent University, where I teach criminology, I urge my students to try to develop rapport with interviewees before asking questions: joke, mess around, loosen it up. But how are you supposed to do that with a man who has lost his two children – his only children – to a war zone and a group that rapes girls and turns boys into human bombs, all as a matter of deliberate policy?

To say that Marvin finds this a difficult subject is an understatement. So the first thing I asked him was about his ex-wife, to whom he had been married for just over ten years. This was safer ground, because it wasn't Qadirah and Muhammad, and because it allowed Marvin to feel his way toward a different order of emotion. Tricia Ramirez, his ex-wife, he said, was "a very pig-headed, very arrogant person...not someone who could be easily advised". Like Marvin, she too was a convert, becoming a Muslim when she was around 13, after moving in with her aunt, who was also a Muslim. But unlike Marvin, who is devout, Tricia, he said, "would dress the part and everything, but I wouldn't really call her religious". She was also, in Marvin's telling, an unreliable and chaotic mother, and would often turn up at the children's school and take them as classes were in progress. The man she left Marvin for and remarried – Sean Bartholomew – was also hardly a role model: he was an ex-con and he was violent. Marvin recalled that just after he had won custody of the children, Bartholomew came to his store and attacked him with a metal bar. Bartholomew was arrested and charged for this, but the case was dropped because of a procedural error.

When Tricia collected the children on the Friday she told Marvin that she would return them to school on the Monday. But when Monday came, Qadirah and Muhammad were nowhere to be seen. Around lunchtime, Tricia sent Marvin a text, explaining that she was extending their stay in Tobago and would return on the Thursday. Straight away, Marvin felt that "something's not adding up". And he was right: Thursday came, and Tricia and the children were still gone, and now she wasn't

responding to his calls and texts. He then contacted child services and the police, who on searching Tricia's home found her two older sons, both in their early twenties, from a previous relationship, but not Tricia or Qadirah and Muhammad. It transpired that Tricia, on the day before she was due to return the children, had taken them on a flight bound for Guyana and, eventually, to Syria. This was despite Marvin having the children's passports, which they would have needed to fly. Marvin believes that Tricia, in planning the abduction, had bribed an official to acquire passports for the children.

According to Marvin, when the police arrived at Tricia's house, they seized the mobile phone of one of the sons, but it had just been wiped and revealed nothing. They also questioned the sons about the whereabouts of their mother, but to no avail: "Police didn't get anything out of them." Around the same time, the police paid Marvin a visit: "A couple of investigators came by, they took statements and that was it. No follow-up. No nothing." And it has been like that ever since, Marvin said. "No updates. Nutting. I honestly don't know what they doing, what information they have, what they gathered, I don't know."

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It was through his own investigations that Marvin was able to piece together what had happened. Tricia's new husband Sean Bartholomew (AKA Shabazz), Marvin told me, had taken a flight from Trinidad on the 8th of October, 2014, to Suriname, and from there onto Syria, to join ISIS. This is confirmed in a 50-page leaked document from a T&T police agency, reported on in the Trinidad Guardian in April this year. Marvin was also able to locate Bartholomew's Facebook page, where he found photos of Bartholomew posing with Tricia in Syria. He also found out about Bartholomew's death, subsequently confirmed in the Guardian, coming across his "martyrdom" picture on social media before this was public knowledge.

Bartholomew, as Marvin describes him, was a troubled soul. The two knew each other well and used to be friends. Born in Trinidad, Bartholomew moved to the US when he was four, returning in his early forties after being deported for drugs offences there.

"First impression was jail-bird, his whole demeanour," said Marvin, recalling the first time they met, having been introduced by a mutual friend who asked Marvin to take him to a mosque. "He told me, 'I really don't have no friends in Trinidad, I've been away, I really lonely, could you befriend me?' Just like that." And just like that, Marvin befriended him. "I got his first job for him," Marvin said. "I remember even giving him clothes." Marvin also tried advising him on matters of faith: "I started teaching him stuff, because I realised his knowledge was very limited Islamically." But little of what Marvin told him seemed to get through. "He was very arrogant, hasty, short fuse," Marvin recalled, adding that "it wasn't far-fetched to see a person like him becoming involved in stuff like this", referring to his involvement with radical Islam and ISIS. It was through Marvin that Bartholomew met Marvin's then-wife Tricia. I didn't want to press him on whether Tricia left him for Bartholomew, but Marvin made it clear that "you don't just break up with one person and go to the next person just like that".

He also made it luminously clear just how he feels about ISIS: "Only stupid people get involved in ISIS. The majority of people being killed at the hand of ISIS are Muslim! You leavin' Trinidad, a beautiful country, sun 24-7, beaches nice, coconut water, doubles, we live good here, nobody stop us from practicing our religion. You free... You would give up all of this to go in a so-called holy war, where the majority of the people you're killing are Muslim."

WATCH: Inside the Islamic State

A lot of Trinidadians in Syria, Marvin claims, are gang-members with pending court cases back in Trinidad. Some of them he personally knew. "One guy that I know very well, he's a drug-addict. I know him from being strung out on crack-cocaine to being a soldier for ISIS." Many other brothers he knew would just disappear, turning up months later in news coverage of foreign fighters in Syria. "They in the gym, you're working out, there's brother so-and-so – 'Hey, how are you?' Next thing you missed the brother for a couple of weeks and then later you're watching the same person on the news. These guys just buying tickets and walking out of Trinidad. No one stops them."

I asked Marvin if he had contemplated going to Turkey or Syria to try to find Qadirah and Muhammad. He has, but he doesn't think it's a good idea, and in any case he doesn't have the money for the trip. Yet not a single day goes by when he doesn't think about Qadirah and Muhammad. Only in his dreams does he get to see them and hear their voices: "It's always, like, they return, always them coming back."

According to a leaked security document containing the names of 102 Trinidadians in Syria, 40 are children. The youngest is just two years-old. In Trinidad, the national conversation is focused on how to respond to the potential security threat of the adult returnees from Syria. But no one is talking about the return of the missing children.

Qadirah and Muhammad Roach were taken exactly two years ago next month. They are still missing. But with ISIS now on the back-foot there is a hope, however faint, that they will return, and re-join the loving father they were so cruelly snatched from.