



International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism



PERSPECTIVE: Ireland's Lisa Smith Is a Test Run on Repatriation of ISIS Women

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The recent return of Irish ISIS wife, Lisa Smith and her two-year-old daughter to Ireland is a trial case of sorts, regarding the good involved in rescuing a young and innocent child from a dangerous conflict zone, while also swiftly bringing her ISIS mother to face justice at home, balanced against the possible dangers of leaving both in Syria, or the potential dangers which ISIS returnees like Lisa, may pose to their home countries upon their return.

I interviewed Lisa Smith in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) run Ein Issa camp in Syria in August of 2019. At that time [there were an estimated total of 12,000 women and children held in the camp, 1000 of these being foreign children detained with their 265 mothers](#)—all designated as foreign terrorist fighter, or FTF, families. Two of the ISIS women I interviewed on that trip, [Bouchra Abouallal from Belgium](#) and Lisa Smith, fled Camp Ain Issa during the October

2019 Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria when the Turks indiscriminately bombed the area. The town of Ain Issa and the neighboring camp were both bombed, and the Kurdish guards temporarily fled a time during which 400 of the camps inmates escaped, some hesitating for a day to try to figure out what to do. Both Bouchra and Lisa joined the ranks of women who headed north, toward the bombing, with children in tow, hoping to make it into Turkey and from there home. Their hope was to obtain security for their children, while also knowing they would have to face justice at home.

Both of these women had strongly denounced ISIS in their interviews with me but also expressed a great deal of fear [about ISIS enforcers active in the camp](#). These [ISIS women are still highly committed to the group](#) and require former ISIS women to continue wearing niqab and they punish by stoning, burning tents, attacking, beating and even killing women who speak out against ISIS. All of the women, in all of the SDF camps, that I interviewed on that trip told me about these enforcers, as did the YPJ guards themselves, who also had been attacked by these violent ISIS diehards. Lisa and Bouchra were deathly afraid of these women, yet in the privacy of our interview they bravely denounced ISIS and they both agreed to speak out against ISIS on video with their identities known. In the case of Lisa, she only agreed to reveal her identity after she got out of the camp due to concerns about safety for herself and her young daughter.

After an arduous and dangerous journey, Lisa made it to Turkey where she was arrested and handed over to her own government who came with security personnel to escort her home. She was then arrested and jailed upon entering Ireland and is now facing prosecution on terrorism charges.

Collecting evidence far from a battle zone is difficult for any security service, and prosecution teams throughout the world fret over whether or not they can successfully prosecute repatriated ISIS terrorists or if those with blood on their hands may roam freely on the streets. In the case of Lisa, the concern in Ireland is that she had a military career prior to joining ISIS and may have used her military training to train others in ISIS—but that has not yet been established with any publicly available evidence and is still *only* a widely held fear. It may turn out that Lisa, as she insists, was only a wife and mother, like most ISIS wives.

Travel to and membership in a terrorist organization and material support to a terrorist group is a prosecutable crime in some countries, including Ireland; although definitions vary among countries. However, when it comes to women in ISIS, membership is hard to define. ISIS wives did not typically swear bayat to the group like ISIS men did after they completed their mandatory shariah training. Women who served in the hisbah, i.e. the ISIS police, often took shariah training and swore bayat, but that was the exception, not the rule. Most ISIS women were homemakers—mothers and wives, versus gun slinging members of ISIS.



[WATCH: The Journey of Jihad for an Irish Muslim Woman](#)

Yet women who traveled to and joined ISIS were not for the most part simply victims of the men they traveled with much as [some security services like to “zombify” women](#) by removing any sense of personal agency to their actions when it concerns ISIS. Most women were involved in their partner’s decision to travel, endorsed it and willingly went to join the group. In ICSVE’s 220 in-depth interviews of ISIS returnees, defectors and prisoners, collected as part of the ICSVE’s *Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Project*, only three foreign fighter women were coerced, tricked or unaware of to where they were traveling. Of course, many did not understand that ISIS was not going to deliver the utopian Islamic living they were promised and as ISIS tried to portray in their recruitment propaganda.

With, or without, a pledge of allegiance, ISIS wives also benefited from having joined the group. In ISIS, the husband’s salary was calculated as a family sum with an amount accorded to him, his wife, and additional amounts added on for each child they had. Most ISIS families also enjoyed Caliphate-provided free housing, as well as other amenities like propane tanks, food allowances, etc. Wives were considered integral members of ISIS and were thus paid and provided for, via their husbands’ salaries and benefits.

ISIS also viewed the foreign women who traveled into their territory as integral members, as ISIS women who tried to leave the Caliphate were stopped from doing so, imprisoned and lectured on their duties to Islam and to remain inside the Caliphate. They also received pay via their husbands’ salaries and other amenities as mentioned above. ISIS actively sought females to join the group as well, despite not requiring them to take shariah training or swear bayat to the group. We must keep in mind that this is a highly sexist organization that assumed a

husband's bayat stood for the family and that he would train his wife and children in what he had learned in shariah training and that he would also control his family members.

The main duties of ISIS wives were to care for their families and to bear, raise and indoctrinate children as future citizens of the ISIS Caliphate. [A minority were trained and employed as spies, couriers, police and as combatants.](#) In the end, ISIS even began to give ISIS wives permission to take suicide missions without asking their husband's permission, claiming Abu Bakr al Baghdadi had the right to send them on his own.

Establishing that a woman was a member of ISIS is difficult, as is collecting evidence against her. Some local Syrian groups have begun collecting testimonies which are then often reported in the Western press, effectively trying the woman in the press, versus a court of law, based on claims that cannot be easily verified. This happened in the case of Lisa Smith when one journalist reported testimony made by an undisclosed local accuser without any solid evidence provided—effectively trying her in the press without her having the possibility of questioning or even knowing the identity and credibility of her accuser.

Perhaps the best option for foreign fighters currently held by the SDF and who may be returned home is to begin working closely with the SDF and triangulating interrogation, as well as victim, records to be able to piece together what is known about those in custody and to identify who can reliably testify about their involvement in ISIS. Many of those held by the SDF said that they were never tortured and in my direct experience, only one individual held by the SDF said he was mistreated. So, these non-coerced testimonies would likely be valid in Western courts. Yazidi "sex slaves" who were held captive by ISIS also often have a wealth of information, although many are so traumatized they would need psychological support to be able to go through the process of giving legal testimony.

Prosecutors and police today often also follow the social media pictures and statements posted by those who traveled to Syria to establish them as members of the terrorist group. With women this is also problematic as two women that I have interviewed ([Bouchra Abouallal](#) and [Hoda Muthana](#)) both claimed that their husbands controlled them, took their phones, and were responsible for vitriolic and threatening posts made on their social media. As many ISIS women have told me in research interviews that it was difficult for them to go to ISIS Internet cafes and that they handed their phones over to their husbands to send messages for them, this may not be such an incredible claim of innocence. Likewise posting pictures of posing with guns does not mean the person ever used them.

To address difficulties in prosecuting ISIS women, some countries—Germany most notable among them—have creatively used other grounds for convicting female members, by turning to laws regarding the commission of war crimes: taking and abusing "slaves", murder, taking over the property of others, etc. to bring prosecutions.

All of the foreign fighters and their wives that I have interviewed in the ICSVE *Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Project* who were being detained by the SDF were asked at the end of

the interview, so as not to contaminate it, if they wanted their interview data transmitted to the justice ministry of their home countries. [Most desperately wanted to return home](#) and greatly feared being handed over to Assad's government or to Iraqis where they feared torture, forced confessions, long sentences and executions and thus readily agreed. In the case of Lisa Smith, she admitted at the time of my interview with her that she was fully cooperating with the FBI and that she wanted to return home, even if it meant imprisonment, prioritizing safety for her two-year-old daughter above all else. Many mothers felt this way and even said they would send their children home without them if need be.

[Currently there are over one thousand women and children from Europe living in SDF detention camps.](#) At the time I interviewed Lisa in Ein Issa camp the [conditions there were already dire.](#) There was a group of about 20 ISIS enforcers in the camp who preached ISIS ideology to anyone who would listen—including young vulnerable children. These women enforced ISIS rules upon the women using knife attacks, beatings, tent fires and other forms of violence. The conditions in Ein Issa camp prompted me to immediately write to the Irish government on behalf of Lisa Smith's daughter to advise that her toddler should be taken home as quickly as possible and obviously as a two-year-old was not an ideological or violent risk to her home country. I wrote a similar letter on behalf of British Shamima Begum's infant who perished in Camp Roj and also for American Hoda Muthana's young son who was quite sickly at the time I interviewed her and remains so today.

All of the camps were at that time, and continue today, to be filled with all kind of dangers in addition to the ISIS enforcers: including blowing dust that causes asthma in some of the children, spread of infectious diseases, lack of trust in vaccines when they are even available, a dearth of nutritious food, lack of good medical care, cold in the winters and extreme heat in the summers, etc. Murders have also occurred in Camp Hol and women and children died in camp fires that were in some cases intentionally set, and by infectious diseases spread amongst the camp inhabitants

Children according to Western laws are not held accountable for the crimes of their parents and children brought, or born, into ISIS entered the ISIS Caliphate at no fault of their own and should not, by any interpretation of Western laws, be detained because their parents decided to join ISIS. Likewise, those under seven-years-old are unlikely to have been successfully indoctrinated into ISIS thinking or trained for violence. Those older may have been, but such children need good psychological treatment not punitive measures.

Teenager boys may be the most problematic in that regard, as some could be ideologically indoctrinated and may even have blood on their hands. ISIS forced many young boys into the Cubs of the Caliphate camps, glorified violence in their ideological trainings and in all their media points, and forced some youth to behead and execute prisoners and to "volunteer" for suicide missions. Likewise, teen girls were often forced to marry ISIS men—although this often was a form of victimization versus turning her into a perpetrator of violence. Although, [one young woman that we interviewed](#) was forced by her circumstances into a series of ISIS marriages and began after joining the ISIS hisbah, acting sadistically toward others after having

suffered a long series of traumas and losses herself. Thus, the issue of returning youth over the age of seven or eight needs to be handled carefully as if they were trained to abuse and kill these may be the most unstable and volatile former ISIS members and they may still be at risk for enacting violence. However, as youth, we should still view them as victims of ISIS and try to find rehabilitative, versus punitive, approaches.

Lisa Smith is currently facing charges of having joined a terrorist group. However, her attorney, Darragh Mackin, has indicated that he will argue on Lisa's behalf that she traveled to Syria and lived under ISIS as a result of pursuing her religion versus wanting to serve a terrorist group.



[WATCH: The Islamic State Protects Muslim Women](#)

Full disclosure—I have agreed to serve on her defense team, after also sharing her information, as she requested, and conferring with her government authorities.

According to her interview given to me in Camp Ain Issa, which maybe is not the full story, Lisa came from a dysfunctional home, joined the military to make her way in life but fell into a life of drinking and partying that ultimately caught up to her. Searching for real meaning in her life she then converted to Islam. This choice probably reflects appreciation by a young woman raised in an alcoholic home for a religion which forbids alcohol.

After Lisa converted, she was introduced to a very strict Salafi interpretation of Islam which helped her clean up her life but didn't suit her well. She almost gave it up, but then found a new mentor—an American who went to live under ISIS. This man, Abu Hassan has been credited as being highly charismatic and persuasive. Indeed, that is how Lisa also describes him.



[WATCH: The Islamic Caliphate Will Protect You](#)

Lisa tells her story as one of wanting to escape family members who were painful reminders of her troubled childhood and wanting to redeem herself from her own life choices. She found answers, but they ended up being harmful ones, as her conversion to Islam opened her to ISIS recruiters who she naively believed when they offered her an escape and the promise of living under Islamic ideals.

That Lisa believed her recruiters and traveled to Syria at a time when ISIS was already in the news as a horrific organization might appear beyond credible. However, I have found that many individuals respond to manipulative lies, that at least in the beginning—before they understand the nature of the lies—serve their needs. Those who believe, then cling to lies, often discount contradicting information as their need to believe is so great. Indeed, I have found this again and again with foreigners who traveled into ISIS. They discounted news and accounts from others and simply narrowed their focus on the false promises of ISIS, wishing for their desperate dreams of significance, purpose, justice, dignity, prosperity and living under Islamic ideals to be fulfilled. Of course, they were all horribly disappointed and Lisa was no exception.

Some women were seduced into ISIS by other women or by men who offered them marriage once they arrived. Foreign women who arrived alone, or who were widowed while in ISIS, were required to marry, or remarry, or live secluded in ISIS guest houses from which most women said they tried to escape by agreeing to marry as quickly as possible. It was a rare foreign woman who remained single in ISIS.

In a horribly ironic twist, Lisa went to Syria hoping to find freedom from alcohol and the “sins” that had plagued her life and to start anew deepening and following the Islam in which she found comfort. Yet she ended up repeatedly imprisoned. When she first arrived, she was put in an ISIS guest house and held in horrific conditions while she waited for her mentor to figure out how to get her out. Later she was imprisoned at home and prevented from escaping ISIS by a violent ISIS husband and ultimately she ended up in SDF, and now Irish, custody. If she will ever find freedom still remains to be learned.



[WATCH: Avoiding a Death of Jihilyah](#)

Lisa’s story is perhaps best told in her own words. These four counter narrative video clips are Lisa speaking about various aspects of her journey into Syria and her deeply traumatic experiences living under them. While she may have withheld some information, and our research ethic is to ask our subjects to refrain from self-incrimination, she clearly denounces ISIS, even while living among the ISIS enforcers in Camp Ain Issa and risks her life to do so. While she is definitely guilty of wishfully believing lies, it remains to be seen if she will be found guilty of being a terrorist herself.

In any case it’s good that her two-year-old and completely innocent daughter has been brought to safety and Lisa will now face a fair justice system that can decide carefully on the issues involved. This is ultimately what we should be aiming for with all ISIS members held under SDF custody—repatriations of the children and Western style justice for their parents.

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About the author:

Anne Speckhard, Ph.D., is Director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism ([ICSVE](#)) and serves as an Adjunct Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University School of Medicine. She has interviewed over 700 terrorists, their family members and supporters in various parts of the world including in Western Europe, the Balkans, Central Asia, the Former Soviet Union and the Middle East. In the past three years, she and ICSVE staff have been collecting interviews (n=220 and counting) with ISIS defectors, returnees and prisoners as well as al Shabaab cadres (n=16 and counting) and their family members (n=25) as well as ideologues (n=2), studying their trajectories into and out of terrorism, their experiences inside ISIS (and al Shabaab), as well as developing the [Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Project](#) materials from these interviews. She has also been training key stakeholders in law enforcement, intelligence, educators, and other countering violent extremism professionals on the use of counter-narrative messaging materials produced by ICSVE both locally and internationally as well as studying the use of children as violent actors by groups such as ISIS and consulting on how to rehabilitate them. In 2007, she was responsible for designing the psychological and Islamic challenge aspects of the Detainee Rehabilitation Program in Iraq to be applied to 20,000 + detainees and 800 juveniles. She is a sought after counterterrorism experts and has consulted to NATO, OSCE, foreign governments and to the U.S. Senate & House, Departments of State, Defense, Justice, Homeland Security, Health & Human Services, CIA and FBI and CNN, BBC, NPR, Fox News, MSNBC, CTV, and in Time, The New York Times, The Washington Post, London Times and many other publications. She regularly speaks and publishes on the topics of the psychology of radicalization and terrorism and is the author of several books, including *Talking to Terrorists*, *Bride of ISIS*, *Undercover Jihadi* and *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*. Her publications are found here: <https://georgetown.academia.edu/AnneSpeckhardWebsite>: and on the ICSVE website <http://www.icsve.org>

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