



# International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism



## ISIS - When Serving Terrorism is an “All in the Family” Affair How to Recover the Lost Children and Spouses of ISIS<sup>1</sup>

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Thirty-two-year-old American Samantha Elhassani, together with her four children—two brought into ISIS and two born there—is now awaiting her fate in a People’s Protection Units (YPG) camp near al-Hasakah, Syria. In 2014, she took her two small American children and followed her Moroccan husband into ISIS. Unbeknownst to her at the time, she had entered a misogynist organization. She would later be subjected to forced marriage, including witnessing rape of other women. She even witnessed the subjugation of her ten-year-old son when he was featured in an ISIS propaganda video, threatening his native land.

Evidence suggests Samantha was not an emotionally healthy woman when she left her native Indiana for ISIS. She had fallen deeply under the influence of a man with a criminal background and history of violence. As described by his sister-in-law, he was an arms dealer and trafficker and someone who would later become a media man for ISIS. When he died of shrapnel wounds, like many other ISIS widows, Samantha was passed to another ISIS cadre. She had two more children born in Raqqa, Syria. Her husband also brought Yazidi women and girls into their home to rape and treat as sex slaves. She and her children endured and witnessed horror on an epic basis on a daily basis.

Currently held with her four children in a YPG-run camp near al Hasakah, Syria, Samantha is uncertain whether she wants to return home, especially when knowing she might face prosecution and heavy sentencing upon her return. Her children’s fate appears to be subject to U.S. policies and to *her* decisions. In other words, unlike the journalist James Foley, for example, who was taken hostage by ISIS and deservedly had the U.S. Navy SEALs mount a rescue attempt on his behalf, the Elhassani children who managed to escape ISIS to end in a camp *are not being rescued, or offered the same option*. Despite the children and their mother being ISIS escapees and the YPG being an ally of the U.S., the U.S. government has not to date, to our knowledge, demanded that the children be turned over.

Even if these children are turned over to the U.S. authorities, there are many issues to surmount. While the two oldest children were U.S. passport holders, their identities would have to be verified. The two youngest were born in Raqqa, Syria, and would need genetic testing to link them to their U.S. citizen mother. She might refuse to cooperate necessitating DNA from a close American relative. The Elhassani children have a maternal aunt at home in the U.S. who is ready and willing to take them in. But what are the legal challenges of severing paternal rights and awarding temporary custody? In the United States, such decisions are customarily carried out at local family courts, not by the federal government.

At present, when it comes to children currently held in camps and detention centers in Iraq and Syria, the U.S. federal government does not appear to follow existing Child Protective Services (CPS) guidelines that would swiftly remove children from abusive and negligent mothers. Undoubtedly, it is both abusive and negligent parenting to willingly subject one’s children to the horrors of ISIS, where they would undergo

demented ideological indoctrinations and witness and partake in beheadings, crucifixions, torture, and floggings—to name just a few.

Our recommendations stemming from Elhassani' s case include the following. The U.S. State Department, U.S. Justice Department, Congress and other relevant bodies and entities in other countries that follow the practice of leaving the decision to return to their respective countries to the mothers, work briskly to introduce measures and laws that severe, or at a minimum temporarily suspend, parental rights of those parents who took their children into ISIS and who are not bringing them home. This would ensure the children's swift repatriation and return to their native countries, in this case the United States. In so doing, the rehabilitation process can be affected quickly rather than stall for months on end.

According to our evidence, the eldest Elhassani boy has openly begun to express his desire to become a YPG fighter, indicating he is aligning himself with available role models. We should also expect that anytime we leave children in camps filled with ISIS cadres, they will likely become more, not less, like those they are exposed to. At ICSVE, we have encountered many cases where young boys were recruited into ISIS in precisely these type of situations and environments. Absent active father figures, they will easily look to the men around them for role models. Girls may fall prey to the same as well. Likewise, sexual predation of both also occurs.

For all the countries and entities involved, we need to acknowledge that if we want to save the children who had no part or say in their decisions to end up in ISIS, we need to return them swiftly home and start rehabilitation efforts on their behalf, regardless of whether their parents return home with them or not.

Iraqi Ministry of Justice officials informed ICSVE researchers that currently there are approximately 700 ISIS women in custody in Iraq. Approximately 400 of them are from Turkey, 200 from the Russian Caucasus (Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia), 8 from Belgium. The rest are from other countries including France, Germany, Jordan, and Iraq, including some from Syria. Nearly all ISIS women were married—remaining single was not an option—and these women are no exception. On average, all of them have three or more children. The Iraqi prison policy on ISIS women is to remove any children over three-years-old from their mothers and place them in protective custody. At present, it is not clear what, if any, rehabilitation these children are receiving for dealing with their time living under ISIS rule. According to one Iraqi Ministry of Justice official, a German non-profit organization recently distributed aid boxes to mothers and children in Iraqi prisons, including milk and diapers for the babies.

Russian officials have recently returned 71 children from custody back to concerned [relatives in Russia, along with 26 mothers](#). Yet, between 70 and 120 Russian children remain in an [orphanage in Mosul](#) and it is estimated that approximately 400 Russian children may still be in Syria and Iraq. Yazidi women taken forcibly into Syria as hostages

with their young children taken have been allowed now to return back to their communities, but due to cultural restrictions on allowing converts or marrying outside the group, children born as result of rape are not welcomed back into the Yazidi community, leaving mothers with no option but to relinquish their children to orphanages in Mosul and other nearby areas in order to return home. Counselors working with some of these women shared the mothers' anguish and desperation for having to abandon their children, constantly wondering how they are faring.

With the huge influx of foreign fighters, many Western men married local Arab women, including fellow female travelers from non-Western countries. Children, born in the conflict zones in Iraq and Syria, whose killed ISIS cadre fathers were Westerners are currently undergoing DNA testing, in cooperation with their claimed homeland counterparts, to learn if they are eligible to attain Western citizenship and if they can be repatriated to their father's country, despite their mothers not being Westerners.

While some of the mothers arrested in Syria and Iraq are requesting to be repatriated to their homelands, their countries are not always keen for them to return. France, for instance, has claimed that French citizens, including women, who can obtain a fair trial in Syria and Iraq will be left to face justice there. It is believed that France had anywhere from [300-400 children](#) living under ISIS-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq, and some of these children have now been repatriated to France. In the case of German nationals, at least six children are being held with their [mothers in Iraqi camps](#), while the number of female [German nationals held in Syrian camps stands at 15](#). In the United States, [more than 45 women](#) are reported to have either attempted or joined ISIS in Syria, with [at least a dozen of American children ending up in ISIS-controlled territory](#).

A majority among the thousands of suspected ISIS members who survived and were arrested are now being prosecuted through specialized criminal counterterrorism courts in Iraq or local and quasi-judicial courts run by different opposition groups in Syria. For example, since the establishment of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS), also known as Rojava, different courts were set up to handle civil and criminal cases, ending in the prosecution of over [700 terrorism-related cases since its establishment in 2014](#). In Iraq, around 100 Europeans, among them also [Belgians, Russians, and Central Asians](#), are currently being tried in Iraqi courts, including five German women—one already sentenced to [death for joining the Islamic State and another hung following her death sentence](#).

Many countries continue to struggle with the question of how to deal with females and child returnees from the conflict zones in Iraq and Syria. This also applies in the case of women and children who remain in ISIS-controlled territories and detention camps. Given the lack of clear legal guidelines on how to address the issue of such returnees, many countries are dealing with them on a case-by-case basis. Difficulties in accessing evidence from the conflict zone, given the complex nature of the environments in Iraq

and Syria, remain a primary obstacle, including the fact that the Syrian government is not functioning in a good part of Syria.

There is also a lack of clear understanding when it comes to understanding the roles played by women in ISIS, given that many were never asked to swear allegiance (i.e. give their bayat) and most were not employed. Some, though, took part in the dreaded ISIS *hisbah*, or morality police, acting as enforcers. Some were sadistic in their acts of flogging and biting other women (with metal teeth). Others functioned as paid propagandists and recruiters, while a small group trained to be combatants and suicide bombers.

Moreover, there are many questions regarding their desires to return home and the possible threat level posed upon their return. In some cases, such as in the case of a 33-year-old French woman, [Emily Koenig](#), an online recruiter for ISIS, the role played and the level of allegiance to the group (i.e. ISIS) seems to determine a country's response to dealing with women. Currently held in a Kurdish-run prison in Syria, she continues with her demands that she and her three children be repatriated to France from Syria. Despite her appeal, she remains in Syria. In contrast, Canadian authorities seem willing to facilitate the return of a woman who managed to escape the Islamic State with her infant daughters, though it remains uncertain whether she [will face charges upon her return to Canada](#). Two German ISIS women together with three children were recently released from a Kurdish prison in Iraq. They were let free upon their arrival at the airport. German authorities cited insufficient evidence to detain the women for participating and [supporting a terrorist organization](#).

The issue of children taken or born in the ISIS-controlled territory is even more complex. Difficulties in proving their nationalities; challenges posed to immigration officials prior to travel—in regard to being issued travel documents—and to social services and teachers upon their return; and the level of threat posed by older children who served the Islamic State, are also looming. Given some children's exposure to ISIS' extremist ideology, and even militant training, the prospect of their return remains particularly worrisome and unwelcome by some.

Social services may lack adequate capacities and staff training to deal with the return of women and children, who are very likely to be in a traumatized state after living under ISIS rule. While some have proposed to have the children of the returnees taken away from parents, namely from those who are tried on child abuse or negligence charges for having exposed their children to a terrorist group, such propositions continue to face criticism on the grounds that determining a parent's threat level towards a child is often difficult, including the fact that governments are not best positioned to guarantee the best sponsorship of every child, [nor even a simple upbringing](#). In the case of the Belgian ISIS returnee, Laura Passoni, while under prosecution, her children were temporarily removed from her care and put in the care and custody of their maternal grandparents. Laura has gone on to be a positive force in her community lecturing Belgian students

about the dangers of violent extremist groups. (Our counter narrative video of her is [here](#).)

Legal hurdles related to the issue of repatriation persist, especially in light of bureaucratic barriers imposed by the YPG-run camps and detention centers in Syria. Some argue that such centers do [not form a legally-recognized state entity](#), meaning they lack the authority to legally detain children and women in such camps. Some governments, including France, have openly demanded that adults captured in Syria be left there, provided [they are guaranteed a fair trial](#), or, in the case of children, [“depending on their parents’ preference, either stay with them while tried locally or be repatriated, where they will be cared for by social services,”](#) with many other countries remaining undecided and uncertain about the decision on how to proceed, [especially as it relates to children](#). The policy of allowing nationals of other countries to be tried or dealt with in Kurdish-run camps is found by some to be flawed, considering their lack of adequate resources, [politicized nature of special courts, and the lack fair trial standards](#). Such policies seem to also reflect Western countries’ avoidance of having to deal with female ISIS members who would be likely to face [criminal charges upon their](#) return, but who are difficult to successfully prosecute given the challenges of presenting evidence from a conflict zone. Likewise, there are no guarantees of fair interrogation procedures or just proceedings. By remaining in such camps, mothers and their innocent children in particular are being exposed to [additional risks](#) in terms of their health and potential increased radicalization while surviving in a war zone surrounded by other militant captives. Likewise, they may also be viewed as potential perpetrators requiring adequate counseling and care.

The Elhassani boy, mentioned earlier in the paper, was forced to dress up in a suicide vest and pose with weapons while threatening fellow Americans in an ISIS propaganda video. He is likely to encounter significant social stigma upon return to his homeland. Social workers, psychologists, teachers and school counselors will likely all need to be engaged to help him. His mother, Samantha Elhassani, who traveled to ISIS as a result of her own dependency, substance abuse, and emotional dysfunction issues also needs to be put into psychological treatment.

While each country has differing standards of collecting evidence leading to convictions and laws that are available to prosecute on a terrorism, criminal, or child endangerment charges, our recommendation, when possible, is that all ISIS wives and mothers be prosecuted for providing material support for terrorism or child endangerment charges if necessary. Where such laws and evidence exist, these mothers can then be offered some kind of treatment to avoid serving prison time. Separating them from their children and serving prison time is not the goal; rather, the goal is to have a means of requiring these mothers to engage in meaningful therapy in order to avoid serving prison time. Arguably, given their level of indoctrination and previous emotional dysfunction, these women might not follow through with the course of treatment unless compelled to do so.

As our research also indicates, many who left for ISIS were hopelessly naïve and overly dependent on the men who groomed them for travel to the conflict zone. Others left for opportunistic reasons, including free housing, salaries, and the potential to reap material benefits. They need to be redirected and helped in removing obstacles to legitimate ways of earning a living and gaining independence.

Those who express grievances, whether real or perceived, over marginalization, discrimination, and Islamophobia, or other difficulties from being Muslim or of an immigrant descent, need to receive assistance in addressing these issues, while also being helped to integrate well into society. Many young women left for ISIS to throw off the chains of conservative families. They were seeking adventure and romance. Some also went to escape from life's problems. Many were looking for significance and purpose and believed that building an alternative world governance was a good idea. Those who left as "true believers" need to have their ideological orientation redirected to nonviolence, while those who still adhere to the Takfir ideology of ISIS and are truly hate-filled may have to be imprisoned and separated from their children.

Many women were raped inside ISIS. Many were forced into repeated marriages, raped by smugglers who helped them escape, or molested and mistreated in prisons before making their way home. All are likely traumatized by all they have witnessed and experienced inside ISIS. They are now facing the same emotional and psychosocial issues they faced before leaving for ISIS, in addition to social stigma, and children that may be acting out the traumas of having lived under ISIS. They need our help. Our recommendation is that governments quickly deploy legal measures alongside qualified mental health and educational support, as well as career counseling and community support, to these women to put an end to the cycle of terrorism and social stigma in their and the lives of their children.

### **About the Authors:**

**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 600 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 two years, she and ICSVE staff have been collecting interviews (n=78) with ISIS defectors, returnees and prisoners, studying their trajectories into and out of terrorism, their experiences inside ISIS, 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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