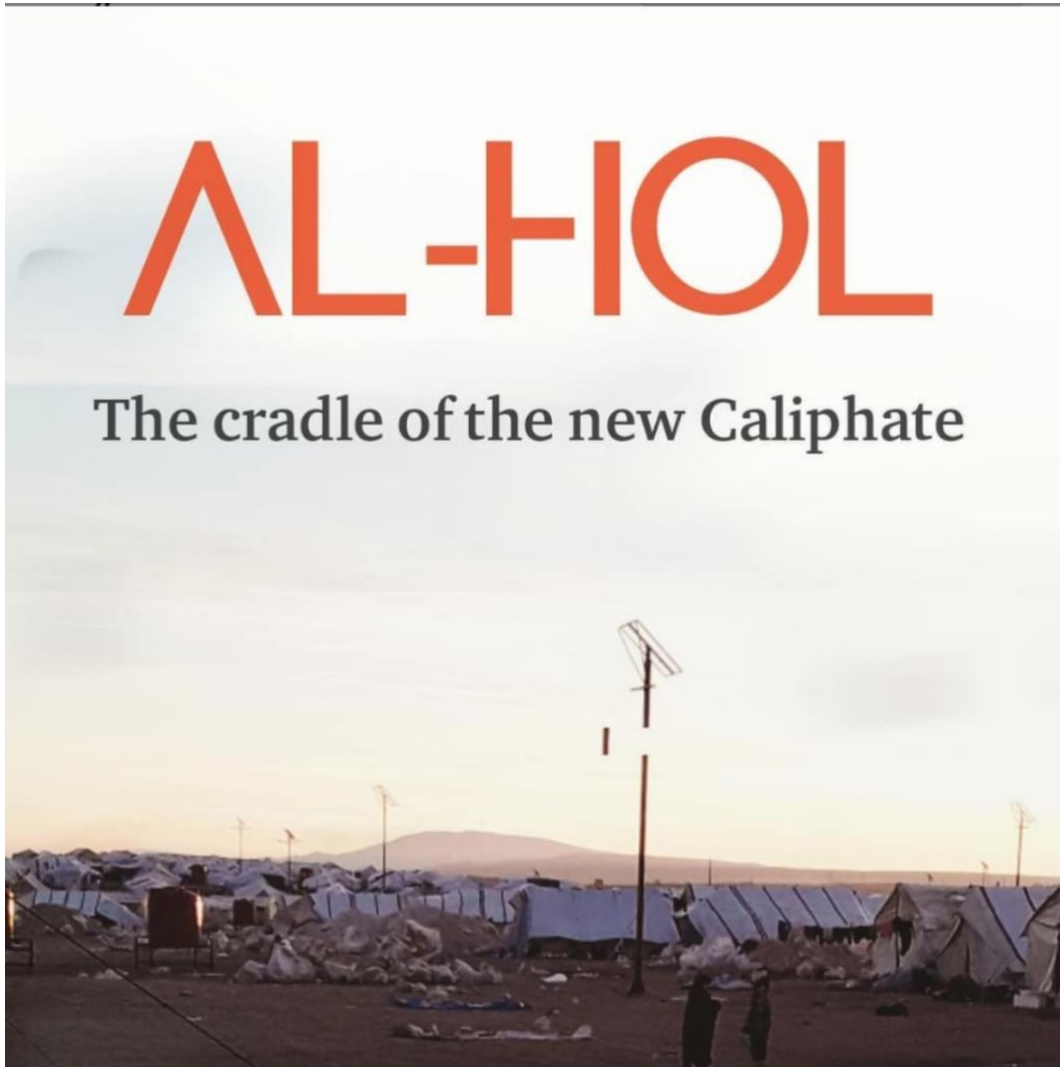




# International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism



## **The Security Risk Posed by ISIS Women Smuggling Their Way Out of Camp Hol**

Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenberg

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While a debate rages in Europe over whether or not ISIS women and their children can be repatriated to their European home countries, some women have been taking things into their own hands and returning via illegal smuggling networks, creating new and serious security issues with which European officials must now grapple. This week [an ISIS woman was repatriated in Sweden](#) and last week three Finnish ISIS women and their children were repatriated to Finland.<sup>[1]</sup> What all of these women had in common was that they paid smugglers to facilitate their escape out of the al Hol detention camp, located in the Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) territory in northeast Syria, made their way to Turkey, and once in Turkey were able to force the hand of their home governments to accept them back, in some cases via circuitous routes. These are the ones we know about; the women so desperate to come home, and to bring their children home, that they risk putting their lives into the hands of smugglers who have been known to rape and facing prosecution and possible imprisonment once returned home.

There are others who didn't come home and who are still on the loose. One worrisome case is that of Hayat Boumedienne, whose partner Amedy Coulibaly was one of the perpetrators of the horrific January 2015 attacks in Paris, France. Boumedienne, who had fled to Syria with Mahdi Sabri Belhoucine, the brother of a jihadist notorious in France, is believed to have been at least peripherally involved in the Paris attacks. She is one of 13 French female jihadists who have escaped from al Hol and Ain Issa camps. "Some were married to well-known jihadists, others made propaganda and appeared in the magazines of the Islamic State organization," says [Jean-Charles Brisard, cofounder of the Paris-based Terrorism Analysis Center](#). The number of French ISIS female escapees from camps in northeast Syria amounts to 10 percent of the French women detained in Syria, [according to Brisard](#). This is no insignificant number and that ISIS women like Boumedienne, who may be guilty of supporting the killings of French citizens, are on the loose is horrifying to say the least.

This steady stream of escapes from the ISIS family detention camps and even from the prisons in SDF territory has been occurring since Fall 2019 when President Donald Trump pulled back U.S. special operations forces who had been helping to secure the prisons and prisoners, as well as protect our allies, the Syrian Democratic Forces, who fought and gave their lives to defeat ISIS on the ground. After Trump greenlit the Turkish invasion of SDF-held territory, many of the camps and prisons holding ISIS members suffered bombardments and hundreds of women, many from Europe, escaped from Camp Ain Issa, as did some men from other SDF-run prisons. The men were later recaptured, but the security situation for ISIS detainees has changed dramatically over the past year, with the loss of American influence in the region resulting in a significant degradation in the SDF's ability to secure the male prisoners and ISIS wives held in camps.

"People try to escape every day, and people do escape every week," a camp administrator from Al Hol [told Lindsey Snell of The Investigative Journal](#) this February. Of these, some wanted to

settle in the Syrian areas of Idlib or Deir Ezzor before doing so became so dangerous, but most want to cross out of Syria and into Turkey. Where they go from there is unclear, though their remaining in Turkey as sleeper cells is also a possibility. [One ISIS male fighter recently surfaced in Spain](#). He had made his way out of Syria via Turkey, but had not been in an SDF prison, however.

According to an unnamed Turkish journalist cited by Snell, women are assisted by the Turkish military in Jarabulus and Manbij to make their way into Turkey. This fits with previous International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) [interviews](#) in which ISIS members claim that Turkish intel and military officials helped them in earlier years when they needed to cross the border from Syria into Turkey for various reasons. Crossing into Turkish rebel-held areas and then into Turkey appears to be how the aforementioned Finnish and Swedish women escaped the camp and made their ways home.

[The SDF](#) acknowledges these escapes, most recently confirming [Swedish news reports](#) that ISIS women from the Netherlands, France, Finland, Switzerland and Sweden have all been smuggled out of the camp in recent months.

The Swedish woman who most recently made it home is in her 30s. She left Western Sweden for Syria in 2013 and her husband and children are reported to be dead. This ISIS woman who is currently living freely in the Gothenburg region has not been arrested but is under investigation for war crimes under the new Swedish terror legislation that affords the police more opportunities to investigate those who have returned to the country. The Finnish women are reported by ICSVE sources as having had their children removed from their custody, but it is unclear what judicial proceedings they are undergoing.

Investigation for war crimes would include looking for evidence of having lived in stolen properties or having owned slaves. This strategy of prosecuting ISIS wives on war crimes versus terrorism charges has also been successfully used in Germany in cases where there is no evidence of them having sworn their loyalty to or actually serving ISIS as recruiters or members of ISIS's morality police, the *hisbah*. In any case, Swedish terrorism laws are particularly weak. Likewise, Swedish counter-terrorism expert [Magnus Ranstorp points out](#) that in Sweden the new terrorism law cannot be applied retroactively, but that this woman could be charged for withholding information about war crimes in which she has been involved if evidence such as photos are found on her mobile phone, or if investigators receive testimony about her involvement in such crimes.

[Relatives of ISIS women in Sweden say](#) the going price for smuggling out of Camp Hol runs from \$10,500 to \$100,000, with the higher price ensuring a safer journey. ICSVE monitoring of social media where ISIS women discuss what it costs to be smuggled out of the camp, however, has found far lower prices for bribes to local guards and payments to smugglers, with the amounts of \$3,000 to \$4,500 per person being discussed six months ago and today's rates being closer to \$7,500.

For instance, this May ICSVE discovered a group of accounts devoted to [“Justice for Sisters”](#) on Instagram, with one of the accounts appearing to be run from al Hol camp, most likely via an illicit phone. The women detained in al Hol, pictured in full opaque niqabs, wrote that they needed \$7,500 to escape. While many of the posts are written in German, a few are written in Arabic and English. The women pleaded for funds “in our hour of need” and said that some of the women had received the required money to escape. They also posted an ISIS propaganda video promising “the punishment of the Burning Fire” to “those who have tortured the believing men and believing women.” In the caption for the video, the women suggested that those who donated would be helping the family of a *shaheed*, a “martyr,” suggesting that the women had been married to fallen ISIS fighters. In ISIS’s distorted version of Islam, “martyrs” families are to be taken care of and they too earn the rewards of Islamic martyrdom.

Another video on the Justice for Sisters Instagram showed women reading a message in German, English, and Arabic. This Instagram account also features Instagram stories glorifying ISIS fighters and their families in ISIS’s last stronghold of Baghouz, and makes requests for cash donations displayed in international currency. Other photos show the dire conditions in al Hol. That account bio includes links to two other Instagram accounts apparently not run from al Hol. One, supposedly run by a man, posted photos and videos of the women in al Hol. His content was almost exclusively in German. Another account posted a link to a PayPal account as well as an address in Germany where supporters could go to offer “help and support.” Most of the photos posted by this account were of women and their children in al Hol. As of June 22, 2020, the primary Justice for Sisters Instagram account no longer exists, and an associated account posted a video on June 12, 2020, purporting to be taken after their escape, “when they are brought out of Camp houl [sic].”

Despite this worrisome depiction of the type of women aiming to escape from al Hol, some of the women who have managed to escape from detention camps in northeast Syria appear to be disillusioned and weary of ISIS. [Lisa Smith from Ireland told ICSVE](#) that she simply wanted to secure her child’s safety by repatriating to Ireland and was willing to face prosecution and prison time at home if necessary. She escaped from Camp Ain Issa during the Turkish invasion of northeast Syria in the fall of 2019 and is now home, living freely on bail as she awaits trial. She doesn’t appear particularly dangerous. There are other examples of women who made it home from ISIS and who are no longer dangerous, such as [Laura Passoni from Belgium](#) who now lectures high school students about the foolishness of believing the claims of groups like ISIS.

[Approximately 4,000 foreign women with their 8,000 children are currently held in Camp Hol and another 1,500 ISIS FTF wives and children are held Roj in northeast Syria.](#) Many are exhausted and disillusioned and have lost their enthusiasm for ISIS. Having survived the downfall of Raqqa and fleeing bombings, in some cases all the way to ISIS’s last stand in Baghouz, many no longer want to be part of ISIS. Yet in Camp Hol, they suffer under [those who still endorse the Caliphate – the ISIS enforcers who punish them](#) if they speak against the Caliphate and if they fail to cover themselves or otherwise adhere to the ISIS rules. That these

women are desperate enough to pay smugglers and risk rape and possibly death by putting themselves and their children into the hands of unknown persons to escape is not surprising.

Still, it doesn't appear to be disillusioned women who are escaping from Camp al Hol these days. From the look of their social media accounts, these women appear to be of the other sort – women who remained loyal to ISIS, who wait for the ISIS men to come break them out or who are now taking matter into their own hands. That we don't know how many have escaped or where they have gone, and we cannot predict how many will escape in the coming weeks and months is truly alarming.

In many cases, female ISIS returnees have been regarded as victims who lack any agency in following their men or were seduced into ISIS, but there are many cases of women who have been highly involved in the *hisbah*; trained with explosives and as snipers, fighters and suicide bombers; and acted as spies and couriers. As is evident from social media accounts and interview reports, some women in the camps are still strongly devoted to ISIS. Unlike many of the 240 ISIS men and women interviewed by ICSVE in these camps and in prisons throughout the region who express regret for traveling to Syria and deep disappointment with the Islamic State Caliphate, these women are not expressing regret.

When considering these ISIS escapes, one should keep in mind that the current ISIS dream is to rebuild itself and its former Caliphate, and prison breaks are one of the ways they hope to carry out that dream. Indeed, al-Qaeda in Iraq pursued a strategy it called "[Breaking the Walls](#)" in 2012 to free enough former jihadists to strengthen their ranks. As a result, they rose again as ISIS – which was by 2014 the most ambitious and powerful jihadi terrorist group in history. When the first author visited the SDF camps in August and September of 2019, [the prison guards told her the die-hard women enforcers of ISIS](#) were roaming the camps sharing news of Baghdadi's speech and telling their "sisters" that it wouldn't be long until their men would come to break them out of the prison. This news was so frightening to some of the disillusioned women that one German in Al Hol asked her, trembling in fear, if it was true that ISIS would be coming back to reclaim them.

ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, who was released from U.S. custody in Iraq a decade earlier, and therefore did not need to break out of prison, urged his followers in his final video months before he was killed last October to break free the ISIS prisoners. Other ISIS supporters have since echoed his call. ISIS men held in al Hasakah prison in SDF territory have rioted multiple times recently, once taking over an entire floor of the prison for several days. Eventually the riots were quelled and the SDF says those who escaped were recaptured.

At ICSVE, we are routinely monitoring social media as it relates to ISIS and have discovered Instagram accounts twice over the last few months that are fundraising for such escapes. The first, mentioned above, was an Instagram page run by ISIS women in Camp al Hol mostly operating in German connected to Europeans who were fundraising openly on Paypal for the

women to be smuggled out of the camp. Last week, our researchers discovered another such page run in English again asking for money to facilitate escapes from the camp.

The account, called Caged Pearls, posts only in English and appears to be run by women more cautious about being discovered. The account is private and hosts fundraisers through Telegram, an encrypted app that has been used extensively by ISIS and its supporters. The account posted its first photo in January but, based on their posts, the women were likely captured following the fall of Baghouz in 2019. Therefore, it is possible that the same women were using a different account that was shut down for posting ISIS-related messages before creating the present account. Like the Justice for Sisters account, the Caged Pearls account praises those who fought until the end at Baghouz, such as in one caption next to a photo of ISIS prisoners, reading, “These are the Men that deserve your sincere Dua [invocation or prayer] who stayed til the end...[sic].” Other posts boast of teaching children to throw rocks at guards, yearn for the days when “we can carry arms again,” and proclaim al Hol to be “The cradle of the new Caliphate.”

In May 2019, [Spain’s National Police reported that ISIS](#) fighters had set up an informal *hawala* payment structure in Syria to give financial support to foreign fighters wishing to return to Europe. According to the police statement, “[This \[police\] operation is part of the fight against the new strategy](#) of [IS] which, after its loss of territorial control, has urged its members to return to their places of origin.” From our monitoring of ISIS social media, it appears that funds are raised on Telegram and Paypal in Europe and transferred via these *hawala* networks to help ISIS women escape. Likewise, the first author interviewed a Turkish ISIS member in Syria who ran such a network in Syria and later in Turkey, lending further evidence to the existence of this system.

The fact that dangerous women who still endorse ISIS are escaping from Camp al Hol, supported by funds raised in Europe and then making their way back into Europe, while others are disappearing into thin air should alarm everyone. That the SDF is not able to stop this from happening underlines the need for more support for our allies in Syria and the need to take concrete action with regard to the status of the foreigners currently held by the SDF. Either trials need to happen on Syrian territory and real prisons be built to house such women, or they need to be repatriated, prosecuted and held in prisons at home. If it is not possible to prosecute or sentence these women due to laws that see women as brainless followers, these women should at least be kept under surveillance until judged to no longer be a threat to society. Turning a blind eye to this very real security risk doesn’t serve anyone – except ISIS.

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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 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 has interviewed 239 ISIS defectors, returnees and prisoners as well as 16 al Shabaab cadres 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 which includes over 175 short counter narrative videos of terrorists denouncing their groups as un-Islamic, corrupt and brutal which have been used in over 125 Facebook campaigns globally. 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 foreign governments on issues of repatriation and rehabilitation of ISIS foreign fighters, wives and children. 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 expert and has consulted to NATO, OSCE, the EU Commission and EU Parliament, European and other foreign governments and to the U.S. Senate & House, Departments of State, Defense, Justice, Homeland Security, Health & Human Services, CIA, and FBI and appeared on 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 writes a column for Homeland Security Today and 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:

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[1] Personal communication via a Finnish counter terrorism expert.