

The Women of ISIS and the Al-Hol Camp

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Brief Analysis

Women and children in the al-Hol Camp are conducting ISIS operations and perpetuating ISIS's ideology.

One of the biggest mistakes after the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the fall of ISIS's self-proclaimed caliphate was to put ISIS families together with a large number of Iraqi and Syrian refugees in the al-Hol camp in the city of Hasaka, northeastern Syria. Of the camp's approximately 62,000 people, an **estimated 80 percent (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1085982>)** are women and children. While repatriation of those with foreign citizenship is an ongoing and challenging issue, the question of ongoing ideological extremism within the camp itself poses a serious issue for the Syrian Defense Forces personnel who guard it.

Repeated episodes have demonstrated that the ISIS ideology is alive and well in al-Hol, maintained and perpetuated by ISIS families. Members of ISIS families tell journalists entering the al-Hol and Roj camps that they came to Syria to wage jihad for the sake of God, and that the ideology of ISIS is not yet over. In April 2019, women **proudly shouted (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpM8d7GurPA>)** in front of an Al Arabiya TV camera: "our faith, ideology have been implanted here forever, and America, the Kurds, the infidels, and the Jews will not be able to remove it. This is a belief that has been instilled in our children too, and we will never regret it. We will continue, because the caliphate will return again." Likewise, children indoctrinated by ISIS ideology throw stones at journalists and threaten them with slaughter because they are "infidels."

These camps therefore stand as a significant hub for ISIS operations and a breeding ground for ISIS's ideology. Looking forward, international action is required in order to move the camp's ISIS families through deradicalization programs and ultimately repatriate them in their home countries. Without such action, the camps will continue to play a role in the continued existence of ISIS.

The Role of Women in ISIS

The former wives of ISIS members compose a considerable portion of the population in al-Hol camp, and ISIS has not failed to utilize these women as a resource. As with ISIS operations outside al-Hol, ISIS depends on the use of women in the camp as an important weapon within its expansionist ideology. The organization has generally attracted a large number of women and girls from different nationalities, which ISIS recruits for the purpose of disseminating extremist ideas, given women's and girls' ability to influence young people. This tactic is particularly relevant in al-Hol, which is filled with children and young people.

In 2014, ISIS established its first armed women's battalion under the name of "Al-Khansaa Brigade," which included one thousand women in its ranks. These women participated in more than 200 terrorist operations, carried out police work within the caliphate, and promoted ISIS ideology in their societies. As evidenced by social media, it is possible that some of these women are [inside the al-Hol camp. \(https://www.annahar.com/arabic/section/140-%D8%B1%D8%A3%D9%8A/02052021011204632\)](https://www.annahar.com/arabic/section/140-%D8%B1%D8%A3%D9%8A/02052021011204632) continuing in their roles to support ISIS.

While the proportion of women in the camps who maintain the ISIS ideology and continue to actively spread it is unclear, it is by no means insignificant. According to Harvard research fellow Vera Mironova's [interviews \(https://www.mei.edu/publications/life-inside-syrias-al-hol-camp\)](https://www.mei.edu/publications/life-inside-syrias-al-hol-camp) with Russian-, Serbo-Croatian-, and English-speaking women in the camps, 30 percent of women in the camps continue to believe in ISIS and that "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was a rightful caliph but the group failed because he was surrounded by untrustworthy people." European women in the camp suggest that the proportion of supporters is actually less than 20 percent, and claim that it is in further decline. Yet even this percentage has managed to participate in successful social media efforts, fundraising operations, and even violent activities within the camps, and the global counterterrorism community should consider them a serious component of ISIS's operations.

One salient component of these women's operations within the camp is their policing of other women. Women inside al-Hol who are still committed to the ISIS ideology have developed a considerable tension with other women who no longer feel an alliance to the organization. These pro-ISIS women, known as *al muhajirat* (the foreign women) exhibit contempt towards other former ISIS wives who feel remorse over their connection to ISIS and demonstrate a desire to return to their countries of origin.

As a result, a group of women's cells affiliated with ISIS have been forcefully imposing ISIS's ideology on other women within the camp. As MEI [reported \(https://www.mei.edu/publications/life-inside-syrias-al-hol-camp\)](https://www.mei.edu/publications/life-inside-syrias-al-hol-camp), "[the muhajirat] condemn women who chat with men at the market or those who bring water to the camp, and they go so far as to put on a *niqab* (face veil) when meeting them on the street." In this effort to enforce ISIS's ideology within the camp, pro-ISIS women have formed *hesba*, or "religious police," units. These units monitor the implementation of religious obligations and hold anyone who refuses to observe the organization's religious teachings accountable. As such, the units enforce "wearing the veil, [and prohibit] smoking, dancing, listening to music, and wearing pants."

More concerning, *hesba* units' activities go well beyond simple chastisement and condemnation. When *hesba* units suspect other camp residents of deviating from ISIS's doctrine or working to spread negative ideas about ISIS, the units impose heavy penalties. Types of punishment include flogging, torture, food deprivation, burning of tents, and murder. So far in 2021, more than [40 people \(https://www.wsj.com/articles/refugee-camp-for-families-of-islamic-state-fighters-nourishes-insurgency-11623254778\)](https://www.wsj.com/articles/refugee-camp-for-families-of-islamic-state-fighters-nourishes-insurgency-11623254778) have been [reported murdered \(https://www.wsj.com/articles/refugee-camp-for-families-of-islamic-state-fighters-nourishes-insurgency-11623254778\)](https://www.wsj.com/articles/refugee-camp-for-families-of-islamic-state-fighters-nourishes-insurgency-11623254778) in the camps, including 10 by beheadings, though not all of these murders are necessarily related to the *hesba* units.

In addition to activities that enforce the ISIS ideology within the camp, pro-ISIS women within al-Hol have also worked to promote ISIS ideology outside the camps. In one aspect of this effort, pro-ISIS women have been vocal on social media about what they deem to be acceptable within Islam. For example, several women in al-Hol have posted letters swearing their allegiance to the new caliph of ISIS, and they often broadcast online that they are continuing to enforce ISIS values. One woman [posted \(https://www.mei.edu/publications/life-inside-syrias-al-hol-camp\)](https://www.mei.edu/publications/life-inside-syrias-al-hol-camp), “Sunglasses are not acceptable in Islam and we would take them off women who wear them in public.”

Furthermore, pro-ISIS women have been able to gather funding for various ISIS-related activities. Using sensationalist titles and language like “Thoughts from Prison,” “Sisters in Captivity,” and “Caged Birds,” to influence the religious sentiment in social media users, pro-ISIS women have engaged in promotional campaigns with the aim of collecting funds and donations from outside the camps. Pro-ISIS women then collect funds from jihadist organizational cells inside Europe and groups loyal to the ISIS project in the Middle East using the informal hawala money transfer system and PayPal, which they often access using covert phones hidden inside the tents. Once they have gathered funds, pro-ISIS women inside al-Hol then pay smugglers related to ISIS cells in Syria and Iraq to smuggle families and individuals out of the camp. Furthermore, smugglers can move amounts of cash between \$5,000 and \$20,000 out of the camp and transport them to Idlib or Turkish-controlled areas. Often, some of these women eventually disappear, likely to join ISIS or other like-minded groups.

Given these ongoing activities in a l-Hol camp, it is important to recognize that the camp constitutes a dangerous “small caliphate.” Female leaders nurture the group’s violent ideology and run money-making schemes that help keep the insurgency and the group’s ideology alive.

Training the Cubs of the Caliphate

Perhaps one of the most concerning efforts of pro-ISIS women in al-Hol, however, is their indoctrination of children inside the camp. Essentially forgotten by the international community, about 28,000 children inside the camp are living without education and health care. Without formal education (the camp’s 25 learning centers are closed due to COVID-19), children there are largely being taught by their mothers, and, [according to U.N. and Kurdish officials \(https://apnews.com/article/islamic-state-group-united-nations-syria-middle-east-ef4113e4ec925db452ea82d368e6e4f4\)](https://apnews.com/article/islamic-state-group-united-nations-syria-middle-east-ef4113e4ec925db452ea82d368e6e4f4), ISIS mothers are often indoctrinating their children with ISIS ideology. As a result, ISIS ideology is filling the gap in children’s education and radicalizing the camp’s youth, and Kurdish officials from the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and human rights organizations fear the camp will create a new generation of a radical militants. Unfortunately, the camp residents’ home governments often see the children as posing threats rather than requiring rescue, and so many children have no way escape this ideological upbringing.

This phenomenon of child indoctrination has historic roots in ISIS. During the existence of the caliphate, ISIS made a priority of indoctrinating children with its brutal interpretation of Islamic texts. ISIS trained children and teenagers as fighters, taught them how to carry out beheadings using dolls, and even had them carry out killings of captives in propaganda videos.

Now, pro-ISIS women in al-Hol are carrying out similar campaigns to spread extremism and recruitment inside the camp by teaching children and teenagers extremist jihadist ideas. A huge portion of the 65,000 people living in al Hol are children, with two-thirds of the camp’s population under the age of 18 and over half under the age of 12, [according to Lt. Gen. Paul Calvert \(https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2021/02/coalition-plans-expand-giant-isis-prison-syria/172270/\)](https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2021/02/coalition-plans-expand-giant-isis-prison-syria/172270/), who commands the U.S.-led counter-ISIS mission in Iraq and Syria. Calvert indicated that the wives of ISIS fighters are carrying out a daily indoctrination program, and he said that so-called “cubs” are

“exported back through the rat lines coming out of al Hol that pushes them down into the Badia desert for additional training and use as [ISIS] fighters.” Calvert also indicated that there is weapons smuggling in and out of the facility.

The evidence of this indoctrination is clear in the violent reaction that a team of Associated Press journalists faced when they **visited the camp (<https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/syria-camp-ideology-molds-forgotten-children>)** in May 2020. When the reporters entered a market inside the annex, around a dozen young boys began to hurl stones at the team. One boy, who seemed to be about 10 years old, screamed, “We will kill you because you are an infidel.... You are the enemy of God. We are the Islamic State. You are a devil, and I will kill you with a knife. I will blow you up with a grenade.”

Furthermore, most of the so-called “cubs” are capable of far more than throwing stones. Many of these children have received training on how to use weapons, execute beheadings, and perform suicide operations. In March 2020, a 16-year-old ISIS child **told a reporter (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIPgZE2yuOU>)** with Al-Hadath TV channel about how he used a method he learned from ISIS to murder one of his friends in the camp. In the interview, the teenager admits to having stabbed his friend ten times in the neck and body with a knife. According to the teenager, his mother received instructions for the murder from two ISIS men in Idlib, along with money. The men said that the victim, his friend, was “fighting against the religion of God.”

In addition, reports have emerged that pro-ISIS women are forcing adolescents "13-16 years old" to marry ISIS girls and women in order to produce more children loyal to ISIS. Regarding this issue, CENTCOM Commander Gen. Kenneth McKenzie **told the American Enterprise Institute (<https://www.aei.org/events/a-conversation-with-commander-of-us-central-command-gen-kenneth-f-mckenzie-jr/>)** in April 2021 that “unless we find a way to repatriate them, reintegrate them and deradicalize them, we're giving ourselves a gift of fighters five to seven years down the road,”

International Action is Required

Most countries and governments still refuse to receive their citizens who joined ISIS, including ISIS families and children. This refusal springs from a fear that repatriated ISIS family members will carry out terrorist attacks inside their home countries. As demonstrated, these concerns are not unfounded. In March 2021, Kurdish SDF forces conducted a security campaign in the al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria to reduce ISIS influence there. During the campaign, the SDF arrested 125 suspected direct links to ISIS, including seven described as senior leaders. In addition to the arrests, **the SDF says (<https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/crackdown-syrias-al-hol-camp-nets-senior-islamic-state-operative>)** they seized weapons, ammunition, and laptop devices. The operation, which was implemented with the support of the United States and anti-ISIS coalition members, has taken on increased importance amid growing evidence that ISIS has been using al-Hol, which is home to thousands of wives, children, and other family members of ISIS fighters, as a new hub for its operations.

At this particular stage of ISIS’s history, during which the organization is facing defeat and weakness, the employment of women and children is most dangerous. As **described (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TodEXdUcGsE&t=2s>)** by Belgian MP Georges Dalmani, who visited the al-Hol and Roj camps in December 2020, “Inside the camp there is a feeling that what happened is a loss for the battle and that the war is not over, and that a new generation of people must be created Jihadi fighters.” Many ISIS women and their children believe that what they are doing is a religious duty and obligation according to the organization’s Islamic creed, and that is why they came with their fighting husbands from different countries to spread the ideology of their organization in the region. Because of the enduring loyalty of these women and children, since 2016, ISIS leaders have developed a strategy of deploying sleeper cells inside populations of displaced civilians and ISIS women. These cells are trained to carry out

special tasks such as espionage, transfer of information and weapons, procurement of funds, and suicide operations.

In combatting these pernicious trends within the al-Hol and Roj camps, the United States and the international community need to take urgent action. One critical step is to increase funding for the camp's educational and rehabilitation centers already set up by UNICEF. These centers should operate with an increased emphasis on de-radicalization for children and women of ISIS through psychological and religious educational curricula, as well as training for healthy re-integration into the camp residents' home societies. This process will likely require the separation of children from extremist mothers for a transitional period until mothers can show that they have shed radical ideologies. At that point, these families' host countries will hopefully feel comfortable repatriating them.

Indeed, addressing extremism between ISIS families and their children is linked above all to the policy of the United States and the international coalition in Syria, as well as the factors that contribute to the increase in terrorism and extremism there. Turkey occupies Kurdish cities, and it cooperates with extremist Syrian opposition militias in the war against its Kurdish allies. These militias were also sponsored by ISIS cells and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham - al-Qaeda in Idlib. All of this constitutes logistical support for ISIS and pushes it to increase its activity in order to return. This situation is conducive to extremism, and the rise of terrorism is a contributing reason undermining all treatment plans in the rehabilitation centers for ISIS families and their refusal of self-treatment.

Therefore, it is useful to support stability and security in northeastern Syria by assisting the Kurds, Christians, and Arabs logistically and politically through the federation of regions, which is the most effective solution to end the conflict in Syria.

Most importantly, the United States has to deal with the logistical role of Turkey, Qatar, and the Muslim Brotherhood and their relationship with ISIS and jihadist groups in Syria. Their policies contribute to the continuation of ISIS and terrorism in the region, which causes the continuation of the war in Syria. Thus, it creates obstacles to the success of U.S. policy in Syria and Iraq, and it gives a good opportunity to Iran, Hezbollah, Shia militias, al-Qaeda, and radical extremist groups to expand and impose their influence there. ❖

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