



“ISIS mothers” are not victims, but giving a thought to them is necessary for Europe to understand itself

Metin Koca, ERC PRIME Youth Project Post-Doc Researcher, European Institute, Istanbul Bilgi University

April 2, 2021

Since the first call for governments to repatriate the abandoned children in Syrian camps, facing these children and their pro-ISIS female keepers divides public opinion.[i] The keepers are mothering and indoctrinating the orphans along with their biological children in the camps. Several incidents have been recorded about them resisting the authorities and ex-ISIS women who try to distance children from them. Among 8,000 children and 4,000 women from outside Syria and Iraq, many are Western and primarily European countries' citizens. Some seemingly regretful mothers hope to go back for a new start. However, most governments refused or evaded the calls to help bring their nationals from northern Syria until recently. Having lost their hopes of returning, some mothers made arrangements for their children to be taken home. Indifferent to these varieties of motherhood and womanhood in the camps, “ISIS mothers” and “ISIS brides” have become the tabloid name for the past and present ISIS female members.

In this post, I will bring together the questions of where the so-called ISIS mothers belong, why they left in the first place, and what they should face upon their return. I argue that there are lessons for Europe to draw about citizenship, social justice, and cultural essentialism. Alongside not knowing what to do with repatriates, the governments are unsure about the principles and procedures that constitute their own identity.

Where do these women belong?

On the borders of international law, some of them are stateless at the moment. For example, like 15 other British women, Shamima Begum eventually lost her citizenship.[ii] Begum, who was 15 when she fled the UK, has been informed that she would be eligible for Bangladeshi nationality. She has never lived in Bangladesh, her mother's country of origin. All she knows is Bethnal Green, an area in the East End of London. Similarly, the Iqbal sisters—Reema Iqbal and Zara Iqbal—were stripped of their citizenship. Although the UK authorities suggest that the sisters are Pakistani nationals as their parents were born there, they have never been to Pakistan and do not seem to know anything about that part of the world.[iii]

Published: April 1, 2021, 7:42 p.m.

Edited: April 2, 2021, 4:39 a.m.

[See all BLOG](#)

Share



Removing their passports will not change the point that, culturally and sociologically, they belong to the West in the digital era. They seek themselves at a time in which Muslim societies meet Western economic, technological, political, religious, and artistic consumption patterns.[iv] It is impossible to disentangle their "Jihadi" experience from the Western youth culture.

Having pursued and failed another kind of life in Syria, they publicly reconsidered their sense of belonging. In her frequently quoted statement, Reema Iqbal says, "if I face court, fine, but take me back to the UK, that's where I am from." In her recent interview for a documentary, Begum also asked "the people in the UK" for "a second chance" after losing three children, the youngest of whom died of pneumonia in the camp.

Some of them openly express guilt, but revoking their citizenship is not about their crime's gravity or remaining motivation. It is about the authorities' lack of confidence in the justice system, judicial procedures, and "deradicalization" programs. Meanwhile, this whole process conveys to the migrant-origin communities the message that their access to the justice system will remain limited as they will always be racialized.[v]

Why did they leave Europe?

A collection of predominantly male profiles that I study in **the PRIME Youth project** suggests that young "Jihadi" violent extremists, including so-called *lone wolves* and *cell members*, do not have tight family or religious-community ties. Muslims' communitarian traditions are among the many humiliating experiences for them. In this sense, their violent extremism should not be confused with the radicalism of Islamist movements.[vi] Without relying on the preexisting forms, they desired to establish relations from scratch. The available data on female recruits, their families, and the recruitment processes suggests that they went through a similar incubation period.[vii]

Concerning the migrant-origin young female supporters of ISIS, Deeyah Khan remarkably described how it feels to be stuck between racist discrimination on the one hand and parental control and "family honors" on the other.[viii] Therefore, Khan calls fleeing Europe "an escape" for these women. Shamima Begum came up with a similar narrative in an interview: "I was the black sheep in the family."

Beyond Islamic exceptionalism, disconnection from family may also shed light on the situation of white women who found ISIS (and its claim on Islam) while seeking subversive authoritative knowledge. Pro-ISIS Michelle Ramsden (36), who plotted an attack in the UK instead of going to Syria, explained to an undercover officer that her conversion to Islam would help her against the memory of her drug-addict family's abuses. She wrote on her social media page that a neighboring Muslim family's kindness gave her hope.[ix]

All in all, I am inclined to seek the answer in the desire for a mysterious adventure, a last resort to find oneself. Before fleeing Europe, these women firstly despised their offline social circles, including their school peers, family, and the broader society. Concurrently, they preferred a virtual life with online friends. Their socialization processes are more akin to that of the youths who embrace right-wing extremism than the Muslim communities settled in the West. Those who come from traditional Muslim families uncovered the religion in a way their parents have not, whereas those who do not share this background discovered (and partly invented) an "absolute" form of Islam from floating symbols.

Compared to al-Qaeda, ISIS posed a unique social challenge by bringing together those who sought a quick shortcut to redemption and others who dreamed of building a parallel universe in a territorial state, strictly in the


traditional sense of the term. Despite the suggestions of the labels "ISIS mothers" and "ISIS brides," many of them did not necessarily go after a lover. Indeed, none of them go to Syria with love for "oriental" customs either.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: what should they face upon their return?

Part of the problem is that the approach to female repatriates in Europe bounces between victimization and stigmatization. Amid worries that some returnees have not been judged thoroughly, the organizations of ISIS victims such as the *Free Yezidi Foundation* remind that all ISIS members are accountable, including women. While the media attention is on the detention conditions of ISIS members, the other Syrian camps where the victims of ISIS live are in even worse conditions. Reports come daily about mothers and their children attacking each other with *takfiri* [x] claims.

Given the perils of whitewashing, among others I have discussed, the first solution is to operate the legal mechanisms for all citizens fully. The justice system should not alienate migrant-origin communities for the crimes they did not commit, as happened in Begum and Iqbal sisters' cases. Secondly, introducing new exit programs that suit the individual needs of repatriates is essential. Similar programs have been optimized for adult men and minors before, but not for women,[xi] especially mothers with children.

Finally, this case once again demonstrates how poisonous the speculations on women's clothing have become. While women in camps are having conflicts over outfit codes, it is also awkwardly common for the mainstream media to classify "Western" clothes as opposed to "Islamic" clothes. This language reproduces the essentialist trend that has already prevailed in the European public debates. It acts as a performative utterance that labels Muslim women who wear different clothes in different regions. Also, it caricatures women in the camps and pushes them to role-play. Some of them even ask to be allowed home with their niqabs swapped for jeans on March 8, women's day.

[i] The al-Hol camp in northern Syria, where nearly  a thousand of the 60 thousand residents are unaccompanied and separated children, periodically becomes a headline with the footages of children threatening the "infidel" journalists with death. It has become common for military people, pundits, and reporters to describe children who grow up in the camps as ticking bombs. Only in March 2021, two children aged 15 and 16 were killed in al-Hol in "an act of violence." The camp has been repeatedly called "Europe's Guantanamo" and a hotbed of dysentery, cholera, and Covid-19. The neighboring camps such as al-Roj have comparable conditions, as their children inhabitants are also suffering from poor health and acute malnourishment.

see Sky News, "We're going to slaughter you": *The children of Syria's IS camp*, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tW_7me1Nj7w&ab_channel=SkyNews.

Al Arabiya Farsi, "ISIS children in al-Hol camp in northern Syria with Al-Arabiya correspondent Rula al-Khatib", Mar 21, 2021,

کودکان داعش در کمپ الهول شمال سوریه با رولا الخطیب گزارشگر العربیه
<https://www.facebook.com/137027712994111/videos/1906706176143321>

Frank Gardner, "IS Prisoner Issue a Ticking Timebomb for the West," *BBC News*, July 23, 2020, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53428928>.

[ii] Elian Peltier, "Shamima Begum Loses Effort to Return to U.K. in Fight for Citizenship," *The New York Times*, February 26, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/world/europe/shamima-begum-citizenship.html>.

[iii] Roland Oliphant and Patrick Sawyer, "Two More Isil Brides Stripped of British Citizenship," *The Telegraph*, March 9, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/03/09/two-isil-brides-stripped-british-citizenship/>.

Abbie Cheeseman, "The Islamic State Brides: Where Are They Now?," *The Telegraph*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/where-shamima-begum-islamic-state-brides-now-syria-2021-pictured/>.

[iv] Olivier Roy, "Born Again to Kill," *Sign and Sight*, August 4, 2005, <http://www.signandsight.com/features/296.html>.

[v] Fatima Rajina, "Shamima Begum and the Conditionality of British Citizenship," accessed March 30, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/3/19/shamima-begum-british-citizenship>.

[vi] Ayhan Kaya, "State of the Art on Radicalisation: Islamist and Nativist Radicalisation in Europe," 2020.

[vii] see Marion van San, "Belgian and Dutch Young Men and Women Who Joined ISIS: Ethnographic Research among the Families They Left Behind," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 39–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1266824>.

Leah Windsor, "The Language of Radicalization: Female Internet Recruitment to Participation in ISIS Activities," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 3 (April 2, 2020): 506–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1385457>.

Anita Perešin, "Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 3 (2015): 21–38.

Nabeelah Jaffer, "The Secret World of Isis Brides: 'U Dnt Hav 2 Pay 4 ANYTHING If u r Wife of a Martyr,'" *the Guardian*, June 24, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/24/isis-brides-secret-world-jihad-western-women-syria>.

Abul Taher and Paul Cahalan, "Families of Missing 'ISIS Bride' Schoolgirls Issue Heartfelt Pleas," *Mail Online*, February 21, 2015, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2963092/You-belong-home-Family-missing-schoolgirl-appeal-return-urge-not-cross-border-Syria.html>.

[viii] Deeyah Khan, "For Isis Women, It's Not about 'Jihadi Brides': It's about Escape," *the Guardian*, June 20, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/21/isis-women-its-not-about-jihadi-brides-its-about-escape>.

[ix] Dominic Casciani, "Safiyya Shaikh: How Undercover Operation Caught a Drug Addict Jihadist," *BBC News*, July 3, 2020, sec. UK, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-53264640>.

[x] Takfir is the excommunication of a Muslim by another Muslim.

[xi] Rabiyyah Mirza, "Canadian Women in ISIS: Deradicalization and Reintegration for Returnees," 2018.

Authors:

Dr. Metin Koca

bilgierc@bilgi.edu.tr

Phone: 0212 311 5363

