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Life inside Syria's al-Hol camp¹

Vera Mironova²

After the fall of ISIS in 2019, many relatives of fighters who were detained or killed, including 10,000 families of foreign fighters, were housed in camps in territory controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The biggest camps include Roj and al-Hol. Like any closed society, the foreigners' annex in al-Hol has its own dynamic. To better understand that dynamic, I conducted around 20 in-depth interviews with females in the camp, including those from Europe, the former Soviet Union, former Yugoslavia, and America. Interviews were conducted in English, Russian, and Serbo-Croatian — languages I speak fluently — and I have been in contact with several of the women for nearly a year now and have developed close relationships.

Although al-Hol camp is often portrayed as either a hotbed of radical fanatics dedicated to ISIS or home to a bunch of poor housewives who were just following their husbands, the reality is much more complicated. For example, according to Russian-speaking females there, most camp residents — around 70 percent — feel they were used by ISIS's leadership to realize its political goals and do not believe in the group anymore. By contrast, just 30 percent still support ISIS and think that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was a rightful caliph but the group failed because he was surrounded by untrustworthy people. According to European females in the camp, the percentage of ISIS supporters is even lower, at around 20 percent, and is constantly falling. So just who are these 20-30 percent, why are they still radical, and what does that tell us about how foreign governments should address the issue of what to do with their citizens still held there?

Who are these ISIS supporters?

There are four main groups of ISIS supporters in al-Hol, all with different motivations. First, there is a very small minority who honestly believe in an Islamic state and think that ISIS was in fact good and fair to its members when in power and its fighters will come to liberate them. Many of them go as far as to claim that “brothers are already in Hasakah waiting for the best time to stage a full-scale attack on the Kurds and overrun the prisons.” This group may be tiny, but it is very dedicated. For example, when Kazakhstan took its female citizens home from Syria in 2019, three of them hid so as not to be taken to the “land of kufr [non-Islam].”

Second, there is a small group of women whose husbands are still alive, free, and fighting with the group. According to one foreign female interviewed, “I have a friend who became anti-ISIS while in the camp with us. She was sure that her husband was killed in Baghouz after she left, so we were all hanging out trying to survive together. But several months ago her husband contacted her. Apparently he was still alive and fighting with the group somewhere near Iraq. She immediately became pro-ISIS, started actively supporting the group again, and stopped hanging out with us.”

Third, there are those who do not want to be deported because their lives will be in greater danger if they return to their home country. In al-Hol, the biggest such group is the Uyghurs, or Turkistanis as they are called there. They are absolutely confident that they will not be repatriated home and “they keep building and rebuilding their tents to make them the most comfortable and permanent. They know that it will be their home for a long time.” Without a country that cares about them, they tend to be strong supporters of ISIS and wish the caliphate would be restored and they could stay in Syria under its rule. By contrast, European females remaining in the camp are considered much less likely to still support the group because “their government cares about them and ISIS is not their only hope for freedom.”

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The fourth and biggest group of radical females, however, are those whose motivation is strategic—they're in it for the money. Life in the camp is not cheap. According to the women interviewed, \$300-500 a month is barely enough for a mother with several children to survive. Many females are supported by their relatives back home, but some are not, and their lives are very hard. They work in all kinds of capacities to earn money from teachers in homemade tent schools to prostitutes for male camp workers, but it is often not enough. So they've pinned their hopes for survival on the members of ISIS who escaped the final stronghold in Baghouz with significant sums of money as well as its supporters abroad who never made it to Syria but still back the group. According to the foreign females interviewed, ISIS supporters get a substantial amount of money every month, often around \$1,000-2,000 per family, and live a much more comfortable life inside in the camp — they are able to afford good food, new clothes, and fans in the summer. The only requirement to get help from ISIS is to pretend to still be a part of the group, so that is exactly what they do.

Performing radicalism on social media

The way these women demonstrate their loyalty to ISIS is by portraying themselves to be radical as possible, especially on social media, because their target audience is ISIS's leadership hiding in Idlib and its supporters abroad. They create social media channels with names like "Sisters in Captivity," "Thoughts from Prison," "Caged Birds," and "Modesty," and use them to express their loyalty to the group and to collect donations from ISIS supporters abroad. When al-Baghdadi was killed, for instance, many females in al-Hol posted messages swearing their allegiance to the new caliph.

They also engage in highly visible conflicts on social media about what is and is not acceptable in Islam, again signaling their dedication to the group. For example, one discussion on social media was about a female who was found smoking (an act prohibited by ISIS); this prompted a flurry of criticism, with the other women in effect competitively condemning her. According to one foreign female in the camp, "It is very funny to watch because not only are many females here smoking, including ones I saw participating in that discussion online, but some (particularly Europeans) are even smoking hashish. At the same time online they pretend to be pure Muslims dedicated to the Islamic State. Hilarious ... but I guess ISIS supporters believe this bullshit."

They also often make threats against ISIS women online in an effort to signal to the group's supporters reading their messages that they are still enforcing ISIS values and rules despite the risks involved. Among Russian-speaking females the most frequently posted threat online is that "Sunglasses are not acceptable in Islam and we would take them off women who wear them in public."

But in reality, ever since an incident on Sept. 30, 2019, when radical foreign females threw stones at Kurdish camp guards and tried to burn down a hospital, resulting in several of them being shot, they are afraid to make any real provocations to demonstrate their support for ISIS, so they have to find other ways.

For example, tents in the camp frequently catch fire by accident in the summer months — often caused by exploding cooking gas balloons — so many females use it as a way of increasing their social capital with the ISIS audience by either claiming that they burned the tent to punish a female opposing the group or to show their support for its goals by writing on social media that "the owner of the tent was punished by Allah because she was not a good Muslim and was making fun of religion."

In some closed internal chat groups, this has gone one step further and it is not uncommon to see messages saying, "Sisters, who has videos of something bad happening in the camp? Please send it to me. We have brothers collecting money for us so I want to send it to them."

In other cases, they resort to more blatant lies. For example, in May a video of a small pro-caliphate demonstration was widely shared on the internet by those foreign females, but according to one foreign female who was interviewed, "This demonstration was in the camp for Iraqi females, and not foreign [ones]. Our females would never dare to do something like that, being afraid of Kurdish forces. But now they are sharing it as if they were the ones doing it, claiming that they risked their lives for ISIS."

Women who do not believe in ISIS anymore are also trying to play the system and benefit from the money it distributes, although the group strictly prohibits sending money to those who do not support the organization. According to one foreign female who does not support the group but still gets money from its supporters abroad, “The person who sends me money is a die-hard ISIS supporter, and he was introduced to me by a mutual friend. He kind of never asked if I still support the group, assuming that I do. And under no circumstances would I volunteer the truth to him. I need to feed my four kids.”

Conflicts in the camp

Internal conflicts are quite common in the camp, but their nature has changed over time. Initially, after Baghouz fell and the majority of females had just arrived to the camp, they frequently settled old scores. Wives of members of ISIS's internal security, known as the Amni, were often badly beaten by those whose husbands had been killed by Amni for betraying the group. The only means of defense for the wife of an Amni member was to have no knowledge of her husband's job. According to a Russian woman who was married to a high-level Amni member, “It was a big problem in the camp. I did not know what my husband was doing in ISIS so no one touched me. I guess I was lucky.” One American female added, “I learned about what my ex-husband did as a member of Amni when I was already in the camp.”

At that time the number of pro-ISIS females was high so they were still trying to enforce ISIS rules. According to one American female, “One and a half years ago I was transferred [from al-Hol] to Roj because I removed my hijab and it was dangerous for me. They threatened to burn my tent, so I had to put hijab back on.”

Things have since changed and norms about following even basic Islamic rules are different. The American woman continues, “It is also risky here to not wear hijab now, but five females do: Two French, one Belgian, and two more.” A Russian woman from al-Hol added, “No one cares if you follow Islam or not anymore. I know several women who do not even pray. They are not hiding it and they are not bothered.”

When asked if pro-ISIS females are dangerous, all non-supporters interviewed said that inside the camp they are not because “they are too scared to do something to prison guards and they do not bother us. They are only brave online posting their pro-ISIS messages.” According to them, “Although from time to time they are still trying to persuade us to support ISIS, it rarely works and we just do not interact.”

According to one female who was once arrested and accused of being an amir of Hizba (the religious police) in the camp, there is no enforcement of ISIS rules. “What ISIS enforcement could we talk about, I feel like we are in Europe here. Many females have sex with male workers of the camp and some girls are even lesbians. Everyone knows about it but no one cares.” In fact, the problem is often the opposite. “We constantly hear about 13-year-old boys having sex with girls or even try to rape other younger boys. I am afraid to let my kids hang out with other kids outside.”

What is more widespread now is simply a division and mutual disrespect between pro-ISIS and anti-ISIS females in the camp. The group's supporters are trying hard to show their contempt for those who are anti-ISIS or even just less pro-ISIS. For example, they 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, although even by their own interpretation of Islam there is no need for women to wear the niqab when there are no men around.

Such visible disrespect is not so much a result of a religious disagreement as it is a fight over the distribution of money. Women who are getting money from ISIS have an incentive to accuse as many others as possible of not being religious enough in order to reduce the number of people with whom they have to share resources. As a result, even among the ISIS supporters, there is a constant fight to outbid one another with displays of radical religious sentiment.

In one known case a stepmother kicked out her two stepdaughters, 12 and 14 years old, after living with them for more than seven years. According to their aunt, “She said that they are not Muslims because she is not sure their father is. She could not find out his aqida [religious belief system] because he is in prison in Hasakah. So she does not want to take care of them until they pass a religious exam to prove to her they are Muslims. They have nowhere to go so I took them to live with me.”

Fighting over the mundane

By now everyone is just tired of living in the camp and the conflicts that do break out are all about mundane things, like kids having fights, arguments at the market, and especially in the line to the water and ice distribution. In fact, when summer began this year, one woman even wrote on her Facebook page, “Al Hol girls, ice arrived to the camp. Fighting season starts!” That said, fights over such mundane issues often escalate into what could be seen as ISIS-related conflicts. For example, at the end of June there was a major incident in al-Hol when one pro-ISIS female – Woman #1 from the Ingushetia region of Russia – stabbed an anti-ISIS female – Woman #2 from the Chechnya region of Russia – in the chest and slightly wounded her child. Although it looked like an ISIS-related conflict because Woman #1 accused Woman #2 of being a kafir (disbeliever) and Woman #2 accused Woman #1 of being a member of Amni, the conflict actually started in the line for water and was simply a mundane disagreement.

And even this conflict was settled relatively quickly too. After the incident, Woman #1 tried to hide, but when a large group of anti-ISIS women came searching for her, the pro-ISIS women who were protecting her gave her up. After negotiations it was agreed that Woman #1 would pay compensation to Woman #2 to solve the dispute. The other alternative was to stab her in return and forgive her, but Woman #2 refused to do it as she was afraid that she would miscalculate the force required and kill the woman instead.

Conflicts also break out from time to time over the presence of spies, which the camp leadership places among the general population, although the majority of women say they know who the spies are. According to one interviewee, “When someone is caught for example with a phone she has an option: to work for the guards as an informant or to go to prison. Many chose working for the guards. They collect info on who has cellphones, gets money transfers from outside, and has older boys [that camp leadership would take to the deradicalization centers]. We know all of them and just try to ignore them, but sometimes they get seriously beaten. A year ago we beat one such informant (from Turkey) and put her in the toilet, so now the guards gave her a pistol so she could defend herself.”

The world outside the camp

Although the behavior of the 20-30 percent of foreign females who are radical is not dangerous inside the camp, non-ISIS females are concerned about the problems they cause in relation to the prison guards and world outside al-Hol.

First, pro-ISIS females behave aggressively toward camp guards and the administration, leading them to have a negative attitude and behavior toward all females in the camp. In addition they teach their kids to do the same. According to one anti-ISIS female, “Pro-ISIS kids throw stones at those who bring water to the camp and even pierce the wheels of their cars. No surprise that we are not getting enough water. I absolutely understand the Kurds’ position, but we could not do anything with those kids.”

Second, non-ISIS females want to return home and they are extremely worried about the online behavior of pro-ISIS females and the image they create for the camp and its residents. According to one interviewee, “Those girls are using nicknames online so it is very hard for us to figure out who is who, but we are keeping track of them and eventually we will find them. For example by making fake male profiles and starting conversations with them. Then we usually just talk to them and if they do not peacefully agree to stop spreading pro-ISIS messages or make their pro-ISIS social media account private, we would have to turn to a less peaceful explanation [beating]. We want to go home and those

messages online are very harmful.”

Finally, pro-ISIS females often hide orphans because they do not want them to be taken back to their home countries. The majority of females who decided to fight till the end and were killed in the last ISIS-controlled territory of Baghouz were die-hard supporters, and they left their children with women with similar world views. As a result, at least in the Russian-speaking community, pro-ISIS females take care of the majority of orphans. Often they are not taking the best care of those orphans, but they refuse to give them to women who are not pro-ISIS or repatriate them to their home countries. While there is a small number of females who legitimately believe that a child should not grow up in the land of nonbelievers, the majority are also doing it for the money. The more kids they have under their guardianship, the more money they can collect from ISIS and the orphans' relatives back home. According to one interviewee who no longer supports the group, “We had one such kid who had a grandfather back home. At night, several radical females came to our tent to take him by force. There was a small fight, but in the end we agreed that they would keep him for now, but when Russia takes their orphans, they would give him and not hide him.”

Escaping from the camp

In June, several Finnish ISIS women and children escaped from al-Hol camp and made it back to their home country. This is not an isolated incident. While escapes from Roj camp are exceptionally rare, escapes from al-Hol happen every week. Usually three to four families leave at once, and since foreign females first arrived there, hundreds of them and their children have escaped.

Inside the al-Hol camp, it is common knowledge whom to talk to and pay to be smuggled out. Escape plans are not kept secret, and when a particular female plans an escape, she informs her close friends so that they can divide up her things when she's gone. Currently, such an escape costs around \$15,000 per family, with the amount varying significantly depending on the woman's nationality and slightly depending on the number of children involved. The only known escape from Roj camp, by contrast, is reported to have cost \$40,000.

Escapes are usually coordinated from Idlib and the contact person depends on the woman in question's ethnicity and the language she speaks. According to a foreign fighter in Idlib who is involved in smuggling, “[If they are] planning to get out, women from al-Hol have to contact a person of their ethnicity. For example, those coordinating escapes of Russian speakers will not help French and the other way around. Prices are different and if they make a deal with Kurds to move a group of Russians but one of them would be French they would lose trust of those Kurds and would not be able to continue working.” There are three main ways in which ISIS females can escape from al-Hol:

- First, the most comfortable (and most expensive) way is by bribing Kurdish security forces, who facilitate the travel themselves.
- Second, the escape could be facilitated by local civilians who work as water tank drivers. According to one female interviewed, this is cheaper (around \$14,000), but is very uncomfortable and dangerous. “Of course, water tank drivers bribe the guards to let us through checkpoints, but there is still the possibility of being caught,” she commented. The initial destination in such cases is a private house in Hasakah where females and their kids are taken from the camp, usually to stay the night, and then they travel on by car to Idlib. The night in Hasakah is considered the most dangerous part of the journey because it is when arrests most frequently take place.
- Third, the cheapest and the most uncomfortable way out of the camp, at around \$12,000, is a six-day walk by foot. Counterintuitively, this is also considered the safest way, and this is the route typically taken by women who have teenage boys. They want to minimize the risks of being caught because if they are arrested, their sons could be considered adults and imprisoned. In fact, this fear is so strong that before this way became available mothers of teenagers who had enough money to pay smugglers chose to remain in the camp and not take the risk that their sons might be imprisoned.

There is a lot of money in the smuggling business and those involved are well known in the local community. There is even a joke that you can easily find a smuggler simply by going to the biggest and fanciest house in the village.

Footing the bill

Because these escapes are not cheap, the incarcerated women find different ways to pay for them. Their relatives back home might send them the money. In some cases their home governments may even facilitate it, viewing it as easier than negotiating with the SDF or politically safer, given that the population in many countries is opposed to the official return of those who have been affiliated with ISIS.

For those who still support the group, ISIS will foot the bill for their escape. According to females interviewed, “All wives of high-level commanders paid \$35,000 and were smuggled out, even during the battle in Baghouz. They never even made it to al-Hol. Next, females from all the powerful ISIS diasporas, such as Chechens, were gone from the camp. And now ISIS is taking low-level, but dedicated females.”

And even more than for women, ISIS is eager to pay for kids to be smuggled out. For example, older boys are known to be smuggled out to join the fighting. According to one foreign female interviewed in al-Hol, “Last year ISIS helped smuggle a group of Uyghur teenage boys and now they are fighting with the group in the desert near the Iraq border.”

ISIS also pays for younger kids, especially orphans. Since these kids cannot be smuggled out alone, the group pays for the escape of the pro-ISIS females who are taking care of them as well. According to one Russian-speaking woman interviewed, “Last month we had one group of 11 under-8-year-old orphans (both boys and girls) smuggled out and now another group is getting ready. Of course, the kids are saying that they are going to training to become mujaheds, but it is not clear what exactly they are doing in Idlib.” This also gives the women who are taking care of orphans another reason not to hand them over to other women in the camp or the children’s home government and grandparents.

The ISIS marriage market

Another popular way for women to get the necessary funding to escape is to get married and have their new husband pay for the trip. The husbands are ISIS supporters from Europe, particularly France and Germany, and they typically choose women who speak the same language they do. In one known case, a 30-year-old Chechen woman with two children whose husband died in 2017 fighting for ISIS met a 39-year-old Chechen living in Germany online (through social media) and got married. According to interviewees, potential husbands are usually based in Europe because men in other countries either cannot afford to pay for a smuggler or are afraid of being arrested for doing so.

“We feel like it became a fad now among ISIS supporters to get second, third, or fourth wives from al-Hol,” commented one of the foreign females interviewed. “We have an abundance of proposals.” According to another foreign female, it is very easy to get a husband and “to be popular in this ISIS marriage market. On your social media pages, you just basically have to praise ISIS, complain about conditions in the camp, and remind your readers that it is mandatory for a Muslim to buy a Muslim prisoner from the hands of non-Muslims.”

In fact, the marriage market is so popular that many females who do not have marriage plans complain they have had to put a fake “in a relationship” status on their Facebook accounts so as not to be bothered by those looking for a wife.

One ISIS supporter from Europe that was interviewed not only did not hide that he paid for the travel of a woman from al-Hol to be his second wife, but he was proud of doing so and showed me her pictures (where she was totally covered). “It is my duty as a Muslim to free our sisters [in religion],” he commented. But later in the discussion, he also admitted that before he married her over the phone, he

had been unsuccessfully looking for a second wife in his home country for almost two years. Getting a mail-order bride from al-Hol was his only chance to marry a second time.

Since the women who choose this way to pay for their escape from the camp are often desperate to get married, this growing market for second wives has led to many family conflicts. It is not uncommon to see the wives of men who are considering buying a second wife from the camp or even just communicating with them openly accuse the women in al-Hol of being prostitutes who destroy families.

According to one female former ISIS supporter, who now lives in Idlib and is married to a foreign fighter with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), “Girls from camps write to my husband and try to flirt with him and when he tells them to talk to me instead,” believing that men should not talk to an unrelated woman directly, “they do not want to, or are even cursing me and calling me a disbeliever. I am very pissed at them since they are intentionally trying to break up our family.”

After escaping, where do they go?

After ISIS females escape the camp, their first destination is Idlib Province, currently under the control of HTS. The town of Tell Abyad in neighboring Raqqqa Province is considered an ISIS stronghold. According to one foreign female who escaped ISIS and is currently in Tell Abyad, “First local [Syrian] ISIS females returned to their houses there, and then they were followed by their foreign friends. So with time, it became a big community.” According to foreign fighters with HTS, some members of ISIS may also be traveling to Sweida, home to a large ISIS contingent that is carrying out regular attacks against Syrian regime forces, while others often continue fighting near the border with Iraq. Locals in Idlib Province say it is easy to distinguish between HTS foreign females and those with ISIS coming from the camp: “ISIS women have a very wide hijab and niqab so that you could not see even the shape of [their] head.”

While Idlib Province is currently the main location for foreign ISIS members, HTS, which controls the territory, is not comfortable with this. According to one of its foreign members, HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani has already issued an order that all ISIS-affiliated women and children must leave the territories under the group's control. That could prompt ISIS members to relocate in the future.

Females who do not support ISIS typically do not remain in Idlib for long and prefer to go immediately to Turkey. There they can either surrender to the embassy of their home country or remain in Turkey illegally and risk being arrested. Many home country intelligence services in communication with women in the camp openly advise them to escape to Turkey because it is much easier to repatriate them from there instead of SDF-controlled camps in Syria. In the case of females who are traveling to their new husbands, they generally remain in Turkey as long as they need to buy fake documents before proceeding to Europe or the former Soviet Union. This does not come cheap, however. According to one interviewee, the price for fake documents is currently around \$25,000.

Conclusion

As shown above, for many foreign women in Syria's camps, supporting ISIS is a strategic behavior and how they portray themselves in public and especially online is often only weakly correlated with what they actually believe. As a result, governments should be very careful when assessing the situation in the camps and especially when relying on individuals' online footprint and interviews with prison authorities. Currently, only a very small minority of women in al-Hol still back ISIS, but as long as foreign government fail to intervene, the number who no longer support the group but feel they have no choice but to turn to it for help will only increase. Moreover, it is relatively easy to leave the ISIS camps in Syria, so it should not be assumed that the women there are locked up or have no way out. As a result, if the foreign females still in the camps are not repatriated home soon, they might not only once again become active members of ISIS, but if they are smuggled out by the group, we could lose

their trail and they may disappear forever.