



Beware the Women of ISIS

April 2, 2021 **Emily Milliken**

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Less than two years after the destruction of its proto-state in Iraq and Syria, the world's most notorious terrorist group is showing new—and alarming—signs of resurgence in the Middle East.

Last year, the Islamic State (ISIS) dramatically increased its attacks in Iraq and Syria, demonstrating that it still can retake territory and recruit new members. And this past January, the group claimed responsibility for its deadliest attack in over three years—a twin suicide bombing in Baghdad that killed at least thirty-two people. Indeed, ISIS has thrived during the coronavirus pandemic, and managed to leverage the security gaps created by lockdowns and other governmental responses in order to regroup, conduct prison breaks, plan sophisticated attacks, and smuggle its members across borders.

For this revival, a large measure of the credit goes to the group's female contingent. Recent reports, for instance, indicate that ISIS has once again become heavily reliant on a cohort of women for logistical support in northern Iraq, and may be reactivating its dormant female cells. Thus, in February, Iraqi security forces arrested five women in the Hamrin Basin who were transporting money, food, and messages for the radical group. These female cadres, moreover, are now poised to expand as a result of a new generation of extremists now being incubated in Syria's assorted refugees and internally displaced person (IDP) camps.

Al Hawl provides a case in point. The largest IDP camp in northeast Syria, it is run by the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and currently houses over sixty thousand ISIS victims and family members, 94 percent of whom are women and children. ISIS has long benefited from prisons and refugee environments, which can become breeding grounds for indoctrination and networking, and al Hawl and other camps like it are proving to be no different. Underscoring the danger posed by these facilities, U.S. officials have warned that ISIS is turning al Hawl and other IDP camps into an active base for the group's operations. This is because many Syrians inside the camp remain connected to the outside world through the use of mobile devices, allowing them to keep in touch with other members of the organization.

These camps also serve as a source of sustenance for the terror group. Within them, ISIS members are known to engage in document fraud, forgery, and various financing schemes. A recent U.S. Treasury Department report noted that ISIS has funneled part of its estimated \$100 million in cash reserves through informal money exchanges, known as *hawalas*, located in Syrian IDP camps, including al Hawl.

Although women inside the camps have a significant impact on the organization, ISIS has also been quick to recognize the strategic value of former detainees as well. The group has focused on breaking out imprisoned adherents as a way of quickly bolstering its forces while chalking up major propaganda wins in the process. From 2012 to 2013, ISIS launched a major campaign that freed hundreds of fighters from prisons in Iraq in at least eight separate jailbreaks—and laid the groundwork for the group's rise to regional prominence. The success of that campaign (and continued calls from the group's leadership for similar actions) have led experts to warn that jailbreaks remain a central component of the organization's strategic planning.

More broadly, ISIS has a history of using women in both operations and support. Female members of the organization have acted not only as spies and couriers but as operators as well; many have been trained in explosives, or to serve as snipers, fighters, and suicide bombers. This emphasis reflects a grim reality: women are often the most capable and ardent supporters of the Islamic State.

Inside al Hawl, for instance, women have been at the forefront of enforcing the group's draconian interpretation of Islam. According to one 2019 report, female detainees in al Hawl have been "imposing their own caliphate" that is headed by a female emir who regulates living arrangements, dress codes, and punishments. This female-run caliphate has also been involved in attacks on prisoners who are not supporters of ISIS as well as on facility staff. In 2021, there have been at least forty-seven killings inside the camp likely involving ISIS members, many of them execution-style shootings or beheadings.

The organization has also used poor conditions inside the camp for fundraising and recruitment purposes. In his final public speech in September 2019, former ISIS *emir* Abu Bakr al Baghdadi urged ISIS members to free women in displacement camps. Even after Baghdadi's death, the group's propaganda and fundraising efforts have used videos of women and children inside al Hawl to call for the return of the caliphate. In May 2020, a U.S. government report warned of a potential "mass breakout" of ISIS prisoners from Syrian camps after concerns about the SDF's administration, conditions inside the camps, and a rash of riots and breakout attempts.

Adding to these concerns, ISIS women and families have escaped al Hawl and other camps by paying smugglers fees ranging from \$3,000 to \$100,000. According to the Rojava Information Center, an estimated 200 people were smuggled out of al Hawl in 2020 alone. A number of women who remain inside al Hawl, meanwhile, appear to have set up their own social media campaigns on Instagram to raise the funds needed to pay smugglers. Those accounts post in Arabic, German, and English and are connected to PayPal accounts which transfer the funds to *hawalas* inside the camps.

The female contingent of the Islamic State thus appears poised to grow in both size and importance. This, in turn, creates unique considerations for the international community. All too often, the female members of terrorist organizations are treated as victims and not subject to the same scrutiny as their male counterparts. In the case of ISIS, however, such a characterization would be a serious mistake—and one that could prove exceedingly costly in the Middle East, and beyond.

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