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From Radicalization to Reintegration:

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Sarajevo, 2025

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**Publisher**


Sarajevo 2025


This research was conducted as a part of the "Reduction of radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism" project, supported by the Embassy of the Kingdom of Norway in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Embassy of the Kingdom of Norway in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

ISBN 978-9926-465-44-5
CIP zapis dostupan u COBISS sistemu Nacionalne i univerzitetske biblioteke BiH pod ID brojem 65611270

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**Dr. Majda Halilović** is a research manager at the Atlantic Initiative. She received her PhD in Sociology and Social Policy from the Open University, and a master's degree in Sociology of Education from Cambridge University. She is a systemic family psychotherapist. In 2000, she began undertaking research on issues of mental health, social exclusion, and discrimi-

nation, and worked in various capacities with international organizations including the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma, Save the Children, the Open Society Foundation, the Roma Education Fund, the Open University, UNICEF, and more. Since 2012, she has worked for the Atlantic Initiative, with a focus on researching the prevention of violence against women, sexual harassment, and the influence of radicalization and extremism on gender equality. Over her career, the significant amount of research she has conducted has generated a wealth of academic papers on these topics. On behalf of the Atlantic Initiative, she has also led working groups to develop guidelines for the prevention of sexual harassment in the judiciary and at several university faculties in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Dr. Vlado Azinović,** a co-founder of the Atlantic Initiative, is a Full Professor in the Department of Security and Peace Studies at the School of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo. His teaching expertise spans courses such as Understanding Terrorism, Terrorism and Political Violence, Contemporary Security Threats, European Security Policy, Euro-Atlantic Security, and Security and Media in Democratic Societies. He is the author and co-author of several influential works on radicalization, violent extremism, and terrorism, including studies on the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters, as well as numerous articles in scholarly and professional journals. He also holds an honorary professorship at the Institute for Strategy and Security at the University of Exeter in the UK, and is a recognized expert in counterterrorism and radicalization, consulting for international organizations such as the European Commission, United Nations, OSCE, IOM, Council of Europe, British Council, and International Republican Institute. He serves as an expert witness in terrorism-related cases for the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

# Introduction

A large aircraft emerged suddenly from a low, thick layer of dark clouds on the northern skyline. The unmarked C-17 Globemaster III, a military transport aircraft, touched down swiftly at Sarajevo International Airport, emitting a deafening roar as it taxied along the tarmac to the eastern edge of the runway. It was 5:58 p.m. on Friday, 19 December 2019; and the final stage of the first group deportation of former foreign fighters and their family members, from Syria to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), was set to commence as soon as the plane deboarded. The moment was significant, opening a new chapter in efforts to address the impact of ISIL and the challenges posed by the return of Bosnian citizens affiliated with the group, including women and children – all of whom have faced the complex and difficult process of disentangling themselves from an ideology of violence and reintegrating into a society which views them with suspicion and fear.

Women who traveled to ISIL territory were recruited under various circumstances and driven by various motivations, but all were subject to strict ideological controls, violence, and subjugation under ISIL rule. Since returning to BiH, their lives have been redefined not only by the demands of rehabilitation and reintegration but by the stigma and trauma

that extends from their exposure to the regime of violent misogyny promoted by ISIL. Many of these women have children who are also severely traumatized, and who have been stigmatized as a result of decisions made by their parents, encountering harassment even from other children. This text explores the stories of six women returnees, and through them the stories of their children as well. Their experiences are at the same time unique and representative, and offer important insights into the intersection of gender, power, and violence in the context of radicalization and conflict.

Setting the stage for analysis, this chapter touches on how gender and extremism intersect, outlines what motivated women to join ISIL, and discusses the approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration programming that have been successful, before detailing the methodology for this research. Then, the focus of chapters two through six is on women returnees, via in-depth case studies. Grounded in feminist research principles, the ideological motivations of these women and their experiences with rehabilitation and reintegration are examined through a gendered lens that honors the diversity of their stories while recognizing the common challenges they must confront in reentering Bosnian society. These are followed, in chapter seven, by an overview of departures of Bosnian citizens to ISIL territory, from a security perspective – which describes three "clusters" of returnees: a first cluster comprising citizens who returned on their own volition before 2019; a second cluster made up of individuals who returned in the 2019 organized repatriation described above; and a third cluster of yet-to-return or would-be-returnees, who remain in camps (Al-Hol and Al-Roj) and prisons in northern Syria.

This research sought to amplify the voices of women returnees, because they are often marginalized or silenced in discussions about conflict, extremist violence, and rehabilitation. Adopting a case study approach allowed researchers to convey the personal histories of these women in a

way that sheds new light on what led them to depart for ISIL territory, the lives they lived under ISIL rule, and their experiences of reintegration. It thus offers valuable insights for policymakers as well as for academics and practitioners working on issues related to post-conflict rehabilitation and gendered experiences of violence and radicalization. It is important to emphasize, however, that this study does more than relay these women's pasts; it is also an inquiry into their futures, examining their personal challenges and emotional struggles, their experiences of motherhood, the support systems on which they can rely, and the opportunities and barriers to social inclusion and integration they face in secular society.

The stories of women returnees in BiH echo across borders, reflecting challenges faced in countries around the world in the context of rehabilitating and reintegrating former ISIL fighters and their families. But more than anything, the cases presented here highlight the critical need for gender-sensitive approaches to rehabilitation. Indeed, the wellbeing and reintegration of women returnees is tied to the wellbeing and reintegration of their children, meaning that support for returnee families is built atop support for women returnees; which must take into account their unique needs in the aftermath of extremist violence. To that end, this research was aimed at understanding the challenges that awaited these women after they returned home. In various ways, these women continue to grapple with the lasting scars of war, displacement, and extremism. And so, researchers wondered, in the years that have followed their return, how have women returnees navigated rehabilitation and reintegration? What has their life been like since their return? How have they confronted social stigmas? And, what resources have helped them rebuild their lives?

## Where Gender and Extremism Intersect

Women account for an estimated 20 percent of the foreign citizens who traveled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIL's international contingents. By selling the promise of a utopian society in propaganda that targeted women with tailored messaging, ISIL appealed not only to women but to entire families, promoting a "family-friendly" jihad. In media and other accounts, women who willingly traveled to ISIL territory have often been portrayed as naïve victims who were seduced by romantic scammers to marry as "jihadi brides" and become mothers to the "cubs of the caliphate," but who were not necessarily lured by extremist ideology. Yet, the truth is more complex, and this characterization of women as subjects acted upon, lacking agency, has only impeded the development of gender-conscious analysis and policymaking to more effectively counter the radicalization of women.

In fact, for several years, many European countries neither prosecuted women who returned from ISIL territory as members of a terrorist group, nor offered them the option to engage in "exit programming" aimed at their deradicalization, disengagement, or reintegration; unlike men who returned at the same time.[1] It was only after substantial evidence emerged indicating that some European women had joined ISIL for ideological reasons that this blanket policy of gendered absolution was rethought. For, women's motivations were quite diverse, with some manipulated by online recruiters who played to their fears and desires in very gender-specific ways, but others driven by many of the same factors that drove men to join ISIL – from a sincere belief in the ideology espoused by the group, to a search for belonging and purpose, to a yearning for power or adventure.[2]

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1 Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, eds., *Returnees: Who are they, why are they (not) coming back and how should we deal with them?* Egmont Paper No. 101 (Egmont Institute, 2018).

2 Anita Perešin, "Why Women from the West are Joining ISIS," *International Annals of Criminology* 56, no. 1-2 (2018): 32–42.

Horgan's central claim is that radicalization is not a singular psychological event but a socially and emotionally driven process involving a range of factors: uncertainty, identity crisis, search for meaning, and social affiliation.[3] Drawing on models by Moghaddam and by McCauley and Moskalenko, he emphasizes that radicalization and disengagement are nonlinear, deeply contextual, and often unrelated to ideological depth, and thus critiques the tendency to view terrorists as psychopaths or ideologically fanatical. Instead, he proposes that individuals often join extremist groups as a means of resolving identity dissonance and emotional uncertainty.[4] This resonated strongly in the narratives of women returnees in this study, many of whom described being drawn to ISIL not by doctrinal conviction, but a longing for clarity, belonging, or transformation during periods of psychological distress or personal crisis.

At the same time, Horgan warns that apparent signs of ideological disengagement in an individual (such as departing ISIL territory voluntarily) should not be assumed to indicate that they have cognitively deradicalized in any meaningful way, and that institutions must therefore take seriously the development and implementation of programming to ensure the emotional rehabilitation and identity reconstruction of returnees.[5] Understanding the roles women play in violent extremist and terrorist groups, and why they are attracted to these groups, is critical to developing realistic approaches to the reintegration of women returnees, both in terms of establishing their legal culpability and ensuring they receive rehabilitation services tailored to their needs and experiences. Additionally, it must be acknowledged that violent extremist organizations increasingly view women as valuable targets of recruitment, due in part to gender biases among security stakeholders that leave women generally less subject to scrutiny as potential terrorist actors.

3 John Horgan, *Terrorist Minds: The Psychology of Violent Extremism from Al-Qaeda to the Far Right* (Columbia University Press, 2024).

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

In ISIL, women took on a wide variety of roles, few of which involved combat or kinetic action but many of which could be said to have supported these activities, directly or indirectly. Quite a few women in ISIL territory were essentially confined to their households, tasked with the mission of birthing and raising children to populate the so-called caliphate, but others took positions within the ISIL bureaucracy, working as nurses, prison guards, or religious police officers. Some women were also involved in producing and disseminating ISIL propaganda, and in fundraising and recruiting activities. A small minority even joined security "brigades," for which they received weapons and religious training.[6]

When ISIL fell, in March 2019, following a final battle in Baghuz, thousands of people were captured and detained by Kurdish-led forces for their alleged association with ISIL. These detainees included several hundred adults with European citizenship, a disproportionate number of which were women, as well as hundreds of children.[7] This presented European governments with a dilemma: to repatriate these individuals or not. Despite an initial reluctance, some European states began repatriating children first, followed by some mothers with their children. Several governments were also challenged in national courts and at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) by plaintiffs seeking to compel the repatriation of European citizens from detention camps in Syria. As a result, at least 400 children and 136 women were returned from Syria to various European countries between 2019 and late 2023.[8] In contrast, very few men – who were considered more of a return risk, from both a security and political standpoint – were repatriated during the same period.

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6 Devorah Margolin and Joana Cook, *The Agency and Roles of Foreign Women in ISIS* (The Center for Justice & Accountability, 2023).

7 Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, "Punishing the Innocent: Ending Violations against Children in Northeast Syria," 20 March 2024.

8 Cyprien Fluzin, "France Called Out for Ignoring Plea to Repatriate Citizens in Syria," *Lawfare*, 3 October 2022, https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/france-called-out-ignoring-plea-repatriate-citizens-syria; and Beatrice Eriksson, "Lost Childhoods: The Ongoing Plight of Children in Detention Camps in Northeast Syria," The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 28 June 2024, https://icct.nl/publication/lost-childhoods-ongoing-plight-children-detention-camps-northeast-syria

For the most part, this has meant that the repatriation of women is defined by their status as mothers and their detention in Syria alongside their children, whereas the repatriation of men is securitized and intended to facilitate their engagement in a legal process of accountability for participating in foreign fighting and/or terrorist activities. In BiH, for example, the accused in all 35 cases of foreign fighting prosecuted by the state have been men.[9] Whether women returnees should face prosecution remains a topic of debate in the country, as it is in other European states where women are seldom prosecuted for activities linked to foreign fighting.[10] While many countries responded to the foreign fighter phenomenon with robust prosecutions of returnee men, their treatment of potentially radicalized children and returnee women have varied considerably.[11] When women have been prosecuted, they have typically been charged with child endangerment, for taking their children into warzones and exposing them to harm.[12]

Though some women returnees to Germany and Belgium have been prosecuted for participating in terrorist activities, and Germany has convicted several more for genocide and war crimes extending from their actions in ISIL territory, few countries have adopted such an aggressive approach.[13] There are several reasons for this, including pragmatic legal considerations related to the availability of evidence; but gendered assumptions also play a role in shaping prosecutorial decision-making. And so, even though the body of literature on women and extremism is growing, there remains a gap in firsthand accounts of what motivated

9 Mirza Buljubašić and Vlado Azinović, *Criminal Prosecutions of Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2023).

10 Kacper Rekawek, et al., *Who are the European jihadis?* (Globsec, 2018).

11 Carlota Rigotti and Júlia Zomignani Barboza, "Unfolding the case of returnees: How the European Union and its member States are addressing the return of foreign fighters and their families," *International Review of the Red Cross* 103, no. 916-917 (2021): 681–703; and Riza Kumar, *Female Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Challenges in Repatriation, Prosecution, and Rehabilitation* (Counter Extremism Project, 2021).

12 Genocide Network, *Cumulative Prosecution of Foreign Terrorist Fighters for Core International Crimes and Terrorism-related Offences* (Eurojust, 2020).

13 Kumar, *Female Foreign Terrorist Fighters*; and Margolin and Cook, *The Agency and Roles of Foreign Women in ISIS*.

women to travel to ISIL territory in Syria and Iraq, which inevitably limits the effectiveness of rehabilitation and reintegration programming for women returnees.

Gendered assumptions can obscure the full range of women's experiences and motivations in any context, including extremism, and may in fact reflect and reinforce constructs of femininity advanced by extremist groups. In other words, to assume that all women affiliated with ISIL took on the traditional roles promoted by the group, serving the extremist collective only as mothers and wives, predetermines the part women can play in such a group. This dismisses women's agency generally, as well as the known involvement of women in online recruitment activities, propaganda campaigns, and even combat, on behalf of ISIL.

The reality is that some women living in ISIL territory contributed to the "Islamic State" through explicitly violent means. All-female units like the Al-Khansaa Brigade were tasked with enforcing strict moral codes, and though they "worked stringently within the confines of women's dictated roles" – meaning, they only regulated other women – they "maintained levels of power unavailable to most women in the caliphate" and committed well-documented cases of violence, including physical abuse and torture.[14] There were also women who carried out suicide bombings and, as the situation on the ground grew more desperate, acted as ISIL combatants.[15] Women's involvement in ISIL in these capacities belies their wholesale portrayal as passive participants or victims, naïve to the extremist nature of the Islamic State project. Indeed, the roles of some women were critical to the operational success of the organization.[16]

14 Margolin and Cook, *The Agency and Roles of Foreign Women in ISIS*, 31.

15 Margolin and Cook, *The Agency and Roles of Foreign Women in ISIS*.

16 Tanya Mehra, Thomas Renard, and Merlina Herbach, eds., *Female Jihadis Facing Justice: Comparing Approaches in Europe* (The Hague: ICCT Press, 2024).

The prevailing view that women returning from Syria and Iraq are de facto victims rather than perpetrators has complicated the legal and social reintegration for women returnees. When legal systems treat women as secondary actors in cases of terrorism, by default, and frame their involvement as coerced or passive, accountability for women who have engaged in criminal actions is lacking.[17] This puts the rehabilitation and reintegration of these women at risk, because as Kumar notes, "[a]ccountability is critical to ensure the sustainability of rehabilitation."[18] That is not to say that women returnees should be assumed to have been perpetrators; the point is, nothing should be assumed about women based merely on their gender. For, it is also true that many women were victimized by ISIL, even if they willingly traveled to Syria and Iraq to be a part of the so-called caliphate, subjected to horrific crimes like forced marriage, human trafficking, and sexual violence. And in some cases, women were both victims of these crimes as well as perpetrators of violence themselves.

This dual role of some women returnees, as both victim and perpetrator, presents a quandary to legal practitioners. While prosecution may be appropriate for certain women if they played an active role in terrorist activities, the public interest is served by all women returnees receiving the most effective rehabilitative and psychological support, so that they reintegrate successfully into society. In BiH, where women returnees have not been prosecuted, most but not all have engaged in reintegration programming with the support of psychosocial service providers. However, because their participation is voluntary, women who choose not to partake cannot be compelled to do so. Some analysts have suggested that the approach taken by Kosovo is more preferable, as women returnees there were all placed under investigation by prosecutors, but only some were eventually charged with crimes related to joining or participating in a terrorist group and were then offered suspended sentences contingent

17 Mia Bloom and Ayse Lokmanoglu, "From Pawn to Knights: The Changing Role of Women's Agency in Terrorism?" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 46, no. 4 (2020): 399–414.

18 Kumar, *Female Foreign Terrorist Fighters*, 44.

on mandatory psychosocial treatment.[19] In practice, this allows officials to cast a wide net, and then identify which women returnees most need to be monitored, but with an eye to ensuring "they will not always pose a security risk, but have the opportunity to one day again be productive members of society."[20]

One could argue that the risk posed by returnees, whether women or men, relates in large part to the degree to which they maintain an allegiance to ISIL or continue to share the group's ideology. In BiH, the ideological perspectives of women returnees vary significantly. Some have entirely rejected the ideology of ISIL and of Salafism more broadly. Others continue to espouse and support some elements of fundamentalist ideology, such as a Sharia state, but do not appear to remain committed to ISIL itself. In most cases, these women began the process of disengagement from the extremism of ISIL before they returned to BiH, but disengagement of this sort does not always equate to deradicalization. Thus, it has been an important observation that personal empowerment, rather than punishment, has proven the key factor in preventing further radicalization among women returnees in BiH.

In fact, a judge who was interviewed for this study emphasized to researchers that the prosecution of women poses such a threat of harm to their children that their disengagement from extremist ideologies is best facilitated extrajudicially, through rehabilitation and resocialization services. Yet this demands that BiH adopt and fully resource a whole-of-society approach to the prevention of violent extremism, including by expanding and tailoring these extrajudicial mechanisms to address the unique needs of returnees.[21] Such efforts must include a greater focus on

19 See: Teuta Avdimetaj and Julie Coleman, "What EU Member States can learn from Kosovo's experience in repatriating former foreign fighters and their families," Clingendael Policy Brief, May 2020.

20 Avdimetaj and Coleman, "What EU Member States can learn from Kosovo's experience," 2.

21 Buljubašić and Azinović, *Criminal Prosecutions of Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Bosnia and Herzegovina*.

returnee children, the considerable psychosocial needs of whom are often overlooked even in comprehensive counterterrorism policies. Simply put, breaking the cycle of violent extremism requires providing the most appropriate and most expert care for these children. This is not only because they have been exposed to violence and may suffer from trauma, or because extremist beliefs may have been normalized in their families, but because whether children can assimilate and reintegrate into society is directly linked to factors like social isolation or in-group exclusion – which may make these children, or any children, more susceptible to radicalizing influences as they age.

## What Attracted Women to the Ideology of ISIL?

To ensure that returnees receive tailored services which are both gender- and age-sensitive, it is crucial that practitioners in any context have a clear view of what drew families to ISIL territory in the first place. Research indicates that, for some women, a significant pull factor was the notion that they had a fundamentalist religious duty to migrate (i.e. perform *hijra*) to an Islamic country where they could contribute to building a "caliphate." But women were also attracted by a sense of belonging and sisterhood, and they often departed with romanticized ideals of what their experience in ISIL territory would entail. Push factors commonly known to inspire radicalization more generally also played a role in these women's choices to align themselves with violent extremism, including a search for identity, and the perception that oppressed and persecuted Muslim communities had been abandoned by international actors.[22]

The recruitment of women by ISIL was both proactive, in which women considered vulnerable to radicalization were actively groomed; or reactive, in which recruiters engaged with a woman only after she expressed an interest in the group's ideology. While some women were recruited

22 Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, *'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part': Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon* (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015).

forcibly or through exploitative means, women's recruitment was much more often facilitated or intensified by peer pressure from friends and family members, relationships formed in online chat groups, or romantic interests.[23] It was common for women who departed for ISIL territory to have had existing relationships with individuals already involved in jihadist networks, and for these relationships to have been strengthened through regular contact on social media and the dark web. Recruiters attempted to mine these personal connections, playing on the vulnerabilities of girls and women in messaging designed to capitalize on specific push and pull factors.[24]

Speckhard and Ellenberg interviewed 38 women who defected from ISIL, returned from ISIL territory, or were imprisoned by ISIL, as part of a larger study involving both women and men. They found that these women shared many of the same individual-level vulnerabilities as men who had been recruited into ISIL, including: emotional, physical, and sexual abuse; emotional and physical neglect; exposure to domestic violence; substance abuse in the household; mental illness in the family; parental separation or divorce; the incarceration of a family member; the death of a parent during childhood; polygyny in the immediate family; family conflict; poverty; leaving home at a young age; personal divorce; and previous criminality. But women were most likely to have experienced some form of prior trauma, poverty, and/or family conflict, and these factors consistently arose when women were asked to explain what had attracted them to ISIL.[25]

23 Karen Jacques and Paul J. Taylor, "Female Terrorism: A Review," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 3 (2009): 499–515.

24 Saltman and Smith, *'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part'*.

25 Anne Speckhard and Molly D. Ellenberg, "ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time – Analysis of 220 In-depth Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners." *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 1 (2020): 82–127.

**Past trauma as a factor of vulnerability for women in ISIL recruitment**

A 46-year-old Canadian woman interviewed by Speckhard and Ellenberg described how the prior traumatic experience of being assaulted by a serial rapist, and the triggering event of watching his trial on television, resulted in an emotional despair that left her vulnerable to ISIL recruitment. Struggling with nightmares and failing in her university classes, she "met" an ISIL member on Twitter and developed a relationship with him. Over time, he "seduced her into marrying him... [and] guided her into escaping her problems by coming to Syria... to help others," having persuaded her that her services as a nurse were desperately needed there.[26]

For some European women, instances of discrimination related to their religious practices also made them more vulnerable to recruitment. For instance, women who were expelled from their family homes after converting to Islam tended to be more susceptible to recruitment by male partners.[27] But women were not only influenced by men to join ISIL, and were often targeted by women recruiters on platforms like Facebook and Twitter.[28] These recruiters promised a life of abundance, as reward for adherence to religious tradition, and preyed on women's fears and insecurities in order to convince them that salvation or purpose could be found in an "Islamic state" and, moreover, that creating such a state was their moral obligation. The research of Speckhard and Ellenberg revealed that the relationships formed by online recruiters with women were extremely influential in convincing them to travel to ISIL territory, matched only by relationships with spouses and parents.[29]

26 Speckhard and Molly D. Ellenberg, "ISIS in Their Own Words," 96.

27 Speckhard and Molly D. Ellenberg, "ISIS in Their Own Words," 97.

28 Sophie Scheuble and Fehime Oezmen, "Extremists' Targeting of Young Women on Social Media and Lessons for P/CVE," Radicalisation Awareness Network and the European Union, 2022.

29 Speckhard and Ellenberg, "ISIS in Their Own Words."

The power of these relationships to influence the decision-making of women should not negate their personal agency, however. While some women followed the lead of their husbands, often fearing abandonment or divorce, and knew little about where they were going, and others were genuinely deceived and appear to have had little to no choice in traveling to ISIL-controlled territories, many women were aware of the implications of joining or aligning themselves with ISIL and did so willingly. For both women and men, the allure of the "caliphate" was hard to resist, and inspired a sense of duty to the larger Muslim community (*Ummah*) that was often reinforced in online spaces by videos depicting atrocities committed by the Assad regime and highlighting the failure of the international community to intervene. In countries and communities recently affected by war, this may have served as an even more powerful recruitment motivator. A 28-year-old from Kosovo told Speckhard and Ellenberg, for example, that memories of his own experiences with war had heightened his sense of responsibility to provide aid to others oppressed by conflict and thereby fulfill his own religious duty as a Muslim.[30]

Yet, because the religious obligations of ISIL adherents were viewed through a deeply gendered lens, women were tasked primarily with "serving" as wives and mothers. Though some women acted as online recruiters, learned to handle weapons and served in security units, or trained as spies, these cases were relative outliers.[31] In fact, marriage and motherhood were not only encouraged but imposed on women in ISIL territories. Single women and widows were generally prevented from living independently, forced instead to stay in women's guesthouses known as *madhafas*, known for their poor, cramped conditions. To escape these conditions, many women readily agreed to marry multiple times, and now have children from multiple marriages, often with different claims to citizenship, complicating their repatriation from detention in Syria.

30 Speckhard and Ellenberg, "ISIS in Their Own Words," 102.

31 Speckhard and Ellenberg, "ISIS in Their Own Words."

## Disengagement, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration: What works?

The importance of tailored approaches to disengagement and reintegration is clear from both research and practice, but this specificity presents challenges when it comes to comparability across contexts. Moreover, because most of the analysis conducted thus far has focused only on the experiences of men in disengagement and exit programming, there is a gap in knowledge regarding the effectiveness of similar interventions targeting women.[32] This represents a crucial lack of understanding, particularly in relation to returnees from ISIL territory, given the degree to which gender dictated different conditions, treatment, and expectations for women and men within the ISIL sphere. As Stenger notes, women returnees are also likely to experience more stigma than men in their home communities, due to gender norms that frame a woman's association with violent extremism as a greater transgression. Thus, rehabilitation and reintegration programming must not only take into consideration the gender-specific nature of the traumas and social pressures women confront upon returning home but must also avoid replicating gender-normative prescriptions.[33]

Beyond gender, tailoring disengagement and reintegration programming means accounting for contextual factors including local culture, traditions, history, and laws.[34] The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) has also emphasized the importance that these interventions are designed to be long-term and multi-faceted, providing mentoring, psychological support, theological guidance, practical assistance with things like

32 United Nations Development Programme, *Preventing Violent Extremism Through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance and Respect for Diversity: A development response to addressing radicalization and violent extremism* (UNDP, 2016).

33 Helen Stenger, *Returning Home: An Intersectional Analysis of the Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of ISIS Returnees* (De Gruyter, 2025).

34 Hamed El-Said, *De-Radicalising Islamists: Programmes and their Impact in Muslim Majority States* (ICSR, 2012).

schooling and housing, and family-level services.[35] For women, Gielen explains, "establishing trust-based relationships between the intervention provider, the female and her family and being able to provide support in a multi-agency setting, are crucial elements for… success."[36] But it is just as important that these women have access to an alternative social network, both online and offline, that prevents them from returning to the comfort of the ISIL sisterhood or to the rhetoric of extremist influencers.

That said, many returnees from ISIL territory have arrived home already quite disillusioned with the group's ideology and methodology, and this has served as a primary driver of their disengagement from extremism. Whether this arose from witnessing behaviors in ISIL leaders that contradicted the group's stated values, enduring harsh treatment and violence themselves, or becoming aware of the abuse of others, it is not uncommon for returnees to report that, at some point, their expectations of ISIL were shattered. Among women, this disillusionment is often linked to the mistreatment of other women, the persistent lack of food they experienced, and the choice of ISIL to undertake attacks outside its territory (such as in Europe). Women who lived in *madhafas* also frequently recount having endured mistreatment, describing prison-like conditions in many cases, from which they were not permitted to leave unless they agreed to marry, with some forced into marriage and even raped by would-be husbands to compel them to marry.[37]

It is worth highlighting that, for women from Western countries, even if they had adopted a fundamentalist ideology before departing for Syria and Iraq, living under ISIL rule and eventually in the so-called caliphate was something of a culture shock. For instance, it was the view of ISIL that

35 Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Approaches and Practices* (Brussels, 2017). RAN, which was established by the European Commission and comprises over 2000 practitioners, has worked systematically to compile approaches and best practices to countering violent extremism.

36 Amy-Jane Gielen, "Exit programmes for female jihadists: A proposal for conducting realistic evaluation of the Dutch approach," *International Sociology* 33, no. 4 (2018): 460.

37 Speckhard and Ellenberg, "ISIS in Their Own Words," 113.

"a woman is always in need of a husband who will look after her and tend to her affairs."[38] In practice, this meant women were expected to submit to their husbands and endure any abuse inflicted by men. It should not be surprising, therefore, that many women returnees have said they lived in a state of constant fear; some from the moment they crossed into ISIL territory, others only after they came to realize the totalitarian nature of the ISIL state. This totalitarian system was scaffolded by an intelligence apparatus known as the *Emni*, which had the power to accuse anyone in ISIL territory of spying or other crimes, with public executions and torture commonplace. Many women returnees report that this climate of fear led them to isolate themselves and refrain from forming friendships, or even to share doubts about the regime with people in their own household. Indeed, as Speckhard and Ellenberg learned, ISIL had no qualms about turning children against their own parents, and instructed youth to spy on family members, encouraging them to report their findings to the *Emni*.[39]

ISIL's system of control through fear also entailed a clear pattern of sexual violence perpetrated in its territories, targeting women from specific groups (e.g. Yazidis) while largely sparing others (e.g. Sunnis). Still, the organization also tolerated "unauthorized" sexual violence within its territories, along with forced marriage, impacting women across lines of identity. And while there were isolated instances when ISIL meted out punishment for rape, it was generally viewed as acceptable and certainly was within marriage. Hence, because girls were regularly forced into marriage in ISIL territory, some as young as 13, sexual violence that occurred within that context amounted to child sexual abuse that was essentially sanctioned by the "caliphate."[40] This appalling reality only underscores why it is so vital that rehabilitation programming be both comprehensive and as tailored as possible to the specific traumas experienced by returnees.

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38 Mara Redlich Revkin and Elisabeth Jean Wood, "The Islamic State's Pattern of Sexual Violence: Ideology and Institutions, Policies and Practices," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 2 (2021).

39 Speckhard and Ellenberg, "ISIS in Their Own Words."

40 See: Revkin and Wood, "The Islamic State's Pattern of Sexual Violence."

In other words, any such programming must address the full range of challenges that face returnees as they attempt to reintegrate. As the cases presented in this text show, many returnees carry deep emotional and psychological wounds from their experiences in ISIL territory and need specialized mental health support. Some must also contend with stigma and rejection emanating from people in their home communities, for whom their association with a terrorist group makes them untrustworthy or validates their exclusion. For women with children, rehabilitation and reintegration can become even more complicated, as the traumas of mother and child may intertwine. These children were born or largely raised in a conflict zone, and because this is the only norm they know, it can be difficult for them to adapt to life back home. Meanwhile, their mothers may struggle to fulfill their role as caregiver while simultaneously navigating the challenges of their own rehabilitation and reintegration; particularly if they have yet to take responsibility for their own role in the trauma suffered by their children.

On top of this, returnees have often faced legal hurdles that stand directly in the way of their full reintegration. For example, many have had trouble replacing lost passports, or were forced to go through protracted legal proceedings to establish citizenship for their children. It can also be challenging for women returnees to find work or continue their education, because the time they spent in ISIL territory has left gaps in their employment or education history that are not easy or comfortable to explain. These obstacles to social inclusion can lead returnees to feel incredibly isolated, especially if they have not found a local cultural and religious community to provide them a sense of security of belonging. In fact, after living under extremist rule, many returnees may be convinced that they can neither fit into nor find acceptance in moderate, mainstream society, adding to feelings of displacement and detachment. And of course, societal expectations and gender norms can further complicate the reintegration of women returnees, who are held to different standards than male returnees. For all these reasons, reintegration programming for women

returnees must take a holistic approach that includes specialized psychosocial care, legal and other practical assistance, and pathways to employment and education, all tailored to their unique experiences and needs.

## Methodology

This study is grounded in feminist research principles, and thus centers lived realities and examines imbalances of power. By exploring the rehabilitation and reintegration of women who returned to BiH from ISIL territory in Syria and Iraq through the lens of gender, and by using a case study approach, the aim of researchers was to understand these experiences in greater depth while also revealing the ways that gender, power, and violence have intersected in each of these women's journeys. This gave priority to their personal narratives, in accordance with feminist commitments to amplifying voices that are often marginalized in conflict-related research.

Each case study presented here provides insight into the personal history of a woman returnee and discusses what motivated her to leave for ISIL territory, her experiences there, her journey back to BiH, and the challenges that have emerged in her process of reintegration. A purposive sample was selected, and the mothers of these returnees (one of whom is a returnee herself) were also interviewed. This added a rich, multigenerational perspective on matters such as family dynamics and gendered expectations, helping to contextualize the decision making and thinking of the women featured in this research.

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, conducted in private settings by two experienced researchers to ensure participants felt safe and empowered. These interviews, which lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, were audio-recorded with the consent of participants. Researchers adhered to strict ethical guidelines, with informed

consent obtained from all participants and measures in place to protect their confidentiality, and the emotional wellbeing of participants a priority throughout; therefore, pseudonyms were used in all reports and transcripts. In all cases, interviews began with a focus on early childhood experiences and upbringing. Researchers also asked participants how they first became aware of ISIL and the conflict in Syria, and probed into their motivations for departing and what may have made them vulnerable to ISIL propaganda, before inquiring in detail about how they were recruited. This was followed by questions about the experiences of each woman while living under ISIL rule. Interviewers were guided by expressions of disillusionment or doubt, or the recounting of traumatic experiences, to ask more about certain topics, but always with careful consideration for the wellbeing of interviewees. Finally, the focus was turned to how the views of these women has evolved over time in relation to the ideology of ISIL.

Applying a gender lens was crucial to this study, as it sought in part to understand the ways gender was weaponized by ISIL, through practices such as the sexual enslavement and forced marriage of women and girls. Feminist theory offers a critical framework for exploring how the ideology of ISIL regulated violence based on gender and identity, as well as how gender-specific propaganda played a role in the successful recruitment of women to a fantasy state that would manifest for most as living nightmare in which the "caliphate" had complete control over their bodies and destinies. This theoretical approach was key to weeding through the complexities and contradictions that lie within the stories of women returnees – some of whom were both victims and perpetrators, and many of whom have struggled with how to reintegrate and move forward while still working to confront, be accountable for, and even rectify past choices and actions.

It is important to note that the literature indicates trauma-informed interviewing techniques are particularly critical where participants may have experienced or witnessed significant violence.[41] Hence, because these interviews involved the discussion of traumatic events and experiences, the interviewers were selected in part due to their extensive expertise in this field. One is a research psychologist and trained psychotherapist with over 15 years of experience conducting in-depth interviews; the other is a researcher focused on terrorist and violent extremist groups, also with considerable experience conducting interviews and focus groups, and adept at quickly establishing rapport with subjects. The interviews progressed smoothly, for the most part, and participants shared a substantial amount of information, with the interviewers making every effort to create and maintain an environment of safety. Nevertheless, it is impossible to claim with certainty that the women who participated were always truthful or expressed themselves fully on certain topics. For instance, some interviewees appeared inclined to present themselves in a favorable light by trying to downplay the degree to which they were responsible for the decision to travel to Syria with their children. Often, these women adopted a narrative of victimhood, portraying themselves as subjects of events that unfolded beyond their will, rather than agents of their own destiny.

Therefore, despite the imperative of researchers to create conditions of trust and safety and build rapport with participants, interviewers must always acknowledge the potential that some participants may seek to manipulate or control the narrative.[42] Maintaining awareness and clarity of this as researchers means reflexively and critically engaging with the data, and being mindful of the ethical dilemmas associated with interviewing

41 Dianne Lalonde, Linda Baker, Robert Nonomura, and Jassamine Tabibi, "Trauma- and Violence-informed Interview Strategies in Work with Survivors of Gender-based Violence," *Learning Network* 32 (December 2020).

42 See: John Horgan, "From Profiles to *Pathways* and Roots to *Routes*: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618, no. 1 (2008): 80–94.

any individual who may have perpetrated or supported violence.[43] In this study, the interviewers worked to ensure that participants felt safe to reflect on their motivations, experiences, and ideological beliefs, while also balancing the need for accurate data collection. This required that they took a trauma-informed approach, adapting the pace and structure of interviews to the emotional and psychological state of the participants, while remaining sensitive to the power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee. Trauma survivors often benefit from feeling in control of the interview process, for example, including by being given the option to stop at any time or change the subject as needed.[44] This kind of sensitivity was central to the success of interviews conducted for this study, by ensuring that the women returnees who participated felt they had the autonomy to set their own boundaries, especially after their experiences in the coercive ISIL environment.

Data from interviews was then scrutinized through thematic analysis, supported by NVivo software, with a focus on gendered experiences, to identify how power, oppression, and resistance manifested in the lives of women returnees. Informed by a feminist approach, this analysis emphasized the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and religion in shaping these experiences. Researchers sought to avoid harmful stereotypes, instead focusing on women's agency and resilience, and used case studies to help draw out and distinguish the individual complexities of each woman's experience. By treating every participant as a unique case, this research thus captured a diversity of experiences that offer valuable insights for policymakers, academics, and practitioners alike, particularly as to the importance of tailored interventions. In fact, all of these cases highlight the need for tailored and gender-sensitive rehabilitation and reintegra-

43 Stella R. Taquette and Luciana Maria Borges da Matta Souza, "Ethical Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: A Critical Literature Review," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21 (2022).

44 Cyanne E. Loyle and Alicia Simoni, "Researching Under Fire: Political Science and Researcher Trauma, *PS: Political Science and Politics* 50, no. 1 (2017): 141–145.

tion programming, and collectively, they demonstrate how feminist theory can and should inform such interventions.

In addition to interviewing women returnees, researchers also conducted in-depth interviews with security officials, psychologists, and social workers directly involved in the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees. These professionals provided a critical view into the challenges they face in this work, and their perspectives enriched this study by broadening the understanding of researchers regarding institutional responses and by highlighting gaps in resources and coordination among social, legal, and mental health systems. The combined findings of interviews with women returnees and with these frontline practitioners indicate unequivocally that gender-specific rehabilitation and reintegration programming must be designed to effectively intervene in the distinct challenges that confront women upon returning to their home communities. To that end, policymakers must move away from "gender-blind" solutions to the deeply gendered problem of extremism. Academics and researchers can support this effort by adding intentionally, as this study does, to the growing body of feminist literature in this field that critically examines intersections of gender, violence, and power.

# Suhejla

*A Quest for Significance*

## Introduction

In 2013, at the age of 27, Suhejla was disappointed with her routine life and marital struggles. She found solace online, where she was drawn into virtual extremist Salafist communities that romanticized jihadism and spoke in simplistic, reductionist terms about religion. There, Syria was portrayed as a place where one could live a faith-driven existence, and escape from the mundane reality with which Suhejla had grown disillusioned. She engaged online with individuals who had already travelled to the conflict zone and found herself inspired by their bravery and sense of purpose. Over time, the prospect of a more meaningful life became irresistible to Suhejla, and in 2016, she left her two children behind in BiH and departed for Syria to be with a man she met online.

Though it took several years for Suhejla to reach the point of departing for Syria, once she arrived, her romantic visions of the so-called caliphate

were very rapidly shattered. Life in a war zone, the oppressive control of her new husband, and the constant threat of violence under ISIL were far removed from the utopia promised on the internet. Like all women in ISIL territory, Suhejla was confined to domestic spaces or was permitted to support the jihadist cause through only very specific roles. When, after a year of this life, she managed to obtain permission from her husband to leave Syria to give birth in safety, she was arrested upon entering Turkey. Facing charges of terrorism, she gave birth in a Turkish prison, bound to the bed by handcuffs; though, within weeks, she was cleared of terrorism charges and placed by Turkish authorities on a flight to Sarajevo.

And so, with a twenty-day-old baby in her arms, Suhejla stepped off an aircraft in Sarajevo in the winter of 2018. She was never detained or charged in BiH, but did begin the complex process of psychological readjustment and social reintegration that has faced all women returnees. The shadow of her past still lingers today, especially in her relationship with her youngest child. Still, in Suhejla's story, the human capacity for change and adaptation shines through, and reflects the journey of many women returnees across Europe.

## From Isolation to Belonging

Suhejla's religious conversion did not occur, as is typical in BiH, through in-person contact with members of the Bosnian Salafist community. Indeed, hers was an online radicalization in every way: she was motivated to convert by content she viewed online, and she underwent her conversion entirely through help and instruction she received online. In an interview with researchers, she explained that this was first sparked by visits she made "*out of curiosity*" to the Facebook profiles of several extremists, and "*somehow saw the profile of Muris*" – a jihadist from BiH who joined ISIL while still in high school, quickly rose to become a star of social media, and died in Aleppo in 2014 at only 19 years of age. His posts

were incredibly popular and it's not surprising that Suhejla found them engaging, but it was because his content led her to the online lectures of renowned Bosnian Salafist figures that her fundamentalism deepened. The most prominent of these were Bilal Bosnić, a known foreign fighter recruiter, and Jusuf Barčić, a leading figure of Bosnian Salafism before his 2007 death in a car accident.[45] As her interest in learning more about Salafism grew, Suhejla decided to join a closed Facebook group of women who had already departed to Syria, who "*suggested which books to read*" and ushered Suhejla into and through her conversion.

Part of what attracted Suhejla to this online community of women was her sense that "*they were not afraid of anything*." She recalled that her contact with these women, who she described as "*true believers*," had given her strength. She appears to have interpreted their strength of belief and their willingness to make considerable sacrifices in service of those beliefs as reflective of a broader strength of character. This intersected with her own pursuit of greater significance in powerful ways. "*Now… I realize that everything is tied to faith. Each of us left because of it*," Suhejla told researchers. For her, religion was the cornerstone of her decision to depart, based in the profound belief that she was partaking in a divine mission, and would finally be free to adopt a life of true purpose.

Her conversion to the Salafist interpretation of Islam was also tied to her relationship with the man she calls her "Syrian husband," even though he is actually from Sandžak, in Serbia. He fought in ISIL's Bosnian contingent, and was introduced to her online, after her conversion, by one of the women in her Facebook group. According to Suhejla, she recognized a fearlessness in him, in photos he sent of himself in his military uniform, citing this as the primary reason she fell in love with him. She emphasized to researchers that he was an al-Nusra fighter, "*not ISIL*," but acknowledged that this made little practical difference as his wife, not-

45 Suhejla referred to Barčić as the "late sheikh" when she spoke of him in her interview, indicating the degree to which she maintains a deep respect for him to this day.

ing that "*they (al-Nusra) still treat women like doormats*," and contending that, "*The first day I arrived [in Syria], I immediately understood what I had done.*" Nonetheless, and despite her husband's "*occasional rough behavior*" – which may have been more than occasional, given her admission that "*it was normal for him to slap me in the face*" – she claims he loved her "*and I loved him too.*" As is the case with many women victims of domestic violence, Suhejla expressed true affection and loyalty to her husband, while also describing inhumane treatment: "*I was like a slave to him… I never left the house alone. There was no chance to even open the door. When he had guests, my voice could not be heard. A woman serves [in his world] to cook and deliver children and has no opinion.*"

As Suhejla sees it, the choice of women to depart to Syria "*fundamentally… boils down to marriage and Islam.*" In her view, women either followed their husbands or left seeking spouses in ISIL-controlled territories. Of course, there were other reasons women travelled to Syria, many of which Suhejla herself experienced, including dissatisfaction or disappointment with various aspects of life, boredom, and a desire for adventure or purpose. In some cases, adolescent rebellion, troubling family dynamics, and traumatic experiences such as sexual abuse or other types of violence also played a role in driving women to depart for the "caliphate". These factors laid the ground for recruiters, who nurtured the idealistic aim in women that they must fulfil a religious duty and help build a Muslim utopia, where they would be granted belonging and sisterhood.[46]

For Suhejla, struggles within her first marriage lay beneath the various motivations and influences that contributed to her search for a new and different life, and made her more susceptible to the sway of the recruiters she encountered online. She told researchers that "*addiction was the main issue*" between she and her ex-husband. "*He was on maintenance treatment for heroin, and although he wasn't using anymore, he was still*

46 Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, *'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part': Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon* (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015).

*very nonfunctional, even setting the house on fire once. He didn't work, and I didn't either; my father supported us*." Suhejla said that, through her online relationships, she finally "*saw… an escape, a way out*" of her marriage, and out of the family life that by then felt exhausting to her. "*It was totally selfish*," she admitted, "*but after years of focusing solely on the kids and not even going on vacation since I was 16, I felt trapped… The constant demands of taking care of the kids and the isolation… made me feel like I was suffocating. I think at some point, I just snapped*."

This sense of isolation was something Suhejla mentioned in relation to her early life as well. Although her father has supported her, and her family, in the absence of her mother, and was quite distraught when she left for Syria; for Suhejla, her youth is marked by an acute absence of a broader supportive familial network and the profound impact of losing her mother at the age of 18. Lacking grandparents or other relatives to share this burden compounded her feelings of isolation and intensified her need for connection and understanding. At the same time, this sense that she is isolated appears, interestingly, to extend in large part from the relationship Suhejla had *with* her mother – who she said was emotionally distant, lacked warmth, and suffered from depression. "*My mother never showed emotion, never told me she loved me*," Suhejla recounted.

Nonetheless, the death of her mother left a void that Suhejla long struggled to fill; a void that was especially large, perhaps, because they were never able to bridge that early distance. She tried to fill this void with her own family, centering her children and their needs. Yet, she found the responsibilities of caregiving overwhelming, recalling, "*I was always with my children… but where was I in all that?*" Challenges she faced with her second son, who was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, only made her feel more lost and isolated. She found that many people in her small local community did not grasp the implications of his diagnosis and could not offer useful support, noting, "*People would tell me to disci-*

*pline him, not understanding the complexities of his condition*." The strain of managing her son's special needs along with her other responsibilities, and the stresses within her marriage, all contributed to her search for an escape, making her particularly vulnerable to online recruitment.

## Online Recruitment

The recruitment methods deployed to draw women like Suhejla into the ISIL fold were sophisticated, multifaceted, and therefore successfully insidious, leveraging both personal vulnerabilities and the reach and influence of modern technology to produce a powerful pull toward radicalization. Because Suhejla was recruited entirely online, her experience provides a particularly valuable look at the online recruitment mechanisms used by ISIL to attract and retain adherents. In Suhejla's case, her first contact with the group began with interactions on Facebook, which she saw at the time as "*a hobby*," a way to "*talk to people over in Syria, and… see how they live*." She now knows that what they showed her "*wasn't a real picture*." But this demonstrates the value of social media platforms for online recruiters, who can attract potential recruits by painting a glorified narrative of extremism.

For ISIL, winning the social media war was in some ways as important as conquering territory on the ground. The group developed a savvy media operation that flooded online spaces with pro-ISIL narratives and messaging. An internal report by the US State Department found in 2015 for example that efforts by the Obama administration and its foreign allies to combat this publicity machine were failing miserably. On a daily basis, up to 90,000 tweets were posted to publicize the objectives and promote the cause of ISIL. Many of these were targeted at Western audiences, because the group saw social media as a means of facilitating recruitment from Western countries.[47]

47 Mark Mazzetti and Michael R. Gordon, "ISIS Is Winning the Social Media War, U.S. Concludes," *The New York Times*, 12 June 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/13/world/middleeast/isis-is-winning-message-war-us-concludes.html?_r=0

To that end, the online interactions of ISIL recruiters were deeply immersive. This was part of what attracted Suhejla, who described to researchers how her admiration quickly grew for the individuals in Syria with whom she communicated on Facebook. It was not long before her admiration transformed into a desire to emulate these more radical peers, who she considered braver and more dedicated than herself. In this way, the presence of these radicalized individuals – especially other women – in her online social network played a significant role in her decision-making vis-à-vis departure to Syria. In fact, this was one of the key roles played by women in ISIL: to recruit "female friends, family members and 'virtual sisters' through the internet," to populate the so-called caliphate. According to Moussa Bourekba, the result was that "the proportion of European women who joined IS increased from one in seven… in 2014 to one in three in 2016."[48] That was the year Suhejla departed for Syria, having been pushed down this path by connections she made online.

It is worth examining the fact that, contrary to other women featured in this text, Suhejla's radicalization occurred completely online. For Suhejla, who first reached out to virtual networks at a time when she felt emotionally vulnerable due to the burden of her partner's substance abuse and recovery, the internet served as a portal to another world. It was there, while exploring new identities and engaging in stimulating conversations, that she could finally escape the monotony and demands of her daily life. She thus developed a profound sense of community with the women she met online, and this provided fertile ground for self-disclosure – which is "the most important basis of intimate social relationships." Indeed, by providing a certain "anonymity and the absence of nonverbal cues," online spaces "can facilitate frequent and more intimate disclosure" than in-per-

48 Moussa Bourekba, "Overlooked and Underrated? The role of youth and women in preventing violent extremism," *Notes internacionals* 240 (2020), 3. Also see: Brigitte L. Nacos, "Young Western Women, Fandom, and ISIS," *E-International Relations,* 5 May 2015, https://www.e-ir.info/2015/05/05/young-western-women-fandom-and-isis/

son interactions.[49] The esteem she felt for these women also played a role in her recruitment, and likely made her even more open to disclosing personal details that helped recruiters understand her unique vulnerabilities. She was "*impressed [by] their bravery, happiness and honesty*," she told researchers, and "*thought, 'I want to be like that too*'."

This deep connecting was paired with a process of ideological indoctrination, achieved through continuous exposure to extremist content and narratives. Suhejla gradually grew to "*believe in the cause*" as her support was endlessly nurtured by the stream of propaganda, often subtly delivered, put forth by the individuals with whom she interacted virtually. In retrospect, she says she never fully adopted the ideology these peers promoted, but "*tried to convince myself of certain things... I tried to force myself*" to believe. This shows the power of the psychological pull and emotional manipulation that extended from the safety of the social network she had developed, even when the content of indoctrination did not entirely break through.

By the time Suhejla did eventually make more direct connections in the real world with people she met initially on the internet, she was already deeply radicalized through these online interactions. Hers was a slow-burning radicalization process, followed by a rapid progression from full radicalization to real-world action. And so, not long after she had "converted" to "true Islam", and just two months after meeting her "Syrian husband" on Facebook, she decided to travel to Syria to be with him.

Suhejla told researchers that she knew on "*the first day*" after arriving in Syria that she had gotten herself into something that didn't match her expectations. And, as Brigitte Nacos has noted, the women who recruited and radicalized her online would also have known how brutal life was for

49 L. Crystal Jiang, Natalie N. Bazarova, and Jeffrey T. Hancock, "The Disclosure-Intimacy Link in Computer-Mediated Communication: An Attributional Extension of the Hyperpersonal Model," *Human Communication Research* 37, no. 1 (2011), 58–59.

women in the so-called Islamic State. Despite this, they targeted Suhejla and other vulnerable women, and continued to "glorify ISIS's religious cause, the courage of jihadists and martyrs, and the responsibility of women to marry holy warriors."[50] Mia Bloom has highlighted the degree to which ISIL recruitment messaging to women contrasted the reality of their everyday domination in ISIL territory, calling it a "combination of fantasy and the feeling that by joining… they will be empowered... and do something meaningful."[51] This theme of empowerment was particularly relevant in Suhejla's case, given the sense of isolation and marginalization she reported feeling in her marriage and family life. When she felt empowered by interactions with women in her Facebook group, to whom she attributed a strength she felt she lacked, this carried considerable weight and drew her further toward the radicalism they advocated. Combined with rhetoric that, as Anita Perešin has observed, often tied women more tightly to "the state" being built in ISIL territory, than to the group itself, women like Suhejla felt they were being granted "a chance to take part in the state-building process and participate in the creation of a new society," offering them purpose while promising them a world in which "they could live 'honourably.'"[52]

For Suhejla, this notion of an honorable life was linked not only to her newfound religious radicalism but also to the economic insecurity that had marked her marriage. The online propaganda to which she was exposed often depicted the lives of foreign fighters and their families as affluent and comfortable. Recruiters emphasized that ISIL sought to bring its members a better life, as an appeal to individuals facing economic hardship. This exploited the Quest for Significance model, which posits that experiences of economic and social loss can push individuals to-

50 Brigitte L. Nacos, "Young Western Women, Fandom, and ISIS," *E-International Relations,* 5 May 2015, https://www.e-ir.info/2015/05/05/young-western-women-fandom-and-isis/

51 See: Lee Ferran and Randy Kreider, "Selling the 'Fantasy': Why Young Western Women Would Join ISIS," ABC News, 20 February 2015, https://abcnews.go.com/International/young-women- join-isis/story?id=29112401

52 Anita Perešin, "Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 3 (2015), 24.

wards radical solutions when they feel "rejected, divested of control, or as victims of injustice."[53] In Suhejla's case, grievances that had arisen within her marriage, related to her husband's addiction and unemployment, had provided an opening to recruiters.

## Significance and Identity

Experts often refer to the vulnerabilities and motivations that draw individuals to extremism as "push" or "pull" factors, which intersect with various other factors – family dynamics, ideology, social support networks, etc. – on the path to radicalization. Some of these push factors include personal grievances, socioeconomic hardship, and a sense of alienation or disenfranchisement, all of which Suhejla had experienced when she reached out to women in online groups. Suhejla had come to a breaking point in relation to her personal and social circumstances, and "*just wanted something different*." Meanwhile, she was also drawn in by a collection of pull factors, such as the appeal of the ideology of her new peers, the promise of belonging, and the notion that she could live a more meaningful and purposeful life.

The Quest for Significance model, mentioned above, suggests that individuals experiencing a loss of personal significance may seek to restore their own sense of worth through extreme action. But it is important to note that many individuals with the same vulnerabilities and motivations as Suhejla and other women returnees exist in circumstances where they are not exposed to extremist ideologies, and face no active recruitment mechanisms to draw them in. These vulnerable individuals are therefore unlikely to align themselves with violent extremism, as there is no group recruiting them, no ideology convincing them to engage in political violence, and no social support incentive for adopting extremist viewpoints.

53 Katarzyna Jasko, Gary LaFree, and Arie Kruglanski, "Quest for Significance and Violent Extremism: The Case of Domestic Radicalization," *Political Psychology* 38, no. 5 (2017), 3.

In other words, social context matters, largely because "people strongly care about the opinions of… members of major groups to which they belong." Hence, radical social networks can both "validate the mere idea of using violence as a legitimate means… which can subsequently decrease objections against violence and make it easier to deviate from broad societal norms"; and they can "influence the extremity of values and commitment to a particular cause."[54] However, even when people are targeted by recruiters, as may have been the case in Suhejla's radicalization, the process of radicalizing is complex and hardly linear. It often plays out in gradual shifts over time, rarely through sudden transformations; a steady progression influenced by personal, social, and ideological factors. And, as Pilkington observes, "[t]he choices individuals make are shaped not only by cost-benefit calculations… but by a range of affective and situational and dispositional factors."[55]

Suhejla's radicalization can be understood through this lens. Her extremism did not emerge abruptly but developed slowly, even insidiously, in a process that spanned several years. The radical ideology to which she adhered provided clear and compelling answers in her search for meaning, offering a sense of purpose she felt was absent in her life. As she explained to researchers, "*It was a process of almost three years in which, at the beginning, it never crossed my mind to go [to Syria]*." But as her respect increased for the women she met online, her interactions with them became more influential on her, and she absorbed more of their ideas and perspectives. This led Suhejla to open herself more freely to them, revealing her vulnerabilities in a way that could be instrumentalized by her online peers to further deepen her sense of belonging in and identification with the group, and with a group identity defined by an extreme fundamentalist ideology.

54 Ibid., 4.

55 Hilary Pilkington, "Radicalization as and in Process: Tracing Journeys through an 'Extreme-Right' Milieu," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2023), 4. Also see: Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (2008).

Extremist groups like ISIL cultivate and rely on a strong sense of community and identity; and are cognizant of the key role identity plays in establishing and maintaining relationships and in shaping decision-making. This focus on identity can be particularly appealing to individuals who feel marginalized or disconnected within their social context and can foster a process of identity fusion – wherein "someone's social identity takes over their personal identity, such that they form an equivalent or the sense of 'being one' with the ingroup." In many people, this fusion of the self with the group is central to their radicalization, as Echelmeyer, Slotboom, and Weerman determined in a review of research that described identity fusion as "a putative risk factor for extremist attitudes."[56]

For Suhejla, the group identity she discovered in online spaces offered her belonging, and the group's ideology offered her a structure that was rooted in religious and cultural narratives which gave her a sense of purpose. The virtual community she entered with people who had already departed to Syria provided a stark contrast to the life she was living in BiH, and this would prove to be a significant factor in her radicalization. As she sought an escape from everyday hardships and persistent feelings of isolation, Suhejla grew to believe she could achieve significance only through the sacrifice and devotion she saw in the women she met online. She would later come to understand the extent to which these women had hidden the disillusionment they felt and the adversities they faced in Syria, perhaps even from themselves – as she commented to researchers that she had also "*tried to convince myself about certain things*" while living in ISIL territory – yet, interacting with these women from her unsatisfactory life in BiH, Suhejla saw only their strength and devoutness and venerated these qualities. As an example, she explained, "*Their child dies, and they say 'Alhamdulillah, he is with Allah.' It doesn't mean that the woman doesn't grieve for her child; she truly believes this was destiny, that*

56 Lea Echelmeyer, Anne-Marie Slotboom, and Frank Weerman, "The Putative Effect of Identity on Extremist Radicalization: A Systematic Review of Quantitative Studies," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2023), 23.

*her child is saved… I liked that mentality… everything is so simple, and there is no need to seek another purpose*."

In Suhejla's mind, this reflected an "*absolute conviction… that it is as written*," and she "*wanted that too*." Instead, she explained, she had spent much of her life plagued by deep-seated fears and existential dread, anxious about her own death and what happens after people die. She recalled that her mother found her crying once and asked what was wrong, and when Suhejla told her that she didn't want to die, her mother responded: "'*You won't die now. First, Dad will die, then me, then your brother, and only then you*'." This matter-of-fact reply left young Suhejla panicked. And it was no consolation when she asked *how* people die, and her mother told her, "'*You just fall asleep and never wake up*'." According to Suhejla, she still remembers this "*like it was yesterday*," and says, "*from that moment*" she has *"had a constant fear [of death], throughout my life."* But Islam now provides her a framework for death she finds comforting. "*I don't really fear it anymore, or rather, I don't think about it… It's now connected with Islam… [W]hen you believe in what is written, you find meaning and calm in that, and you find a purpose*."

For Suhejla, the teachings of Salafism came like an answer to an all-pervasive question. "*Everything seemed to make sense*," she recounted. "*I remember being a teenager and thinking, 'I have everything, friends, this and that, but there's this emptiness; what's the point of all this if it ends in a moment?' And I've thought about that my entire life but couldn't find an adequate answer in science or other religions*." Her search for purpose, to fill that emptiness, illustrates how existential anxieties and personal traumas can lead people toward ideologies that promise clarity. Still, the value of such an ideology is magnified when it also offers a sisterhood and community, the power of which can often outweigh doubts that arise in new adherents. For some time, this was the case for Suhejla, who indicated to researchers that she was never the true believer that some around her

were. As Suhejla tells it, she never really reached this level of devotion, and "*was jealous, [because] I wanted to believe, to make it all simpler*."

## A Life in Conflict

This desire to believe so much that even daily life in a conflict zone could be made to make sense extended from the fact that, for Suhejla, the harsh reality of life under the oppression of ISIL had very quickly shattered her illusions; Syria would not offer the utopian reinvention she had imagined. Exposed to the raw brutality of war, she found herself in a struggle for survival, amidst constant danger. And moreover, she had to adapt to a culture that felt foreign, while living in perpetual fear.

"*When I got to Syria and sat down to think, only then did the panic set in. Where am I? How could I?*" she recalled. Life under ISIL meant strict adherence to rules and regulations, particularly for women, who were expected to submit to men. "*You wear what he says, do what he says. That's how it is there*." This loss of personal freedom and autonomy was profound for Suhejla, who found it challenging to conform to social expectations. But it was the reality of life under constant threat that most resonated from her recollection of this time:

"*I'd sit in the basement, trying to ward off the fear… The sound of an approaching airplane and the anticipation of a damned shell falling somewhere would paint an even more terrifying scenario of my death [in my mind]... Maybe I would suffocate, be buried under the house and its debris, until the arrival of the angel of death... Better to pray for a quick end, I'd think, for it to be just a boooom!!! and then it's over.*"

She spent a year in Syria, where she compared her life to "*BiH a hundred years ago*." Under relentless shelling, she lived without electricity or running water and strove to be "*as brave*" as the women whose strength

had inspired her in the first place. After all, she had been motivated to travel to Syria to conquer her fear; but it remained her constant partner. She acknowledged to researchers that her experiences there prompted introspective questioning at the time, which left her with a deep sense of regret and doubt. She said she asked herself: "*Do I have the right to pray to choose my own end? Do I have the right to wish that the shell falls somewhere else and kills someone else? Why did I even come here?*" And she chided herself for needing "*to be my own hero*."

As Suhejla grappled with the motivations that led her to Syria, the stark contrast between her initial expectations and the brutal reality became more and more evident. She began longing for her boring, previous life. "*Every day, the planes flew overhead. You'd try to do something normal, and then you'd hear the planes*." For Suhejla, this perpetual source of fear made any semblance of a normal life impossible, and she realized that she was still afraid of death. "*It was pointless that I went there with all that conviction, because I was still afraid [in the end]. I truly thought that I would come to terms with death… But it didn't work for me*."

On top of this spiritual conflict, Suhejla never escaped the isolation that had been so central to her search for a different life. In Syria, the strict control exerted by her husband and the gender norms upheld by ISIL meant Suhejla was often confined to her home, and coupled with the incessant threat of violence, this gave her the sense that she was trapped and helpless, too. She said her husband "*forbade me to go out without him*." Still, she sometimes defied him, and "*[w]hen he wasn't there… would secretly go out in a niqab, because who would know?*" It was clear, during Suhejla's interview, that the restrictions placed on women in ISIL territory had troubled her then and troubled her in retrospect. In her words, "*It was terrible how women's lives were so worthless there. There was no documentation about the birth of children… A man could kill his wife and just say she didn't obey him... It's terrible; imagine living like that… and thinking that.*"

These reflections offer a window into the internal conflict and disillusionment Suhejla faced in Syria, and the profound sense of regret that developed as she recognized the hypocrisy in her own thinking. And yet, her awareness of these conflicts and contrasts did not insulate Suhejla from the trauma of having her body policed and her conformity enforced. The long-term consequences for women who live under the repression of a group such as ISIL are frequently significant. Many, like Suhejla, not only struggle with the psychological scars of violence but also with a sense of alienation upon returning to "normal" society – where violent extremism and the systematic devaluation of women's lives and bodies are unacceptable. As Suhejla found, the influence of an extremist ideology can be pervasive, even when it exists alongside doubt, and experiences of violence and control can fundamentally alter an individual's worldview, complicating their reintegration into a non-violent society.

In Suhejla's case, she adapted her behavior to mitigate her oppression, for example by behaving in ways that pleased her husband, to avoid his abuse. Eventually, though, she sought refuge from this violence; from his psychological abuse, from the bombings that defined the rhythm of their days, and from the retributive, communal violence of ISIL. She described how her husband "*would lecture me for hours, berate me for the smallest things*." And she described the harrowing experience of being forced to witness an execution. "*My husband made me watch the execution of a young man just because he believed differently... it was terrible. It haunted me*." This kind of brutal act, carried out with callous efficiency, was a tool of ISIL, and served as a stark reminder of the regime's ruthlessness, to anyone who may consider going astray. Suhejla was marked by the experience of watching another person executed in cold blood, and she portrayed it as a moment of profound horror and helplessness for her; for, it was the condemned man to whom she most related. "*They tied a blindfold on him and shot him in the head. Before they killed him, he asked if he could pray one last time, and he was so calm*," she recalled, noting that his faith and serenity stood out against the cruelty of his executioners.

To cope, Suhejla attempted to rationalize her circumstances. "*I tried to convince myself that this was normal, that I could live like this, like all the other women*," she explained. The cognitive dissonance this created caused her stress, but it provided a temporary means of survival. She also continued to trust that her religious belief would bring the promise of spiritual reward. The interpretation of Islam taught by ISIL frames "*everything [as] a test from Allah. Anything bad that happens is a trial from Allah, because He loves you*." This provided Suhejla with a religious path to meaning and solace, even in the midst of so much violence and suffering.

Her determination to reunite with her children also played a crucial role in Suhejla's survival under ISIL. She admitted that it was only after she arrived in Syria that she confronted the hard question, "*How could I leave my children*?" Being separated from them was painful, and focusing on finding a way to reunite with them was a driving force that kept her looking forward. To that end, she engaged in a degree of psychological compartmentalization, detaching herself from the violence in her environment and focusing on day-to-day tasks. This also helped her present a facade that conformed to her husband's expectations. But it was through small acts of defiance, such as when she would secretly leave the house in a niqab and sit "*in the park, looking at the sun, thinking how beautiful it was*," that she managed to maintain her sense of self.

## Returning and Rebuilding

Suhejla knew very soon after arriving in Syria that "*the reality… was not what I had imagined*." Her choice to depart for ISIL territory had been borne from a deep desire for radical change and a suffocating boredom with her life; but that life looked awfully appealing once she saw the brutal truths of the ISIL regime. "*When I understood the reality, I wanted to leave immediately*," she told researchers. "*The daily bombings, the violence, it was nothing like what I had envisioned. I was scared for my life every single day*."

When Suhejla finally made her way out of the conflict zone, and into Turkey, she was charged with terrorism. She was seven-and-a-half months pregnant at the time and was told she could serve 4 to 15 years in prison, based on an indictment that claimed she was not only married to a foreign fighter but was one herself. She attributes her eventual release to her father, who "*luckily... got me a lawyer, who pushed for a trial*." Still, she remains troubled that her son was born in prison and that "*none of the authorities in BiH helped*." Her imprisonment while pregnant added layers to her trauma. "*They treated me like a terrorist*," she explained, and "*I gave birth to my son in a Turkish prison, all by myself*." The psychological toll of this was immense, and Suhejla remembered the experience as "*a living nightmare*."

Thus, when she returned to her hometown in 2018, Suhejla was surprised that the community was largely supportive. "*People were actually happy I made it back alive. Nobody said a bad word to me*." This was especially notable given the condemnation she had faced from the women in Syria she had once called sisters. "*They called me a traitor. To them, I had betrayed the cause*." And so, while she welcomed and was relieved by the acceptance exhibited by her local community, Suhejla struggled with the sense of abandonment she felt in relation to women she had considered allies and with whom she shared the experiences of war.

Suhejla was also forced to navigate her reintegration process without coordinated support. She rated the institutional assistance she received as mixed, and often inadequate, noting that "*[n]obody from social services or any organization came to check on us or offer help*." When she returned in 2018, she did so alone (without other returnees), facilitated by her father (not the state), and her first concern was securing housing and financial stability. Because she couldn't see a future for her family in the city where they lived, she moved them to another, but this brought its own set of bureaucratic hurdles, particularly in securing necessary documents for

her youngest child. "*Getting my son's birth certificate was a nightmare*," she explained. To make matters worse, she had no psychological or social support mechanism. "*I didn't have anyone to talk to. No professional came to determine if I needed medication or therapy… My father tried his best, but it wasn't enough*."

To her credit, Suhejla persisted and found solace in writing, which allowed her to reflect on her experiences. "*Writing my book was therapeutic. It allowed me to process everything*." Externalizing her thoughts and feelings in this way relieved her of a burden, and she told researchers that she "*wrote about everything, the good and the bad*." This was an important step in reconciling her experiences in Syria with her life back home in BiH.

Finding a routine and establishing a sense of purpose has also proven crucial for Suhejla, who acknowledged that this has been facilitated in part by the support of certain individuals and organizations in her community – which "*has been more than accepting*." However, she emphasized to researchers that she would have benefitted from much more structured and consistent support. She is also aware that the warmth she has felt in her community is not universally felt by women returnees. "*I was lucky... but that's not the case for everyone*," she noted, before underscoring that isolation can result from stigma and suspicion. Suhejla has observed how this can impact the success of reintegration, commenting that women "*who are seen as traitors or threats find it much harder to rebuild their lives*."

Suhejla remains cautiously optimistic about her own progress and future. "*I just want my children to have what they need and to feel safe*," she remarked, adding, "*I want to find a job, settle down, and give my kids a sense of normalcy*." Even so, she reiterated that "*[t]here needs to be a better system in place to help [returnees] navigate the bureaucracy and rebuild*." Based on her experience, Suhejla advocates a comprehensive and society-wide approach, particularly in light of the trauma that many re-

turnees have endured. She contends that returnees "*need more than just financial aid. We need mental health support, counseling, and someone to guide us through the reintegration process*."

**Unlearning and Unwinding**

After Suhejla became enmeshed in online relationships with her "virtual sisters" in Syria, her beliefs and social relationships were both transformed. The ideological indoctrination she first experienced in online spaces – which had convinced her that, by traveling to Syria, she could find belonging and purpose – gave way to disillusionment when she was confronted with the realities of life under ISIL. She came to see that the belief system which had "*seemed simple and fulfilling*" was layered atop a regime of fear, violence, and oppression in the "caliphate." She found it "*unbearable [and] started questioning everything*."

By the time Suhejla returned to BiH, she had been seeking a way out of Syria for some time. "*I knew I had to leave. I couldn't remain in a place that perpetuated such horror*." But her clarity of mind did not mitigate the emotional challenges of returning, particularly when it came to reestablishing relationships with her older children. "*My children were happy to see me*," she said, "*but it took time to rebuild our bond. I had to explain why I left and assure them that I was here to stay*." And despite the fact that her community has mostly been welcoming, Suhejla still struggles with the stigma she knows is associated with her past choices, mentioning to researchers that "*it's hard to shake the label of 'returnee'. People are suspicious, even if they don't say it out loud*." Similarly, she commented that, "*People are kind, but you can tell there's always that question in their mind: Can they trust me?*"

This may reflect Suhejla's own self-awareness and the guilt she must yet work through, as much as it reflects any suspicion or distrust on the part

of her community. More than many of the other returnees interviewed for this text, Suhejla displayed a profound insight into her own psychological journey vis-à-vis radicalization and return. That is not to say that she has been immune to the trauma of that experience. In fact, she shares all the same after-effects that other returnees report; the result of living under constant threat, witnessing violence, and struggling for survival. In Suhejla's case, nightmares about bombings and executions have haunted her. "*It's something that doesn't just go away*," she acknowledged, as she discussed the elements of complex PTSD, which manifest in her through recurring nightmares, hypervigilance, and a pervasive anxiety about her own safety and that of her children.

She has reoriented her quest for significance toward providing a stable and nurturing environment for her children, rebuilding her life, and finding a sense of peace. "*I want my children to have what they need and to feel safe. That's my new purpose*." Leaving her two children behind in BiH when she travelled to Syria was a decision she now says was rooted in desperation and disillusionment, and even then, she is unequivocal that "*It was the hardest thing I've ever done, but… I thought I was doing the right thing*." The weight of this decision plagued her in Syria, however. "*Every day, I regretted leaving them. Every night, I cried for them*."

That was one of the many factors that pushed Suhejla to engage in the honest self-reflection that finally led her to unlearn and unwind some of what she had come to believe. For example, though Suhejla remains a practicing Muslim, she has come to understand that she was deeply affected by a very radical interpretation of Islam and that it drew her toward the jihadi cause, and away from other priorities. Hence, her beliefs and practices have moderated considerably since her return. She says she once enjoyed wearing the niqab because she liked "being invisible" but chooses not to wear it anymore, and practically speaking, she appears to have undergone a rather complete process of self-deradicalization.

## Conclusion

Suhejla's journey to Syria was, in many ways, a story of seeking. This is why the Quest for Significance model resonates; for, Suhejla was unhappy with the routine monotony of her marriage and the daily economic struggles of raising her children, and she felt the weight of insignificance bearing down on her. It was not the radical nature of the ideology she encountered online that attracted her, it was the promise of a life of purpose and clarity. It was an alluring escape from her disenchantment, a siren call, a new identity, far removed from the banality of the everyday. Her sense of personal significance had been shaken by the emotional voids in her family life, the stifling routine of her marriage, and economic hardship, and this created fertile ground for the seeds of radicalization to take root.

The fact that her radicalization process took place entirely online is a testament to how skilled some groups are at planting and nurturing those seeds in virtual spaces, and through virtual networks. The relationships and influences that drew women like Suhejla to ISIL were tailored and multifaceted, leveraging personal vulnerabilities and grievances. Suhejla's case reminds us how feelings of isolation and purposelessness can operate as poignant touchpoints for recruiters, and make it difficult to crawl out from under the intricate web of influences that pull individuals toward violent extremism. Her interactions in online chat rooms gave her a sense of belonging, significance, and purpose, but also slowly deepened and modified her Islamic beliefs in the direction of fundamentalism. As she engaged with increasingly radical content in virtual spaces, she was exposed to an increasingly distorted version of Islam that justified violence and jihad. At the same time, Suhejla encountered like-minded people who bolstered her new beliefs and encouraged her to deepen her religious devotion.

It may seem, despite all this, that a woman like Suhejla still would not have been expected to depart for Syria. But the burden of motherhood weighed heavily on her, and like many people in failing marriages, she thought the love of another man may provide her an escape. He, an ISIL fighter, became her ultimate supporter and confidante; so when he proposed that they marry and encouraged her to travel to Syria, assuring her that she was needed there, she believed the moment had come to transform her inconsequential life into a one of impact and meaning.

Importantly, Suhejla has learned through the reintegration process – which she has navigated on her own – that she can find purpose in the everyday tasks and obligations she once convinced herself were insignificant. In this way, her story points to the value of developing tailored rehabilitation and reintegration programming for returnees that offer alternative narratives to individuals like Suhejla, who has found a way to achieve a sense of personal significance and fulfilment in a "normal" life by addressing the underlying issues that drove her toward extremism. There is a universality in her journey, in that it reflects the human search for significance and the lengths to which people will go to find belonging, and it underscores the need for comprehensive, trauma-focused support for all returnees.

# Iman

*From Faith to Disillusionment*

## Introduction

Iman's journey was set in motion by her deep sense of faith and longing for purpose. She grew up in a traditional rural Bosnian family, religious but not strictly so. For example, her parents were supportive of Iman as she explored her religious identity, but they were uncomfortable with her decision to wear the hijab and later the niqab, as this departed significantly from their more moderate lifestyle.

Academically gifted, Iman was at the top of her high school class and received international recognition for her poetry writing, an achievement that set her apart from her peers. She enrolled in university. Yet, her life took an unexpected turn when, at age 18, she met a much older man through Facebook. Despite the strong reservations of her parents, Iman married him after only a short time and moved to Gornja Maoča – a village known as a center of strict Islamism in BiH – to become his second

wife. At the time, Iman was a typically rebellious teenager who desired independence, and this drove her decision-making. But once she had opted for a certain path, such as the one leading her to Syria, she was bound to it partly because returning home would mean facing the disapproval of her parents and having to acknowledge that they had been right, and that she had made a mistake.

Iman was only in Syria a short time before any illusions she had harbored were swiftly dismantled by the brutal realities of life under ISIL. The pervasive violence, authoritarian governance, and suffocating control were a stark departure from the devout religious community she had been led to believe awaited her. Women like Iman were relegated to very strict domestic roles, their lives dictated by rigid expectations, while under the constant threat of violence. After the death of her first husband, with whom she had a son, Iman remarried a Bosnian man who subjected her to severe physical and sexual abuse. The marriage was marked by such cruelty and domination that it left her emotionally and physically empty, and she struggled to care for her second child. Her sense of purpose, once so clear, had been reduced to little more than a fight for survival. Against insurmountable odds, Iman managed to escape with her children from the war zone and into Kurdish controlled camps, and finally return to BiH.

Her return, in 2019, was the beginning of a long and complex process of reintegration for Iman and her family. Though she faced no legal charges, she had to confront significant psychological and social challenges in order to rebuild her life. The trauma she suffered in Syria left deep scars, especially affecting her relationship with one of her children, and she struggled to balance the realities of her past with her need to move forward. Iman's story reflects the experiences of many women who left Europe to live under ISIL, only to find themselves trapped in a cruel and unforgiving regime. Her journey is one of persistence, adaptation, and an ongoing

search for peace in the aftermath of profound trauma. Her children, both born into the violence that fueled that trauma, can only begin to unpack what this will mean for them going forward.

## Family Dynamics

Recalling her early life, Iman characterized it as a time when her sense of self was evolving, shaped by family dynamics, cultural expectations, and her own inner conflicts. She described herself as more reserved during adolescence but said she had gained confidence as she developed into adulthood, explaining, "*When I was a teenager, I was much more withdrawn...*" The root of this seems to lie in part with her upbringing. Iman still has a tendency to withhold her feelings, and explained in her interview that, as a child, "*If something happened to me, like someone hurt me, I wouldn't talk about it. I didn't want to make a fuss*." This suggests that her reluctance to share personal feelings may stem from an emphasis in her family on emotional restraint and maintaining harmony, and the notion that expressions of vulnerability may disrupt social and familial cohesion.

A tension related to family communication was further illustrated in the way Iman remembered interacting with her mother, particularly regarding matters like love or sexual attraction, which Iman simply "*wouldn't talk to her about*." The emotional distance of her mother was matched by her father's authoritarian but often absent presence, and it is fair to say that communication within the household was stifled. According to her mother, Iman's father "*was always away… He didn't have much communication with the kids… He always wanted things done his way*." This combination of emotional neglect and rigidity played a key role in how Iman saw the world; contributing to her feelings of isolation and pushing her toward a search for community and belonging. And because Iman's father was less involved in day-to-day decision-making in the family, her mother was left to enforce family norms, including on the matter of reli-

gion. "*It was mostly my mom who had opinions on these things*," she told researchers, which exacerbated the tension between Iman and her mother, particularly during Iman's transition into wearing the hijab.

The relationships between Iman and each of her parents are worth examining through the lens of attachment. Attachment theory posits that early relationships with caregivers significantly shape an individual's interpersonal dynamics throughout life.[57] In Iman's case, her emotional restraint and reluctance to share her feelings points to an avoidant attachment style, which often develops when caregivers are emotionally distant or unresponsive to a child's needs, leading the child to believe that expressing emotions or seeking comfort will not be met with support. The emotional detachment of Iman's mother and the absence and authoritarianism of her father would have reinforced this avoidant pattern, influencing her coping mechanisms and emotional affect. Iman is highly self-reliant and her approach to interpersonal interactions is guarded, resulting from the early internalization that vulnerability may lead to rejection or disapproval. Her hesitance to speak about personal issues or "make a fuss" reflects the strategies of emotional suppression and self-containment that are characteristic of an avoidant attachment style.

Iman described her parents' marriage as one punctuated by occasional conflict over seemingly trivial matters, noting that her father was never violent but that arguments would often escalate unnecessarily. "*They would fight over small things… I'd wonder, why can't they just sit down and talk through it*?" Importantly, parental conflict does not need to become physically violent to negatively impact the emotional wellbeing and social development of children, especially if their exposure to it is frequent and the conflict goes unresolved.[58] And when parental arguments

57 John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 1., Attachment, 2nd ed (*New York: Basic Books, 1982); Mary D. Salter Ainsworth et al., *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1978).

58 Patrick T. Davies and Mark E. Cummings, "Marital conflict and child adjustment: An emotional security hypothesis," *Psychological Bulletin* 116, no. 3 (1994), 387–411.

escalate over minor issues, children can perceive the home environment as unstable, producing feelings of anxiety and insecurity. According to the Emotional Security Hypothesis developed by Davies and Cummings, these children may also develop heightened emotional reactivity and become overly attuned to potential sources of tension, which can further disrupt their sense of safety.[59] This can lead to the development of conflict-avoidant behaviors and maladaptive coping strategies, such as emotional withdrawal or suppression.[60]

Iman exhibits both emotional restraint and a clear reluctance to engage in situations that may lead to conflict. She portrayed her relationship with her parents, particularly her father, as one in which conflict resolution was difficult, and emotional validation was rare. Iman spoke candidly about her father's quick temper and her mother's habit of engaging in futile arguments: "*My dad would snap over small things. He wasn't violent, but his words were harsh… She'd argue, but then say, 'You're right,' and back off.*" The dynamic between her parents evokes traditional gender roles, with her father's authority ultimately unquestioned and her mother relenting.

Indeed, from the perspective of family systems theory, proposed by Murray Bowen (1978), the family dynamics described by Iman suggest a family hierarchy in which the authority of her father was largely uncontested. This structure, reinforced by traditional gender norms, ultimately results in compliance from other family members. Such compliance can be seen in the behavior of Iman's mother, whose habit of arguing but relenting is a demonstration of pseudo-mutuality – where outward conflict implies opposition but the deeper relational patterns of a family remain unchanged, leaving power dynamics intact.[61] It is possible her mother felt a sense of

59 Patrick T. Davies et al., "Child Emotional Security and Interparental Conflict," *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 67, no. 3 (2002).

60 Frank D. Fincham, "Understanding the Association Between Marital Conflict and Child Adjustment: Overview," *Journal of Family Psychology* 8, no. 2 (1994), 123–127.

61 Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1978).

isolation in her marriage, and developed a certain degree of emotional distance as a coping mechanism, for she described a household in which her husband maintained authority without discussion and exhibited both physical and emotional detachment from the family.

As an observer of these family dynamics, Iman was left feeling anxious about the potential for conflict. She trusted that her parents would always prioritize their children, remarking that, "*They always made sure we had everything*." Yet, she had an emotional response to their arguments, nonetheless: "*When someone raises their voice, you can't help but worry about what might happen next*." This unease and insecurity contributed to Iman's determination to find calm and control in her personal life, particularly through religion, as a counterbalance to her family environment. And her mother, conditioned to addressing any problems within the family by herself, sought no external support when she noticed changes in Iman's behavior; explaining, "*I never asked for help… I dealt with it on my own*."

## Religious Seeking

As a teenager, Iman initially found her outlet in sports. Handball offered her a sense of freedom and, as she put it, "*gave me joy… it was a release*." When she quit the sport abruptly, she cited scoliosis and the discomfort of wearing a back brace, but Iman revealed to researchers that she had in fact been sexually harassed during a handball practice – something she kept hidden, even from her mother. This appears to have been the real catalyst for her decision to wear the hijab. Unaware of Iman's experience with harassment, this choice surprised her mother, who explained, "*One day she just said she wasn't going to play handball anymore... and then she covered herself*." According to Iman, her mother was left to confront these changes without the support of her father, because she "*was the one who was more involved, since my father worked and was often away. He would be gone for a week at a time… and by the time he returned, he didn't really care*."

Gathering the resolve to wear the hijab at 17, despite her family's – and especially her mother's – objections, was a pivotal moment in the development of Iman's personal and religious identity. Her mother did not voice any explicit opposition to Iman's choice to cover, but did urge her to dress in a more modern style. "*My mom didn't have a problem with me covering*," Iman recalled, "*but she didn't want me to dress so loosely. She would pressure me to wear things [that fit me] more tightly*." This led to a tension between familial expectations and norms, and Iman's desire for self-determination; but she found her choice to wear the hijab increased her sense of agency and gave her greater control over her identity.

This is emblematic of the generational and cultural divides that commonly surface in families, often regarding matters of faith. For Iman, what felt like a lack of understanding from her mother in this context was a source of frustration: "*She never took the time to understand… it was always 'don't do this,' or 'don't dress like that'*." On top of this, Iman was never particularly close to her younger sister, which she attributed to the five years between them. "*Maybe five years doesn't seem like much, but there was a gap. I was already a teenager, and she was still a child*." This gap only widened after Iman got married, which left her feeling even more isolated from her family.

Iman's relationship with religion grew gradually and organically, rather than arriving suddenly in some sort of epiphany, and she considers her religion to remain rooted in the traditional Bosnian Islam she experienced in her childhood home. Her decision to wear the hijab and later deepen her religious practice was about personal choice, and about aligning her external identity with her internal beliefs: "*I wasn't the type to go out to cafes or clubs*," she told researchers. "*Over time, I just decided I wanted to cover*." Still, Iman acknowledged that a close friend of hers also had a significant influence on her decision-making in this regard. Her friend was already wearing hijab and the two would "*talk a lot about it*."

Iman would then "*check hadiths and verses… to see if what [this friend] said was true.*"

Coupled with experiences that made Iman feel unsettled within her family, she was increasingly aware of being "different" in the outside world, especially when she began wearing the hijab. This only intensified when she decided to wear the niqab. Iman recounted that people were both curious and hostile about her choice to cover, often staring at her in public; and while she initially found this disconcerting, she learned to handle it with humor and resilience, for example asking one couple if they knew her, "*because they were staring so intently*." However, she also experienced verbal harassment and was called names such as "Wahhabi," which upset her at first. Over time, she learned to let these comments roll off her back, in some cases even reframing them in a positive light – such as when she was called a "ninja" by some children: "*I just laughed… ninjas know how to fight, so I took it as a compliment!*"

This shift, from anger to acceptance, came as Iman grew more self-assured and more adept at navigating the complexities of her public identity, allowing her to adopt a new cognitive appraisal of the situation. According to Lazarus's cognitive appraisal theory, emotional responses are influenced by how individuals perceive and evaluate stressors. By reframing insults as compliments, Iman altered the meaning of the moment, reducing its negative emotional impact and transforming it into a source of empowerment.[62] This reflects a resilience that developed as she gained greater control over her emotional responses. For Iman, this process validated her religious seeking. Even the feelings that arose from her first encounters with discrimination vis-à-vis the niqab, she tied to religious fulfillment: "*It felt beautiful, like I had found myself… [there was] a sense of calm*."

62 Richard S. Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Still, Iman's choice to wear the niqab – driven as it may have been by her own agency – cannot be separated from broader gendered dynamics; particularly given how she herself framed the decision to move from the hijab to the niqab: "*My husband and I had the desire [that I wear niqab], so when the opportunity came, I wore it*." This highlights the pressures women face within patriarchal structures, where their autonomy is often negotiated within the confines of marital and cultural expectations. Ironically, Iman had married so shortly after high school and so soon after she began wearing the hijab, as part of a search for autonomy. Marriage, she thought, would offer an escape, a refuge, and a new chapter in which she could fully embrace the religious identity she had been pursuing. But this quick transition, from high school to marriage, only intensified the pressures she faced as well as her desire to assert more control over her life. She was deeply committed to her faith, but also deeply aware of the ways her religious identity set her apart, including from her family. The internal fulfillment she felt from her personal faith seemed to bring an array of external challenges and familial and societal pressures.

There was a very personal element to Iman's decision to cover completely, however, rooted in her own experiences of harassment and objectification. She recalled feeling unsafe and humiliated by having received unwanted attention from men. "*Before I covered, I'd had these experiences where men would slap me on the backside… and I thought, 'how degrading' …but you can't say anything; they'd just assault me right there in the street*." This underscores the gendered reality that women are unable to defend themselves against public harassment without fear of retaliation. For Iman, wearing the niqab represented a way of reclaiming a sense of safety and control in public spaces: "*When I'm covered, I feel safer… if a man looks at me, it's not in [a sexualized] way*."

The niqab thus functions as a physical and figurative barrier, limiting the male gaze and reorienting the type of attention directed at Iman. By cov-

ering, she is able to move through public spaces without feeling sexualized and objectified. Reflecting on this, she again raised her experience with harassment when she played handball, recounting, "*I used to train, and I had this figure… and I'd get unwanted attention, like men calling out to me or touching me, and it made me so uncomfortable.*"

In this context, the choice by Iman to cover can be seen as an act of agency, in response to a culture that hypersexualizes women's bodies, and yet holds women responsible for the actions of men. The niqab becomes a tool for navigating and controlling this environment. Then again, this still places the onus on women to modify themselves in order to avoid male attention, rather than addressing the male entitlement at the root of the problem. Iman's decision, like that of many women (for religious and many other reasons), was to alter her public appearance as a means of self-protection; a choice that is both a personal safety strategy and a clear reflection of social structures that burden women with the responsibility for how men behave.

## Becoming a (Second) Wife

On an individual level, the decision to marry at such a young age will always represent a significant turn, but for Iman – who became a second wife at the age of 18 and simultaneously adopted the niqab – this new life particularly confused her sense of agency. Marriage brought with it new dynamics, and Iman surrendered much of her independence to her husband, relinquishing some hard-earned autonomy. By agreeing to be a second wife, Iman entered a household in which her husband held significant power over her. Though she had made the decision to cover, to embrace a life aligned with her religious convictions, in marriage she handed her agency over to a man who had his own expectations of her as a wife. He increasingly influenced her decisions, and Iman's choices were less and less her own. When she moved to Gornja Maoča, her life became

even more restricted, and the niqab became less a form of self-protection and more part of a pattern of submission, as her husband's authority extended into most of her life.

This relinquishing of her autonomy in marriage contrasts sharply with Iman's own description of her empowerment through religion, and hints at a conflict between her desire for self-realization and the bounds imposed by her relationship. Through this lens, Iman's framing of why she chose to wear the niqab may reflect a form of feminist symbolic empowerment, in which outwardly conforming behaviors are reinterpreted as expressions of personal strength and resistance to social pressures.[63] Of course, gendered power dynamics play a crucial role in this, and it therefore makes sense to consider Iman's religious and personal choices as a function of Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, which suggests that individuals internalize social norms that define their roles and expectations and interpret these constraints as personal choices rather than external impositions.[64]

In other words, Iman's perception of what makes a good wife and religious devotee are almost certainly influenced by gender norms that informed her willingness to relinquish certain freedoms in order to fulfil her role within marriage. She talked of meeting her husband online, and of a relationship that blossomed through extended conversations about religion and shared values, offering her a sense of security and emotional support for which she had longed. Her husband, eight years her senior, was calm and caring, qualities she deeply admired. Even when tensions arose, "*He never raised his hand to me… he was always saying, 'Let's sit down and talk about it, don't get angry'*." The contrast between Iman's relationship with her husband and father is stark, and the equanimity she found in her husband provided her with a sense of peace that she deeply craved.

63 Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (Routledge, 1990).

64 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Polity, 2001).

Iman's choice to marry as a second wife raises some important questions about the degree to which women in plural marriages have agency or are responding to patriarchal pressures. While proponents of the practice argue it can provide economic stability and emotional security in certain contexts, critics highlight its correlations with spousal abuse, early marriage, and other violations of women's rights. There is also the issue of conflict between and among wives, as plural marriages can force women to compete for resources and attention from their husband, who is typically the family's main provider. This can undermine cooperation and solidarity among wives, resulting in power imbalances and constraints on their autonomy, limiting or outweighing any benefits of the practice.[65]

## The Journey to Syria

The lives of Iman and her husband's first wife took a dramatic turn when he expressed a desire to join the conflict in Syria. Iman had only just moved into his home and was unsure about the idea, but her husband was determined, and eventually persuaded her to join him despite her doubts. She was unaware at the time that she was pregnant, and said later, "*If I had known… I might not have gone*." This speaks to her internal conflict over the choice, and the pressure she faced to support and comply with her husband, even when his decisions clashed with her own instincts. But on top of this, Iman feared returning to her family and facing their judgment. She was so unwilling to admit her error and have her family "*throw it back in [her] face*" that she traveled to Syria.

This decision had a profound impact not only on Iman but also on her family. Her sister struggled with the discrimination and rejection that came with suddenly being known as "the sister of the girl who went to Syria." Iman's mother was also in emotional turmoil: "*Somehow, you find*

65 Bola Lukman Solanke et al., "Polygyny and Resources for Empowerment and Equality in Anglo-Phone West Africa: Implications for Childbearing and Women's Well-Being," *European Scientific Journal* 14, no. 17 (2018), 174–194.

*the strength… but there were days when I'd fall into a depression… It all piles up to the point where you feel like you're going to lose your mind. It has been a constant struggle*." Her words reflect how the trauma of one person's radicalization can ripple through a family, as explained through family systems theory – wherein families are interconnected emotional units in which the stress of one member impacts the entire system.[66]

Iman's family by then included her husband, and her story is one shaped by loyalty, youthful naivety, and powerful religious and ideological convictions. At the time she departed with him to Syria, she was still quite young, only 18, and had yet to solidify her sense of identity or fully assert her autonomy. In discussing her decision to join her husband in traveling to Syria, Iman explained that she felt distrustful of her family, who had not supported her choice to marry. Her mother in particular had urged her to prioritize her education over her new marriage: "*My mom kept saying, 'Just get a divorce, it doesn't matter how you dress, just stay in school'*." In fact, her parents tried almost everything to convince her to return home from Gornja Maoča, promising her that her religion was of no matter to them. But as Iman put it, she "*didn't trust their words*." Despite their continued involvement in her life (her family visited Iman and her husband, and they maintained communication), there was an underlying tension in their relationship.

At the same time, Iman's husband framed his decision to travel to Syria as one of duty and moral responsibility, akin to role played by foreign soldiers who came to BiH to help Muslims during the Bosnian War. Iman recalled, "*He said, 'You can't just sit back and watch other Muslims suffer; I have to go and help*'." Thus, Iman explained, "*there was no question about going [to Syria]. We were following the news and were in contact with some Bosnians who had already gone there, and it was like they just changed our minds. Something happened, and he wanted to go there to help Muslims in*

66 Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*.

*need*." At first, she was skeptical: "*He was determined to go, and I kept asking, 'How can you be sure it's 100% true, what they're telling you?' I didn't know.*" But Iman was young, and did not yet know she was pregnant, so "*I decided to follow him. I kept thinking, if I go back to my family, they will constantly remind me of what I did, that I got married [when I should not have] and that they were right*." This choice was made easier by the rationalization her husband offered, rooted in a sense of "religious obligation" and a desire to contribute to a larger humanitarian cause, which drove many individuals to the conflict zone.

Interestingly, Iman admitted in interviews that she continued to have strong reservations about traveling to Syria, even as she was *en route*. In fact, in Turkey, just before crossing into Syria, she recalled having such a strong urge to return home that she contemplated contacting her family to let them know where she was. By that point, however, she feared this contact could endanger them: "*I was scared they'd get arrested, or worse*." This moment, in which Iman felt the pull of her family against the weight of her husband's choice-making, highlights the internal conflict she experienced within her marriage and the way this eventually served as a trap. That said, Iman did have some agency in this decision and acknowledged that her husband would have been unlikely to force her to go, if she had refused.

It is hard to know exactly what Iman knew about the illegality of the actions she took alongside her husband when they traveled to Syria. She was fearful about calling her parents, worried it could put them in legal trouble, but claimed she was unaware that joining the conflict was illegal: "*I didn't know, [or] not until later… I didn't know when we left, and I'm not sure if he did either*." If Iman did lack awareness about the potential criminality of their actions, she would be among the many women who have traveled to conflict zones without fully understanding the legal implications.

Though Iman said her husband would not have forced her to go to Syria, once the decision was made, she said the journey was largely out of her control, dictated by her husband's resolve to join the fight. The process of traveling to and crossing into Syria was highly organized, requiring them to know someone on the ground near the border: "*You had to have a Bosnian there to greet you and arrange housing*." This illustrates the networked nature of foreign fighters and their families in ISIL-controlled territory, who relied on a series of connections to facilitate their integration into life there.

During her time in Syria, Iman communicated sporadically with her family, who pleaded with her to return. "*They said they'd send money, whatever, just come back*." But the practicalities of leaving felt almost intractable to her: "*You couldn't just do it alone... you needed to know the right people*." And so, she braced herself for the horrors of war and initially encountered a life with a semblance of normalcy, albeit within the confines of a highly militarized zone. Iman reflected on those early days, explaining, "*We lived a normal life… because we weren't directly at the frontlines*." The dissonance this created was soon unsettling for Iman, though, as she was physically distant from the violence but mentally consumed by the awareness that danger was never far away.

Iman and her husband were near the border for some time: "*He was part of the 'Kiribati unit', which basically means guarding the border. There wasn't much going on, you just sit there; and I think he did that for maybe a year or so*." But, she explained, *"suddenly, he decided he wanted to go to the battlefield, where the real fighting was happening. What could I say? 'Don't go?' He would have gone anyway*." She remembered feeling off-kilter in that moment, recalling the sense that "*you don't even know where you are or what's going on, you're both empty-headed and full of thoughts at the same time, and you can't find a way through it. He told me, 'I'm going,' and I just sort of thought, 'Well, go then*'."

Iman's resignation could be seen as part of a pattern within her family of patriarchal authority, internalized and replicated. Her acquiescence, and even ambivalence, to her husband effectively limited her ability to influence decisions that significantly impacted the family.[67] In Syria, this meant that her husband eventually joined the fighting while Iman was confined to the domestic sphere, caring for their child and navigating life in an unfamiliar and volatile environment. As a result, as her husband's role in the conflict intensified, she felt increasingly isolated and helpless. Iman, like many women, watched the war slowly erode her relationship with her husband as he grew ever more detached from their life together. "*He became… emptier, as he was seeing the bombs and grenades. He would often just sit there and get lost in thought. You'd call him, but he wouldn't respond, as if he wasn't there. It wasn't that he stopped loving me, but when I'd ask, 'Tell me what's wrong,' he would say, 'I don't want to talk about it'*."

When her husband died, Iman was moved to a *madhafa*, a guesthouse for widows and their children, where her basic needs were met but her autonomy was severely impeded. The strain of living in the *madhafa* was substantial; Iman described women left to cope with decisions made by the men in their lives, forced to survive in an environment where strongly gendered expectations were placed upon them and individual agency was often subordinated to the collective ideology of the group. In this context, life became much harder, but Iman demonstrated considerable resilience. One of the most difficult aspects was the dislocation, driven by the chaos of conflict: "*The worst part was when we had to move. You hear that they've taken an area, and you need to relocate*." According to Iman, this "*constant uncertainty [meant] not knowing where or how*" she and her son would live.

These were hardly conditions in which Iman could process the loss of her husband, though on some level, perhaps she had already conceded

67 Naila Kabeer, "The Conditions and Consequences of Choice: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," UNRISD Discussion Paper No. 108, August 1999.

to the inevitability of his death, as she recounted having anticipated it in dreams in which "*he wouldn't come back… [and] someone would come to tell me that he wouldn't return*." Her initial reaction was thus a stoic acceptance. "*You're just emotionally drained*," she explained, "*it didn't hit me the way it would now… but later, it caught up with me… I missed him*." This delayed grief suggests that her mind and body, initially focused on survival and unable to manage the depth of her emotions, allowed these unresolved feelings to resurface once the acute danger had passed, finally enabling her to experience a more typical grieving process.[68]

## The Journey Back Home

Life in the *madhafa*, following the death of her first husband, eventually took such a psychological toll on Iman that she decided to remarry, out of desperation. "*The madhafa became too stifling*," she recalled, "*I thought, 'just marry and get out'*." This was also a choice made by other widows in ISIL territory, who found their options extremely limited, particularly because the group's manifesto explicitly outlined the expectations of women, emphasizing their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers from as young as nine years old.[69] Under these conditions, (re-)marriage was not so much a personal decision as a means of assimilating to the group's rigid gender norms.

For Iman, the decision to remarry further exacerbated internal tensions arising from her desire for personal agency and a life structured by patriarchal norms. Moreover, her remarriage did not provide the respite she sought, as her new husband grew violent. Iman described him as "*very aggressive*," and said he would hit both her and her son, who was not even

68 Donna M. Wilson, Leah Underwood, and Begoña Errasti-Ibarrondo, "A scoping research literature review to map the evidence on grief triggers," *Social Science & Medicine (1982)* 282 (2021).

69 Heather Saul, "Life as a woman under Isis: Document reveals for first time what group really expects from female recruits living in Syria and Iraq, 5 February 2015, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/life-as-a-woman-under-isis-document-reveals-for-the-first-time-what-group-really-expects-from-female-recruits-living-in-syria-and-iraq-10025143.html

two years old at the time. "*He couldn't accept that my son was always by my side… he's a baby, what do you expect?*" The child, who lost his biological father, naturally clung to his mother, but Iman's second husband saw him as an unwanted burden.

Iman offered some insight into her second husband's abusive behavior, linking it to a cycle of violence from his own upbringing. "*He learned that from his family*," she claimed, adding that "*his father was violent... He probably has trauma from that*." Initially, Iman saw no signs of her husband's violent nature, "*but as time went on, it started to show. He'd explode, insult me, and so on*." There may indeed be links between exposure to domestic violence in childhood and cycles of violence in adulthood.[70] And the aggression Iman observed in her second husband may reflect a very real generational transmission of trauma, wherein the violent behavior of his father created a blueprint for his own interpersonal relationships.

Notably, Iman admitted to researchers that her second marriage was loveless. "*I didn't really feel much from my side*," she said, describing compulsory intimacy and lack of desire. She said she entered relations with her second husband "*without any will… everything felt forced*," though she insisted she never experienced any direct physical coercion from him. Still, she argued that "*you can't love someone who is aggressive and angry, especially when they've raised their hand against you*." This suggests that Iman was subject to a more subtle coercion through emotional manipulation, which often goes unnoticed in abusive relationships. In fact, sexual coercion can take many forms. The aggressive behavior, emotional distance, and underlying hostility of Iman's second husband created conditions in which she had no desire for intimacy but felt refusal was not

70 See: Richard J. Gelles and Murray A. Straus, "Violence in the American Family," *Journal of Social Issues* 35, no. 2 (1979), 15–39; John W. Fantuzzo and Wanda K. Mohr, "Prevalence and Effects of Child Exposure to Domestic Violence," *The Future of Children* 9, no. 3 (1999), 21–32; and Alireza Doroudchi et al., "Psychological complications of the children exposed to domestic violence: A systematic review," *Egyptian Journal of Forensic Sciences* 13, no. 1 (2023).

an option.[71] This type of coercion repositions consent as a mere formality rather than a genuine choice, and underscores how sexual autonomy can be compromised by abusers.[72] The psychological toll of this coercion can be profound, and women like Iman often feel trapped in cycles of violence, guilt, and self-blame.

Iman did consider ending her second marriage, explaining, "*I wanted to leave him, but he convinced me to stay, to wait until we could escape to Turkey*." She was desperate to flee ISIL territory, and the knowledge her second husband had of the language and local networks thus complicated her decision. As Freedman has highlighted, this is the impossible choice that often faces women in conflict zones, where leaving an abusive relationship could mean losing the little protection and resources they have.[73] And, given how perilous the escape from ISIL territory into Turkey was, particularly because Iman was pregnant at the time, her choice to remain with her husband may truly have protected her. She described a harrowing escape during which the family was smuggled through various means: "*I was holding my son, riding on a motorcycle with my husband… praying we wouldn't be caught… One minute on a motorbike, the next in a truck, hiding in houses. I was so scared; I thought I'd never see Bosnia again*."

The risk of being caught by Kurdish authorities was high, and Iman feared being arrested, detained, or even killed. In the end, they were detained and separated by gender so that "*men went to one prison, women to another*." In the prison, Iman recounted hearing the sounds of other women being tortured. "*They would take a woman out at night and beat*

71 Some women may also lack an awareness of their right to refuse sexual intercourse, especially within marriage. See: Majda Halilović, Aner Zuković, and Nejra Veljan, *Mapping online extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Findings and Reflections* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2019).

72 Shaun Miller, "Sexual Autonomy and Sexual Consent," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Sexual Ethics*, edited by David Boonin (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

73 Jane Freedman, "A Gendered Protection for the 'Victims' of War: Mainstreaming Gender in Refugee Protection," in *Making Gender, Making War*, edited by Annica Kronsell and Erika Svedberg (Routledge, 2012).

*her… I still jump at every little noise*." The trauma of these experiences is evident in Iman, who struggles with hypervigilance, a common symptom of PTSD.[74] Her later transfer to Al-Hol camp, a place infamous for its overcrowded and under-resourced conditions, would only deepen this trauma.

## A Detour to Al-Hol

Despite its geographic separation from the war zone, and even though Iman was only there for several weeks, Al-Hol forced Iman into a constant struggle for basic necessities, as her access to money and food was precarious. Even meeting women from the Balkans whom she knew previously in Syria could not provide her any real solace in Al-Hol. Their reunion offered some emotional support but still occurred within the harsh confines of the camp, which was marked for Iman by an ever-present fear of violence. As she described it, internal policing by women who continued to adhere to the ideology of ISIL produced an environment with a pervasive lack of trust and widespread paranoia. According to Iman, these women rationalized violence by deeming people *kafir* (non-believers), such as in "*cases where they set fire to the tent of someone who irritated them, claiming 'they are kafir' and therefore it was halal (permissible) to take their life*."

It is clear that the cumulative psychological strain of escaping Syria, being imprisoned, and surviving the brutal life of the camp have had long-term consequences on Iman's mental health. She remembers life in Al-Hol as one of terror, hardship, and deprivation, exemplified by her experience of giving birth without proper medical facilities or adequate support. "*I was terrified I'd have to deliver by myself in the tent*," she told researchers.

74 See: Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror* (Basic Books, 1997); and Tina Sideris, "War, gender and culture: Mozambican women refugees," *Social Science & Medicine* 56 (2003), 713–724.

With only minimal assistance, she delivered a baby boy, with whom she has struggled to connect, ever since.

This highlights the mercilessness of Al-Hol; a place where intra-group violence has mirrored the internal hierarchies found in ISIL and other radicalized groups, instrumentalizing the fear of denouncement and relying on internal self-regulation. For instance, Iman recounted the ferocity with which women in Al-Hol enforced regulations prohibiting phones in the camp: "*You weren't allowed to have a phone, but we had them secretly. You'd… hide it here and there, but then someone would report you, and they'd come searching, conducting raids*." Iman had a phone and found she "*wouldn't sleep the whole night… just waiting*" for these enforcers to come to her tent. "*Next to me, a woman's tent was raided because someone reported her for having a phone… [and] they took her to prison*." Iman would finally get a couple hours of sleep when the dawn prayer was called, and the nighttime enforcers withdrew.

Iman emphasized the importance of visits by international organizations such as the Red Cross and other humanitarian aid agencies to Al-Hol, even if they offered only temporary relief. Healthcare services in the camp were basic, competent to provide antibiotics for a fever but unable to address anything more serious. On top of this, Al-Hol was often flooded and lacked even rudimentary infrastructure, conditions that were particularly challenging for women with children. It was, as Iman put it, "*a disaster*." The stress and malnutrition affected her physically, and she lost the ability to breastfeed. "*I could only breastfeed my younger son for a month… the stress, being so thin, [the milk] just stopped*."

Iman's relationship with her second child was already strained by his traumatic birth and her traumatic experiences in a war zone and in an abusive relationship with his father. Research shows that traumatized moth-

ers can be less sensitive, available, and involved with their children.[75] For Iman, her second child is a reminder of the violence of her marriage and the violence of war, and the child's origin is in fact intertwined with this trauma. This can lead to an emotional ambivalence in a mother that becomes a significant risk to the formation of a secure attachment. Furthermore, the stress of such trauma can be the cause of social isolation, which exacerbates the suffering for both mother and child.[76]

In Iman's case, when her second child was born, a hostile environment awaited her in every direction in Al-Hol. This inevitably affected her mental health, impairing her ability to bond with her baby.[77] Moreover, PTSD is a well-documented consequence of living in war zones, particularly among women who endure the physical hardships of conflict and intimate partner violence as well as the psychological burden of keeping themselves and their children safe and alive.[78] The long-term impacts of this within Iman's family highlight why it is so important that the deep psychological toll on both mothers and their children is considered in reintegration and rehabilitation programming for returnees.

## The Return to BiH

Though Iman found herself on the list for repatriation, delays kept her in limbo for weeks. Kurdish authorities had moved her to Al-Hol on the premise that she would soon be sent back to BiH, "*but something happened… the planes couldn't fly because of the fog or something… I started thinking there wouldn't be a deportation*." Her husband had been repatri-

75 Elisa van Ee and Jorin Blokland, "Bad Blood or My Blood: A Qualitative Study into the Dimensions of Interventions for Mothers with Children Born of Sexual Violence," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 23 (2019).

76 van Ee and Blokland, "Bad Blood or My Blood."

77 Mogesie Necho, Asmare Belete, and Yosef Zenebe, "The association of intimate partner violence with postpartum depression in women during their first month period of giving delivery in health centers at Dessie town, 2019," *Annals of General Psychiatry* 19 (2020).

78 Joop T. V. M. de Jong et al., "Lifetime Events and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in 4 Postconflict Settings," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 286, no. 5 (2001), 555–562.

ated a year before, and their divorce had done little to reduce his presence in her life, despite their physical separation and his imprisonment. When she returned to Bosnia, he had been persistent in contacting her, calling her daily after his deportation, notwithstanding ostensible limits on his communication. At first, she believed it was important for him to maintain a daily connection with their child, but when she told him this was too frequent, his rhetoric escalated, and Iman began to feel threatened. She cut off all contact with him; apparently, he had been calling "*from a private number, doing it illegally*," and when she told social services, "*they stopped the calls*."

In her interview with researchers, Iman spoke about the looming reality that her ex-husband would be leaving prison, sharing that she is "*worried about his release… [and] about the problems he might create*." She was resolute that her son not visit his father in prison, but feels her ex-husband has a right, even an obligation, to cultivate this relationship once he is no longer incarcerated. Still, the prospect of coexisting with her ex-husband weighs heavily on Iman, and she speculated that he could be prone to violence again in the future. "*Considering all the trauma… it's possible*," she reasoned.

As a woman returnee, Iman was not subject to the criminal prosecution or imprisonment her husband has faced. Still, she complained that she and other women returnees were not clearly informed that they were being treated as witnesses during the questioning they underwent. This lack of transparency by the authorities significantly eroded her trust in them: "*They didn't tell us what [the questioning] was about. We didn't know what to expect*." Iman expressed frustration that she has been asked to identify men allegedly involved in ISIL-related activities, especially given her limited contact with any of the individuals she was said to have known.

The stress of these demands by authorities compounded when Iman's identity was exposed in the media. "*Our names were public, our identities exposed… meanwhile, the 'protected witnesses' remained anonymous*." Her rehabilitation process was disrupted as she grew consumed by the implications of her now-public involvement in criminal proceedings, and she told researchers that this lack of protection had a considerable impact on her confidence in the legal process. "*They told us we were witnesses only after our photos were publicly exposed*," she emphasized, "*…of course you lose trust when that happens, and we made that clear*."

For Iman, the legal system in BiH has not offered her a sense of justice or security. If anything, it has felt exploitive, particularly because she does not believe she witnessed anything of value in Syria. "*I wasn't on the battlefield, nor did I see who killed whom. I was at home… I can only testify about myself and the one housewife I saw…; but I never saw her husband, and I don't even know what he looks like. Women and men didn't mix*." Along with the exposure of her identity, this sense of Iman's that she is unreasonably being treated as a witness has left her feeling unsupported, and skeptical of legal authorities. Many women returnees also express a fear of repercussions. In other words, testifying may serve the cause of justice but must be balanced by these women against various perceived risks.

It is important to note, too, that a psychiatric evaluation concluded Iman was not mentally fit to act as a witness. This raises the question of whether the legal system could have taken a different approach to supporting Iman and other women returnees, to better foster a climate in which they felt safe enough and were deemed stable enough to participate. Indeed, it has not only been Iman's treatment as a witness that has fed her distrust of legal and judicial authorities since her return. One of the most troubling aspects of Iman's reintegration has been her experience with the justice system as she tried to add her children to the country's birth registry. The court repeatedly delayed her case with requests for witnesses and doc-

uments, while failing to send notifications of critical appearances. This speaks to broader concerns about how returnees, particularly women, are treated by institutions that should be facilitating their reintegration, especially given research highlighting the importance of efficient legal and social services for returnees in order to mitigate long-term detrimental effects on their ability to rebuild their lives. Iman's view of the court as hostile extends from actions of the judge in her case, who repeatedly cancelled hearings and demanded unnecessary documentation, creating conditions that made her feel further marginalized and exacerbated her feelings of anxiety about the uncertainty of her future and that of her children.

Throughout this process, Iman's primary source of support has been her family, particularly her mother; but she also benefits from treatment by mental health professionals and commented that she feels "*at home with them*." The fact that she can rely on her family and on structured support systems is positive for Iman, as studies have demonstrated that strong familial relationships and access to mental health services significantly aid the healing for individuals who have experienced trauma.[79] However, families are complicated, and Iman's relationship with her father always remained distant. When she tried to discuss her experiences with him, she says he would "*just start his own story, about how he was in the war. 'You are not unique', etc., etc*."

Iman has managed to speak about her time in Syria with her mother, even if she has avoided going into details. According to Iman's mother, after several of these conversations veered into Iman's ideology and ended in arguments, she has stopped discussing Iman's beliefs. She has accepted that Iman has adopted a certain lifestyle; now, the only boundary she asserts has to do with Iman returning to the extremist community where she lived with her first husband. Her mother has made it clear that such

79 Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 2 (2008), 166–191.

a choice would sever their relationship permanently: "*I told her, I helped you through what you did once, but a second time, I wouldn't do it. No matter what, I wouldn't do it again. My only concern is for the children, to make sure no one mistreats them. If it came to that, I'd take them myself.*" This reveals the emotional toll of Iman's past decisions on her family. While her mother has shown some degree of resignation in accepting Iman's religious conservatism, she draws a firm line when it comes to the possibility of her daughter returning to the radicalized environment of Gornja Maoča.

Iman's relationship with her younger sister now rests on a combination of emotional distance and acceptance that allows the two to maintain a peaceful coexistence, despite the strain of Iman's choices. This was not the case when Iman first returned. And while they are "*on good terms*," they avoid discussing any aspects of Iman's radicalization, having come to an unspoken understanding that has facilitated their reconciliation by setting aside the need to confront any deeper issues. Iman's sister, who initially struggled significantly with Iman's decisions, has learned to focus on her own life and tends to engage with the family in more practical than emotional ways, though she does help care for Iman's children.

Meanwhile, Iman's father – who had slowly begun to build relationships with his grandchildren – passed away recently. As she explained, he had especially grown closer to the older boy and often planted things with him in the garden. Establishing a bond with the younger boy was more difficult, and this has been a challenge for her mother as well, because he is so attached to Iman. "*We try to take him on weekends*," Iman's mother explained, "*but he won't go*." The younger boy faces some developmental delays that have made communication difficult, and his grandmother's concern for his speech development is clear: "*I told Iman to take him to a speech therapist*." According to a psychologist working with Iman, the boy "*wasn't born with disabilities*," but delays have appeared over time. As

a result, Iman's younger son, now six, has not been enrolled in school, while her older son, aged eight, attends regularly.

As Iman contemplates her future, including her employment prospects and education, she cannot escape the conflict that arises between her religious identity and her desire to participate in public life. "*If the opportunity for a job comes, and they ask me to remove the niqab, I would agree; it's not a problem*," she says. This is notable given her commitment to the niqab and its place in her identity. In her view, her family would be pleased if she removed it, particularly for practical reasons like employment, noting that "*they would be happy… but it's not that simple*." However, her mother appears to see the issue through a very practical lens and has real worries about how the niqab affects Iman's opportunities to provide for her children, asserting that so long as she wears it, "*she has no possibilities to earn for her family*." Like many returnees, Iman faces the challenge of reconciling her religious identity and personal beliefs with societal norms. She has acknowledged her mother's concern and the limitations posed by wearing the niqab, but views it as a source of strength that has helped her cope with past traumas, and remains deeply committed to her faith.

## The Reintegration Process

Iman wants to return to her education but struggles with concentration and memory. "*I start reading something and get lost halfway through*." This is one of the ways that the trauma of a returnee's past experiences can complicate their reintegration into social systems like education and employment. So, rather than returning to university, Iman has been considering a vocational course in tourism, seeking a manageable path forward and one that accommodates her current limitations while allowing her to develop skills for the future. This pragmatism reflects what some studies have found; that tailored educational opportunities which take into ac-

count the psychological and emotional needs of each returnee contribute to more successful rehabilitation outcomes.[80]

Iman's likelihood of a success in her rehabilitation is helped, too, by the fact that she is wary of ever living again under a regime like the one she experienced in Syria. "*I wouldn't want to live in a place ruled by Sharia law again*," she told researchers. Her views on governance and religious conservatism are complicated, but her negative experiences under ISIL rule have made her cautious about any Sharia-like system. At the same time, Iman is aware of the broader Western discourse on women's rights and religious freedoms and is concerned about the potential for future restrictions on wearing the hijab or niqab in public spaces in BiH. "*I'm most afraid of losing our religious rights… like in France, where women are banned from wearing the hijab in universities. If you allow other things, like freedoms for [LGBTQ+] populations, why shouldn't this be protected as well?*" Iman's fears about the potential erosion of her religious rights in increasingly secular or restrictive environments are shared by many religious people. But for women returnees, living at the intersection of identity, obligation, and expectation, rights often feel like a rarity and restrictions feel all too familiar. Iman is willing to make necessary compromises, but she is constantly attuned to the internal conflict between her beliefs and the realities of reintegration, between her personal identity and societal assimilation.

Women returnees from ISIL territory must navigate this tightrope as they work to reintegrate into societies where their outward expression of faith may be met with discrimination, or even legal restrictions. This is hard to do, and Iman has come to see her experiences over the past decade with greater nuance as she confronts the complexities of rehabilitation and reintegration, even candidly acknowledging the futility of the choice to go to Syria. "*[W]e gained nothing. We only harmed ourselves*." This is an

80 Eugene Guribye, "Communal proactive coping strategies among Tamil refugees in Norway: A case study in a naturalistic setting," *International Journal of Mental Health Systems* 5 (2011).

example of the way individuals in the reintegration process must come to terms with past choices and their consequences, and Iman's ability to do so underscores the importance of the psychological and social support she has received since her return.

Even so, Iman is still navigating a complex moral landscape in reconciling the past and was unwilling to characterize events that took place on the battlefield, or foreign fighters, in a particularly negative light: "*I don't know who did what over there… maybe they were defending themselves*." This ambiguity indicates that Iman has yet to fully confront the atrocities committed by ISIL, including by foreign fighters, and suggests that her process of rehabilitation requires a deeper engagement with questions of accountability.[81] Indeed, for Iman, a similar ambiguity extends beyond the battlefield to the practicalities of her life in the conflict zone, such as to the houses her family occupied after the families who lived there were displaced; about which she commented, "*If you think about it… in every war, there's looting and occupation*." Iman's tone suggested a detachment from her past actions, and from their effect. "*I don't think any of us… knew whose houses we were living in*."

It is not uncommon for individuals who did not directly participate in violence but were part of a system that caused widespread harm to employ a lack of awareness or avoidance of responsibility as a defense mechanism, to protect themselves from anxiety and psychological discomfort. Defense mechanisms function unconsciously, allowing individuals to maintain emotional stability and self-esteem by distorting reality to reduce cognitive dissonance or shame.[82] Rehabilitation programming must account for these layers of cognitive dissonance, to help returnees un-

81 Bart Schuurman and Liesbeth van der Heide, "Foreign fighter returnees & the reintegration challenge," RAN Issue Paper, November 2016.

82 Mariagrazia Di Giuseppe and J. Christopher Perry, "The Hierarchy of Defense Mechanisms: Assessing Defensive Functioning With the Defense Mechanisms Rating Scales Q-Sort," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021); and Psychology Today, "Defense Mechanisms," https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/defense-mechanisms (accessed 10 November 2024).

derstand and take responsibility for the broader impacts of their involvement and presence in a war zone.

In fact, fostering personal accountability is a crucial part of rehabilitation for individuals who have participated in or have been associated with violent groups.[83] Psychological counseling, narrative therapy, and group discussions about personal responsibility can all offer crucial support to returnees like Iman as they confront the ways their choices, actions, and inactions touched others. Narrative therapy, in particular, has been noted for its effectiveness in helping people reframe their personal stories in a way that acknowledges both the harm they have done and their capacity for change.[84] Given research showing that individuals who have experienced prolonged exposure to violence or coercion, like Iman, often compartmentalize their experiences as a coping mechanism, it is essential that returnees are supported in reconciling traumatic memories and emotions in order to take full personal accountability for their actions and engage meaningfully in reintegration.

Education and legal counseling are also important in helping returnees understand the consequences of their involvement with extremism. Programs that provide returnees with knowledge about international law, human rights violations, and the impact of extremist violence encourage deeper engagement with the moral implications of their actions. By placing their experiences within a broader socio-political context, returnees may better grasp the scope of the harm caused by groups like ISIL, as well as their role, however indirect, in supporting extremist violence.

Iman does not hesitate to admit that she made a mistake by living under ISIL rule. "*If I could go back in time, I wouldn't have gone… I wouldn't have*

83 See: Peacebuilding Initiative, "Transitional Justice: Transitional Justice & Peacebuilding Processes," 2009, http://www.peacebuildinginitiative.org/indexf0e6.html?pageId=1883 (accessed 10 November 2024).

84 Virginie Andre, Onni Sarvella, and Nejra Veljan, *Priručnik za praktičare o psihičkom blagostanju povratnika* [Handbook for practitioners on the psychological wellbeing of returnees] (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2024).

*experienced the trauma and stress I went through*." She carries a sense of regret and loss, particularly regarding the missed opportunity to raise her first child in BiH, which alludes to the long-term impact of her choices not just on herself but on her family. She still struggles with the intrusive memories and panic attacks triggered by her experiences in Syria. But because she sought therapy when she returned to BiH, mental health services have played a critical role in helping her manage her trauma and reintegrate into society. Nonetheless, the psychosocial challenges she faces will require sustained and specialized support.

Importantly, Iman expresses a sense of resilience and feels capable of caring for her children: "*I think I have enough strength. Over there, it took ten times more strength, and if I could survive that, I can handle it here*." This resilience is a key to successful reintegration, but it must be reinforced by consistent support. In this way, Iman's story underscores the critical need for long-term, comprehensive rehabilitation programs that not only address the psychological aftermath of war and extremism but also help returnees rebuild their lives and reconnect with their families. Her life in BiH exemplifies many of the challenges of rehabilitation and reintegration, particularly for women who return from conflict zones, even though she benefits from strong family support and structured psychosocial services.

For instance, she faces gendered expectations related to her appearance and stereotypes because she wears the niqab. It can be hard to determine whether this has hardened her sense of religious identity, or whether that identity has hardened her own view on gender roles and appropriate dress. But her continued reverence for Salafi preachers like Elvedin Pezić and Safet Kuduzović, both of whom are known for advocating very conservative views on gender, demonstrates the degree to which this ideology remains central to her identity. These figures often advocate for a

narrow role for women in the public sphere;[85] and Iman appears to have internalized this messaging. "*It's unnatural for women to work in certain jobs*," she told researchers, "*It's best for women to work as teachers, caregivers, or doctors*."

This framing allows Iman to align her views with the Salafi belief that the primary role of women is to shape younger generations and care for older ones, while also adapting to her own circumstances, pragmatically placing women in the professional sphere but in jobs that do not threaten the gender roles assigned by her conservative ideology. That said, her openness to removing the niqab for employment, if necessary, reflects the complexity of this issue, as well as her flexibility in navigating between her faith and societal pressures. Iman is deeply committed to her religious identity but understands the practical limitations this can pose, and the internal conflict this produces has forced her to confront a spectrum of contradictory feelings about gender, faith, and modernity.

## Conclusion

Iman's case highlights the need for gender-sensitive reintegration programs that address not only the trauma and psychosocial needs of female returnees but also the ideological influences shaping their understanding of gender and social roles. In fact, it is crucial that rehabilitation and reintegration efforts consider the ways that deeply ingrained beliefs about gender can facilitate or hinder the ability of women returnees to reintegrate. Women like Iman have travelled a difficult journey, literally and figuratively, to return home from conflict zones. They need tailored support that addresses the unique challenges they each face, not just as women returnees but as individuals.

85 Halilović, Zuković, and Veljan, *Mapping Online Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*.

For Iman, psychological support and the role of social services have been vital. Asked what she would tell policymakers and professionals working with returnees from conflict zones, she emphasized the need for early psychological intervention. In her experience, "*it's equally important for women and children to go to therapy*." This is a view backed by research on trauma recovery, which highlights the necessity of mental health support for any individual who experiences prolonged exposure to violence and instability. The focus of this support should also extend to the broader family unit, taking a holistic approach to rehabilitation.[86]

As Iman has found, however, it can be complicated to involve and depend on family members during the reintegration process. While her family has welcomed her return and has generally been quite accepting of her, some relationships have posed challenges. This was particularly true with her father, who was unwilling to acknowledge or engage with her experiences in the war zone. The inability of Iman's father to confront her choices and actions is not uncommon in the families of returnees, though; and in a post-conflict society like BiH, can be layered with generational traumas. This underscores the value of extending psychosocial support and programming to the family members of returnees, early in the reintegration process.

86 Derrick Silove, Peter Ventevogel, and Susan Rees, "The contemporary refugee crisis: an overview of mental health challenges," *World Psychiatry* 16, no. 2 (2017), 130–139.

# Leila

*Between Two Lives*

## Introduction

As she spoke, Leila clutched her bag tightly and shifted uneasily in her chair. She shared how distressed she felt about discussing her time in Syria, explaining that she had been anxious the night before just from the thought of revisiting these experiences. With assurances that she could decline to answer any distressing questions, the conversation began on lighter subjects such as her children, her life, her schooling, and how she manages her daily responsibilities. This was meant to foster a sense of comfort and trust, but despite the interview having been carefully planned in advance with her social worker, Leila was clearly wary, perhaps the result of multiple interviews with Bosnian security services.

Leila described herself as quiet, withdrawn, and somewhat naïve, traits she said she has observed in her son as well, noting that she would like to change these qualities in herself and in him. She described her late hus-

band as quite the opposite, very open and direct. Leila acknowledged that she didn't always appreciate this straightforwardness, especially when it hurt her feelings, but portrayed him as someone who always spoke his mind no matter who it offended.

In part, it was this clarity of mind that made him so seductive to Leila, who accompanied him to Syria at the age of 18. In this way, she charted a different path from many other women returnees, most of whom went first to the Salafist enclave in Gornja Maoča. Leila instead made the decision to leave directly from her hometown, an industrialized Bosnian city, after her first husband introduced her to Salafism and persuaded her to depart with him to Syria.

Thinking back on this time, Leila conceded that she had been young and impressionable and had failed to fully consider the gravity of this decision. She had been immature and uninformed, she told researchers; and driven more by an emotional dependence on and desire to please her husband than by any ideological conviction. This reflects what Moaveni has argued, that external influences can play a key role in shaping the decision-making of young women who travel to foreign battlefields.[87] It appears that specific environments and social contexts are indeed pivotal to determining the paths some young people choose when seeking to assert or explore their identities.

Now, with the perspective of time, Leila takes no pride in her decision to go to Syria and sees it as a mistake. Specifically, she regrets having been party to anything that had such negative impacts on women and children. "*Why should women and children suffer, when we could live in peace and our children could be educated?*" Her focus as a returnee is on guiding her children to the right path, and ensuring they have access to education and opportunities.

87 Azadeh Moaveni, *Guest House for Young Widows: Among the Women of ISIS* (Random House, 2019).

## From Home to Syria

According to Leila, her childhood was generally positive. Her parents were not overly strict and hoped their children would be successful, placing a strong emphasis on education. Leila said her mother had always encouraged both her and her older sister to complete their schooling and put off marriage until at least their late twenties. Yet, Leila married much earlier, while her sister – who is now married and has a child – focused first on her education and career and married at the age of 32.

Recalling her childhood, Leila commented that her early expectations for the course of her life were quite different from how things turned out. She fondly remembered trips to the seaside in Croatia, where she and her sister would travel with their father in the summer. And though she described her relationship with her father as emotionally distant, characterizing him as a typical "Balkan man" and thus disinclined to express his feelings, she was very close to her sister, in whom she found emotional support and understanding. Beneath these pleasant memories, however, lay a much more difficult reality. Her father was abusive toward her mother and would periodically disappear for extended periods, leaving the three of them—Leila, her sister, and their unemployed mother—in a state of instability and financial hardship. Despite the weight of these early experiences, Leila expressed a strong determination to create a different kind of life for her own children. Yet, the decision to go to Syria remains a source of deep regret and something that continues to haunt her. In retrospect, Leila frames her decision to elope at 18 as a rebellion against her parents' disapproval of the man she loved. She explained that the more her parents tried to control her, the stronger her desire grew to assert her independence. Yet, even now, looking back, she speaks warmly of her first husband, calling their relationship harmonious and describing him as supportive, saying, "*He was always there for me*." To marry him was to assert her autonomy and agency indisputably; to define herself beyond familial expectations. In many ways this is the work of adoles-

cence, the questioning, reflection, and either rejection or reaffirmation of values internalized during childhood. This is why adolescence is the period during which the pre-existing identifications of a child with parental and societal values may undergo significant transformation as they define their adult identity.[88]

In choosing to marry early, and then by adopting practices like wearing the niqab, Leila was constructing a personal identity that may have contradicted her family's values, but which felt authentic to her own beliefs and desires. Leila noted that her parents were initially angry about her marriage but never severed ties with her, commenting, "*No matter how much a child might make mistakes, a parent will always forgive*." Despite the violence her mother had endured in the marriage and the instability caused by her father's periodic absences, Leila's parents—especially her mother—still chose to maintain a relationship with him, and ultimately with Leila as well. In this sense, their capacity to forgive extended beyond Leila's choices and reflected a broader, complex, family dynamic. And so, in many ways, Leila's story is less about her rebellion and more about the enduring nature of parental love. As attachment theory posits, strong emotional bonds between Leila and her parents seem to have prevailed despite conflict, as reflected in her statement that a parent will always forgive. This kind of unconditional love, and the acceptance that grows from it, are not only important in developing secure attachments but in healing from trauma.[89]

Just a month after their wedding, Leila and her husband left for Syria. He believed life would be better and more fulfilling for them there, and when reality diverged from these expectations and they wanted to return, it was impossible. With the borders closed, they were trapped. As time

88 Tilmann Habermas and Christin Köber, "Autobiographical Reasoning is Constitutive for Narrative Identity: The Role of the Life Story for Personal Continuity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Identity Development*, edited by Kate C. McLean and Moin Syed (Oxford University Press, 2015).

89 Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

went on, Leila began to resent him for this; and then in 2019, her husband disappeared, never to be heard from again. Hence, Leila is grateful that she and her children were ultimately able to return to BiH. Since then, Leila described having moved on: her children are in school, and their past in Syria is gradually becoming more distant. "*It almost feels like a dream*," she explained, "*something that's fading away the more I focus on the present and don't talk about it anymore*." Three years after returning, when it had become clear to her that her husband would never return, Leila remarried.

Leila's experience highlights the complexities of how agency and influence can intersect, and how personal relationships – rather than ideology alone – can drive young women to make life-altering decisions.[90] In her case, this influence came both from figures she encountered online and her husband, and even after the passage of time, she was reluctant to share all the details. She acknowledged that she had been young, naïve, and deeply in love when she married, and that her husband, ten years her senior, had made the decision they should go to Syria. She said his reasoning had not entirely made sense to her, but she had trusted him fully.

Leila now believes that she and her first husband could have lived a comfortable life in BiH, had they not become convinced their future would be better elsewhere. When asked how she would respond if someone suggested she go to Syria now, her response is blunt: "*I'd say, 'Are you crazy? What's wrong with you?*'" She framed her decision to do so at 18 as a function of youthful ignorance, both to the act itself and to any repercussions. She told researchers that when she discovered she was pregnant in Syria, her naivete was such that she had no way to fully grasp the reality of becoming a mother in such a precarious environment, particularly because conditions were relatively stable then. "*It was peaceful*," she explained, "*but later, the situation changed*."

90 Moaveni, *Guest House for Young Widows.*

Leila found the most challenging aspect of her time in Syria was the isolation of being cut off from her parents and sister, who she missed deeply. But she never gave much consideration to the values promoted around her by ISIL and claimed in her interview that she "*was too young to understand or think about the purpose or the goals*" of the organization. She was reticent to discuss this topic at any length or to revisit this time, remarking that she "*lived that life already, and it doesn't interest me anymore*." Moreover, she noted that distancing herself from that chapter of her life has made it easier to move forward and that when she does sit with old memories, it stirs up old emotions, leaving her feeling unsettled. This was common among the women interviewed for this research – many of whom described themselves as oblivious to what was happening in Syria during the time they lived there or even suggested they were unaware of the atrocities committed by ISIL fighters – indicating that they have yet to bridge the disconnect between their own narratives and the full extent of brutality that took place on the ground around them.

It was not just the environment of violence that shaped the reality in which women like Leila lived, but also the cultural norms by which they were expected to abide. For example, while Leila characterized her relationship with her first husband as one marked by love, highlighting his role as her protector even after they moved to Syria, his decision to take a second wife was deeply painful for her. Leila struggled with sharing her husband and said she openly expressed discomfort about this to him. She told researchers that he tried to be fair and did his best to fulfil his responsibilities to both wives and families, but hinted that this was nevertheless a source of ongoing pain for her.

Plural marriage can present various challenges for a woman and her children, and polygynous families can experience problems including jealousy between co-wives over the husband's affections and resources.[91]

91 Ismail Shaiful Bahari et al., "Psychological impact of polygamous marriage on women and children: A systematic review and meta-analysis," *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* 21 (2021).

Research has also found that children from polygamous families tend to experience more "mental health disorders, scholastic difficulties, and social problems" than their peers from monogamous families; but that "the position of the mother within the family is an important variable affecting women in polygynous relationships," and the extent to which this impacts their children is not well documented.[92] Navigating the complexities of these dynamics can be especially difficult for younger women who have not been raised around the practice of plural marriage.

For Leila, who acknowledged that polygyny is permissible in her faith, experiencing it firsthand left her uncertain that any man can truly maintain equity among multiple wives in today's world. She argued that many men take on additional wives without meeting the ethical demands to which this obligates them. And though she contended that her husband made a genuine effort to be fair, Leila said it was never easy to be part of a plural marriage, and she would never participate in one again. She told researchers that she maintained a civil relationship with her husband's second wife, for the sake of the household, but found it impossible to be genuinely close. When their husband disappeared, they lost contact, and while Leila expressed a willingness to reconnect so that their children – who are half-siblings – can know each other, she had not had any communication with them at the time.

The experience of living in Syria left a clear and lasting impact on Leila, who now places the wellbeing of her children above all else, prioritizing their stability and safety as she rebuilds her life and theirs. Parallel to this, she has had to rebuild trust with her parents and sister, who suffered immensely in the years following her decision to go to Syria. As Leila described it, her mother bore the deepest emotional scars, perpetually consumed by worry. Indeed, many of the families of women who travelled to Syria lived in a constant state of fear for their safety. Parents desperately tried to maintain

92 Mohammad Al-Sharfi, Karen Pfeffer, and Kirsty A. Miller, "The effects of polygamy on children and adolescents: A systematic review," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 22, no. 3 (2016).

contact, sent money when possible, and persistently sought information from authorities about when, or if, their daughters would be repatriated. But these families carried a combined burden, as they were simultaneously confronting social stigma. They, and their community, had seen their daughters as virtuous members of society; but this perception had been upended. Suddenly, they found themselves faced with the public opinion that their daughters were criminal, or even terrorists.

This pushed families once regarded as upstanding community members into the social margins and subjected them to suspicion. The weight of this was profound, fracturing some families and leaving lasting scars on them all. Despite this, Leila credited her sister, who was initially shocked by her decision to leave for Syria, with fighting tirelessly for her safe return and ensuring that Leila was part of the first group of women to be repatriated to BiH. The crucial role that this unwavering support by her sister has played in Leila's reintegration underscores the powerful impact families can have in facilitating and supporting trauma recovery and readjustment for their loved ones.

## Shaping a New Identity

Leila did not disclose to researchers that she and her children initially lived with her first husband's family after returning to BiH. Social workers who visited her there said she was cared for by them, but when Leila later recounted her return, she began her narrative by stating that she had moved back in with her own family and had quickly adjusted to living with her parents again. By choosing to emphasize this return home to her parents, and omitting the fact that she spent time living with her in-laws, she may have been engaging in selective disclosure as a form of impression management.[93] For Leila, presenting herself publicly as someone

93 Erving Goffman, *The presentation of self in everyday life* (Doubleday, 1959).

who returned directly to her own family could serve as a way to distance herself from her former husband and their shared past.

It was that past and her first marriage which brought her two sons, both born in Syria, in 2015 and 2017. Leila remarked that the younger of these sons is so quiet, withdrawn, and shy, and speaks so little, that it worries her. This concern echoes the reports from social workers who met Leila upon her return to BiH, of one of her children exhibiting significant emotional distress. Notably, early exposure to trauma can alter the cognitive abilities of children, particularly in the regions responsible for language, communication, and emotional regulation.[94] On top of this, Leila and her son also share an anxious attachment style, which tends to be characterized by heightened emotional responses on the part of the child, such as excessive crying and temper tantrums, especially during separations between mother and child or when perceived threats to this relationship arise.

Children with this attachment style are often labelled as "clingy" and may exhibit contradictory behaviors, desperately pursuing comfort and safety, and then rejecting it. This inconsistency reflects the child's uncertainty about the emotional availability of their caregiver(s), which can lead to feelings of insecurity and confusion.[95] Anxious attachment typically develops when a primary caregiver is unpredictable in responding to a child's needs and can emerge when the caregiver is facing their own emotional turmoil, which impedes their ability to provide stable and consistent parental support. Though Leila has clearly prioritized the wellbeing of her children and has added two more to her family with her second husband, the consequences of the upheaval, trauma, and loss she and her

94 See: Katie A. McLaughlin et al., "Mechanisms linking childhood trauma exposure and psychopathology: a transdiagnostic model of risk and resilience," *BMC Medicine* 18 (2020); Janna Pickett, "Infant Language Development: The Consequences of Trauma," *Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology* 15, no. 2 (2020); and Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, "Supporting children and young people who have experienced adversity and trauma," *Giving Voice*, June 2021.

95 Douglas F. Goldsmith, "Challenging Children's Negative Internal Working Models: Utilizing Attachment-Based Treatment Strategies in a Therapeutic Preschool," in *Attachment Theory in Clinical Work with Children: Bridging the Gap between Research and Practice*, edited by David Oppenheim and Douglas F. Goldsmith (Guilford Press, 2007).

older children suffered have very likely influenced her relationships with them, and may also have contributed to the development of this attachment pattern with her son.[96]

Leila has no knowledge of what happened to her first husband, father to her elder sons, who was imprisoned somewhere in Iraq or Syria in 2019. Since then, she has had no communication from or with him. When asked how she would react if he suddenly reappeared, Leila hesitated, then replied that she does not allow herself to entertain this possibility. However, she acknowledged that his return would make their children happy. They often talk about him and wish he would come home, as they do not fully understand the situation.

In many ways, Leila has suffered a classic "ambiguous loss" with her first husband's disappearance. The concept, developed by Pauline Boss, captures the loss that occurs when a person is physically absent but psychologically present, or vice versa, resulting in a state of unresolved grief and uncertainty. Lacking any definitive closure about the fate of her husband, Leila has not undergone the emotional process typically associated with conventional losses. Instead, the ambiguous loss of her husband has "frozen" her in a grieving process that can never end, because the inherent ambiguity of the circumstances inhibits emotional resolution.[97]

This has led to emotional numbing in Leila, which is a common response to trauma and loss and acts as a protective mechanism by allowing an individual to unconsciously suppress feelings and thoughts that may trigger painful emotions.[98] She has carried this into her second marriage, which

96 Amy L. Busch and Alicia F. Lieberman, "Attachment and Trauma: An Integrated Approach to Treating Young Children Exposed to Family Violence," in *Attachment Theory in Clinical Work with Children: Bridging the Gap between Research and Practice*, edited by David Oppenheim and Douglas F. Goldsmith (Guilford Press, 2007).

97 Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* (Harvard University Press, 1999).

98 Brett T. Litz and Matt J. Gray, "Emotional Numbing in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Current and Future Research Directions," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 36, no. 2 (2002).

she described as merely "*okay*" and said was supportive but lacking the passion she once felt for her first husband. "*It's not really that kind of love*," she added, explaining that she is much more guarded in this relationship.

Leila also said that she still struggles to help her sons cope with the absence of their father. They frequently ask about him, and Leila tells them that he's not here right now, but "*maybe one day he'll come back*." She explained that she tries to reassure them by focusing on what they do have: "*I remind them that they have me, that they have everything they need… except for their father's love, but I do my best to fill that gap*." While Leila's desire to provide emotional stability and security for her sons is undeniable, her frozen grief and the ambiguity that surrounds her first husband's fate has shaped the way she frames his absence to them, potentially creating confusion that undermines their ability to develop a coherent understanding of their family dynamics.

When caregivers are unable to validate a child's reality and fears or provide adequate support in the aftermath of traumatic events, it can have lasting harmful effects on the child's emotional and psychological wellbeing. This is because young children rely on their caregivers to help them make sense of distressing experiences and losses, and to guide them in regulating their emotions. Yet, caregivers who are themselves overwhelmed, traumatized, or emotionally unavailable, like Leila, may struggle to do so. If, as a result, a child is not supported in processing their emotions, their sense of security may be affected as well as their ability to form healthy relationships well into the future, and they are also at higher risk of developing anxiety, insecure attachment, or behavioral issues.[99]

It is also not uncommon for parents to seek treatment for their children, to address experiences they recognize as traumatic, never having

99 John Bowlby, *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds* (Tavistock Publications, 1979); John Bowlby, *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development* (Basic Books, 1988), esp. 99–119.

processed other significant family events such as divorce or the loss of a loved one as similarly traumatic for their children. This creates a situation in which new traumas have accumulated atop unresolved past traumas, intensifying the child's distress and disrupting their capacity to build secure, trusting relationships, which can weaken the caregiver-child bond to the detriment of the child's emotional recovery and resilience.[100] In order to fully acknowledge and address the layers of trauma impacting her older children, Leila may need to progress further in her own emotional recovery and process of reconciliation.

## Choosing Pragmatism

Leila's decision to marry her current husband was driven largely by the practical desire for financial security, as she was unable to make ends meet despite receiving some support from her in-laws. Reflecting on the decision, she told researchers that if she had been financially stable, she probably would not have remarried. "*I wanted to help myself and my kids*," she explained, "*we didn't have any income*." The marriage has indeed provided her with some financial relief, but it is hardly a conventional arrangement. During this marriage, Leila gave birth to two more children, expanding her responsibilities as a mother while still navigating the emotional and logistical challenges of a long-distance and largely solitary domestic life. She and her husband live separately, and he visits about once a month from Serbia.

Although her husband only visits occasionally, Leila has grown accustomed to this and said she feels supported by her parents, especially her mother, who helps her manage the household and care for the children. Leila appreciates that her marriage does not disrupt her daily routine and

100 Alicia F. Lieberman, "Attachment, trauma, and reality: Clinical integrations in the treatment of young children," in *Attachment Across Clinical and Cultural Perspectives: A relational psychoanalytic approach*, edited by Sonia Gojman-de-Millan, Christian Herreman and L. Alan Sroufe (Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2017).

allows her primary focus to remain on her children. That said, she did attempt at one time to travel to Serbia to be with her husband and was denied entry at the border. She found the experience confusing, recalling it as very unpleasant and unsettling, and was left uncertain about the reasons she was not permitted to enter.

Leila shared little about her relationship with her new husband, making it difficult to understand the precise nature of their arrangement. She noted that he lives in Serbia with two children from a previous relationship, but when asked if he has a wife there as well, she claimed not to know and seemed unbothered by the possibility that he might, saying, "*We don't talk about those things.*" Though she had expressed at another time in her interview that she would never participate in a plural marriage again, Leila also said that she may be willing to stay with her husband even if he does have another wife, for the sake of her children. Taking a pragmatic approach, she argued that the physical distance between her and any second wife would make it easier for her to tolerate such a marriage.

This response was inconsistent with her previous statement, but consistent with the emotional detachment Leila exhibited generally and the dispassionate way in which she spoke about her second marriage. She appears to have constructed an emotional shield to protect herself from further instability after the profound uncertainty and ambiguous loss she experienced with her first husband. Leila's expectations and understanding of marriage have also shifted, and she no longer places the same value on emotional intimacy, prioritizing practical aspects of her marriage instead; an adaptation that is not uncommon in survivors of trauma.[101] This may enable her to avoid facing realities of her current relationship that would otherwise cause her discomfort or distress. At the least, she is able to maintain a semblance of emotional safety and avoid becoming

101 Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*.

vulnerable to further disappointment or betrayal by conceding to a certain degree of ignorance about her new husband's life.[102]

The largely long-distance arrangement between Leila and her husband relieves some of the pressure on her older sons to develop anything more than a functional relationship with their stepfather. She characterized their relationship with him as "*normal*" though not particularly close, "*nothing extraordinary, but fine*." Leila emphasized that it is her priority to maintain a stable environment for all her children, but added that when he visits, her new husband fits into the dynamics of her family quite well. Her parents and sister have apparently been supportive of the marriage, welcoming him into their lives without issue.

## Rebuilding a Life

Leila conveyed that she has no friends in her town, and said her life revolves around caring for her children, who are at an age when they require a great deal of attention. To run errands, she relies on her mother's assistance, as her toddler is full of energy and always on the run, while her youngest is still a baby. Leila came across to researchers as a woman burdened, but did not complain about her situation, expressing little frustration. She has learned to navigate the complexities of motherhood in a suburban area outside of her hometown with creativity and resourcefulness. "*I've got my license, thank God*," she remarked, "*At least I have that!*" This seemingly small achievement marks a significant victory in her life, as it has provided her the mobility she needs to keep up with the daily routines and needs of her family, by borrowing her sister's car. This borrowed car represents more than just a means of transportation for Leila; it is a lifeline that enables her to maintain a sense of autonomy.

102 Ibid.

Despite her relative isolation, Leila rated her experience with the community and school system as overwhelmingly positive since her return. Initially, she was concerned about how her children would be treated in school, especially given their unique background and the stigma associated with returning from Syria. But she expressed relief that these fears have not borne out, and her children are thriving. She attributed this in part to the understanding and open approach of their teacher, who has engaged with Leila in a way that makes her feel comfortable discussing any issues as they arise. Although she acknowledged that there were certain topics about which she had yet to speak in detail with the teacher, she said she was prepared to do so if necessary.

The support of this teacher, and the relationship they have built, have clearly been meaningful to Leila. This kind of positive experience in the community, especially given Leila's initial anxiety that her sons would face rejection in school, can be a vital factor in the rehabilitation and reintegration process. It can help mitigate the heightened sensitivity to potential judgment and rejection that is sometimes rooted in hypervigilance in individuals who have endured prolonged trauma or social isolation. In combination, the weight of these past experiences and the social stigma Leila now faces can cause her to be overly attuned to perceived negative reactions, making her hyper-aware of disapproval or exclusion. Positive interactions with teachers, counselors, and other professionals who exhibit a vested interest in supporting her reintegration and that of her children act as a counterbalance to this, to some degree.

The trust Leila has built with the teacher is important, too, because Leila acknowledged feeling unsure about the capacity of the younger of her two sons born in Syria – who she described as so shy he hardly speaks – to manage in school. She mentioned to researchers that she has wondered if he may have a learning disability, but has not explored this further; though, interestingly, she did not raise the possibility that his behavior

could be linked to trauma stemming from their experiences in Syria or from the deprivation they endured while living in a refugee camp. This suggests that Leila may not yet fully recognize or be able to face the emotional impact of these past experiences on her children, and even that her focus on building a stable future for her family is preventing her from processing and reconciling some of the traumas that continue to impact her children. Indeed, she was open about the fact that she dislikes talking about her past, particularly her time in Syria.

In many ways, Leila's second marriage marked a break from that past. Her second husband was not involved in the previous chapter of her life. He works in moving services and provides for her family while requiring relatively little of her on an emotional level. Moreover, the infrequency of his visits offers her a modicum of spare time, during which Leila enjoys reading, especially religious texts, which bring her comfort. Although she said she lacks any close friends, largely due to the demands of motherhood, she does maintain occasional contact with some other women who returned from Syria.

Many of these women are likely to hold Leila's Salafist beliefs, which she explained her family members do not share. For example, her mother practices the much more moderate, traditional Bosnian form of Islam, which Salafists have characterized as a deviation from the "true" path of the religion. Within BiH, this ideological divide has led to tensions between the broader Islamic community and adherents of Salafism. The presence of parallel but deeply divergent narratives of Islam in the country has intensified existing distrust and friction in Bosnian society, undermining a legacy of unified local Islamic practice and community cohesion.[103] Yet, in Leila's family, they have agreed to disagree. She does not speak to her mother about their religious differences, and her parents seem to have accepted Leila's Salafist identity. Her decision to wear the

103 Majda Halilović, Aner Zuković, and Nejra Veljan, *Mapping online extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Findings and reflections* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2019).

niqab was at one point a source of tension with her parents, especially with her mother, who "*just didn't think it was the right thing*," Leila explained. Nevertheless, Leila felt a strong personal need to adopt the practice, and her parents have learned to live with it.

Leila is also supported by her older sister, of whom she spoke fondly. They communicate regularly and often lend a hand to each other in various ways, such as when Leila needs help with her children. Although her sister took a more conventional path and married later in life, Leila emphasized that she is also unconditionally accepting. This unconditional love and help she receives from her family has been invaluable to Leila. When asked by researchers about this support, she replied that she had just left her children with her mother to do the interview, adding that her parents assist her with whatever she needs, whenever she needs it. Leila also maintains contact with her late husband's family, ensuring her children can visit and spend time with their paternal relatives. She shared that her sons had recently spent two weeks with them in Kakanj, a village they love, where the children enjoy the countryside as well as the attention lavished on them by their grandparents.

It is clear Leila has a reliable network of family support. This is of the utmost importance as she works to overcome past traumas and move through the processes of rehabilitation and reintegration.[104] By all accounts, her relationship with her family is strong and positive, and the willingness of her parents to step in and provide help as needed makes them a crucial source of stability. Notably, her family also appears to be supportive without being domineering, which allows Leila to feel empowered to make her own choices. This is significant because the social cognitive theory of posttraumatic recovery suggests that social support

104 Casey D. Calhoun et al., "The role of social support in coping with psychological trauma: An integrated biopsychosocial model for posttraumatic stress recovery," *Psychiatric Quarterly* 93, no. 4 (2022).

is most effective when it helps individuals utilize or develop their own internal coping skills.[105]

Importantly, Leila's family does not challenge her autonomy but still represents a source of security, which is crucial for trauma survivors. Effective social support of this kind can encourage the use of adaptive coping strategies and reduce avoidance in survivors of trauma, ultimately reducing the symptoms of PTSD and promoting active recovery. The approach of Leila's family underscores the value of maintaining supportive engagement that fosters resilience.

In Leila's case, this has included her family's acceptance of her choice to wear the niqab. However, Leila acknowledged that, while wearing the niqab makes her more comfortable, it may also limit her employment opportunities. She has focused all attention on her children since her return, and so long as they are still young will not be seeking work, but told researchers that, if circumstances changed and she needed to provide for her children, she would consider *not* wearing the niqab. "*For my children, I will always do whatever is necessary*."

**Finding the Way Forward**

According to Leila, she and other women returnees found it difficult to deal with various state and municipal agencies and authorities upon their return. The process caused them considerable anxiety, and they feared possible arrest. The stress took a toll, and Leila says she was among many women returnees who relied on medication to cope, in the early days of their return. Indeed, the psychological complexities of reintegration for women returning from conflict zones are considerable. For this reason, it has been valuable for women returnees to maintain contact among them-

105 Ibid.

selves, and activities organized within rehabilitation and reintegration programming have therefore been aimed at strengthening this network.

Although Leila did not participate in some of these support activities during the COVID-19 pandemic or her pregnancy, she remains in touch with other women returnees and told researchers that they often talk about how they can support each other in their reintegration processes. She noted the significance of being heard in this way, particularly in the context of helping future returnees, and said it is essential that the reintegration framework continues to be improved, to ensure that women and their children are welcomed back into society with their needs fully met. She underscored that psychological support is crucial, for women and children returnees, and that women who remain in the camps – with whom she occasionally speaks – are in an extremely poor mental health. They are desperate to leave and return to a normal life.

Leila expressed gratitude that an effort has been made to understand her experience and those of other women, as this helps clarify what is working and what can be improved. She also articulated her appreciation for support she received from social services. Though this is now limited mostly to the provision of school supplies for her children and child benefits, she previously received psychological support for herself and her son as they dealt with the trauma of their experiences in Syria. These counseling sessions helped tremendously, particularly to help Leila resolve the nightmares and emotional stress she faced upon returning. But as she built a new life with new responsibilities and a focus on the future, she decided she no longer needed therapy. She described this new phase of her life as a fresh start and a new beginning. This framing has allowed her to very consciously move on from her past and concern herself with paving a new path forward for herself and her children.

Eventually, Leila told researchers, this will mean living independently from her family. She appreciates their help but recognizes that space in their home is becoming tighter as her children grow. The need looms for a larger home, especially as her younger children start school and require space for studying. This will be a priority for Leila, who's youngest child is a daughter, to whom she said she will emphasize the importance of education. She wants her daughter to finish school, attend university, and have a plan for her life before thinking about marriage. Based on her own experiences, Leila has come to realize how vital an education is; and like so many parents, she hopes her children will achieve what she could not.

This focus by Leila on the education of her children aligns with research suggesting that some individuals respond to a loss of agency (such as marrying young) by developing a strong dedication to empowering their children, to help them avoid a similar path.[106] By emphasizing education with her daughter specifically, Leila is encouraging the self-development and autonomy that may have served to prevent her own early choice-making, which led to feelings of disempowerment and lack of control. Though Leila said she has given little thought to returning to school herself, she noted that she may consider doing so when her children are older, and she has more time to focus on her personal goals.

For now, Leila finds joy in supporting her children, and comfort in the simple things. Nothing is more important to her than the wellbeing of her children. "*I hardly think about myself*," she admitted, though she knows this mindset is not necessarily balanced, adding, "*I know I should prioritize my own health too, but my children come first*." And thus far, Leila's focus on her children is paying dividends; they have had positive experiences in school, with her eldest son doing quite well and both sons fitting in without any problem. Still, she is convinced that their past is not

106 Dan P. McAdams and Kate C. McLean, "Narrative identity," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, no. 3 (2013).

widely known among her children's peers, and said she hopes this will not become an issue in the future.

Along with their regular schooling, Leila's children also attend religious education classes. They are not learning what some of the strictest Salafist adherents advocate, but Leila is content "*as long as they learn the basics*." What is important to her is that they receive an education which includes both secular and religious elements. This shows some flexibility in her religious thinking and in how she interprets and integrates Salafism into secular Bosnian society. Perhaps this reflects the fact that Leila's understanding of religion, as she described it, is built on knowledge she said came quickly and unexpectedly, transforming her from someone who "*didn't know much about religion*" into a Salafist, almost overnight. She maintained a deep commitment to this interpretation of Islam during her time in Syria, but says she no longer follows some of the preachers or teachings to which she adhered then. Though she reads books about the companions of the Prophet when she has time, religion no longer plays such a central role in her life.

Nonetheless, Leila also mentioned that she still feels as though she does not belong in some social and secular settings. "*I have boundaries*," she explained, which include avoiding environments where alcohol is consumed, for instance. At the same time, the multiculturalism of BiH means Leila feels a particularly strong sense of belonging in circles of women who dress modestly and share similar beliefs. She has learned from her experiences, however, to value moderation and balance, and does not think an extreme or overly rigid system of religious imposition is justifiable. "*I don't think we need to go too far*," she remarked, adding that the goal is to find a middle ground where life can be lived in equilibrium. "*What we had [in Syria], that was too much*."

Leila shared that she feels she has finally achieved this balance for herself. "*I've managed to find that middle ground*," she said, having built a life in which her faith coexists with the realities of secular society. This sense of moderation brings her peace, regarding both her personal beliefs and the broader society around her. That said, she emphasized to researchers that she is willing to "*fight for [her] children*," suggesting that she still fears their potential isolation or exclusion as "other" due to their childhood experiences in Syria. Despite this, and the many hardships of parenting four young children, Leila remains optimistic. "*Everything will pass, and the kids will grow up*," she noted with a smile. Then, with her thoughts on her children, she glanced at the time and felt the pull of motherhood, commenting, "*I've been gone too long*." With her baby still nursing, she explained, "*I can't be away for too much time*."

## Conclusion

Despite the stigma of returning from Syria, and the trauma she and her sons endured there, Leila's determination to create a stable life for her family is evident. Yet, a failure to adequately address the trauma she and her children suffered could risk undermining these efforts. Indeed, effective reintegration must go beyond logistical support and focus on the deeper psychological needs of both mothers and children over the long term. In Leila's case, her commitment to seeking mental health support has diminished in recent years after she initially received psychological counseling. This has left traumas unresolved that could prove to be obstacles to her progress or stability in the future. Rehabilitation and reintegration programs should therefore encourage and facilitate a long-term commitment to counseling and should provide trauma-informed care that considers the impact of complex trauma on parenting, recognizing that a caregiver's capacity to support their children is directly linked to their own emotional health.

This kind of long-term psychosocial support must also be available to Leila's oldest sons, who have experienced conflict and displacement and bear psychological and emotional scars from their time in Syria, shaping their development and wellbeing. Targeted and continuous trauma-informed interventions that help both mothers and children process their experiences, construct a shared trauma narrative, and restore a sense of security can help families like Leila's achieve lasting stability. The Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP) framework offers a valuable model for teasing apart and making sense of these intertwined traumas. By supporting children and mothers in creating a shared trauma narrative, CPP helps integrate fragmented memories and emotions. This allows children to better process their experiences, and it can strengthen their relationship with their mother. Such an approach not only promotes the rehabilitation of chil-

dren but also provides a space for mothers like Leila to reflect on their own trauma, enhancing their caregiving capacities.[107]

This is important because mothers are often expected to care for their children even when their own psychological capacity is compromised; and yet, a mother's unresolved trauma impedes her ability to effectively care for her children and leads to further disruptions in their attachment and emotional regulation. In Leila's case, and in the case of all women returnees, the strain of undergoing their own rehabilitation and reintegration processes while balancing motherhood is significant. This can lead, as it has with Leila, to the prioritization of practical parenting tasks over the intense psychological work of confronting past traumas. As Leila strives to rebuild her life while remaining emotionally present for her children, it is no wonder that she would rather avoid some of her own unresolved trauma. This highlights the need for longer-term support for women returnees to balance caregiving with their own self-care and self-development, to ensure they reconcile conflicting identities and ideologies, and past experiences.

107 Busch and Lieberman, "Attachment and Trauma."

# Selma

*A Journey of Faith, Love, and Patience*

## Introduction

Faith has always been a central part of Selma's life, which she described as deeply rooted in her family's history. Both sides of her family have been religious, featuring a lineage of hajis and imams, and Selma was raised in a household where religion was not just a belief system but a way of life. Her family took pride in being able to practice and live as Muslims. However, this practice was situated within the traditions of Bosnian Islam, which differ significantly from the Salafist practices Selma later adopted.

The customs of Selma's family, and of the religious community in which she was raised, reflect a time when religion was more of a private, family matter. In traditional Bosnian Islam, women did not wear full cover, there were no plural marriages or Sharia judges, and believers had no aspirations to transform society into a theological regime. In this way,

Selma took a radically different path in terms of her values, lifestyle, and world view.

Selma continues to remain firmly dedicated to many tenets of Salafism; though, in her interview, it was notable that she also exhibited a willingness to criticize some of its key elements. For example, she spoke in decidedly disapproving terms about polygyny, and said she would never participate in a plural marriage. Her own marriage appears to be based in true love, and she spoke frequently, warmly, and wistfully about her husband, who was detained in a prison somewhere in Syria at the time. She looks forward to his return to BiH, and seemed to see this as a benchmark moment when life will again have meaning and color.

Her focus on this vague future date has prevented Selma from being fully present in the now, which has limited the benefit she can receive from rehabilitation and reintegration programming. That said, she has successfully supported her children through what has been, by all accounts, a relatively smooth transition into Bosnian society and schools. Her oldest son struggled for a time, but all her children have now integrated quite adeptly, and her daughter makes friends with ease. Hence, it is all the more crucial that Selma engage in the kind of self-reflection necessary for her to meaningfully confront the implications of her own past choices and actions, lest her own emotional avoidance begin to affect her children emotionally or hinder the remarkable progress they are making.

Selma is representative of the fact that rehabilitation and reintegration, on an individual and family level, are not linear processes. Yet, a child's ability to heal in this context is inevitably impacted by the willingness of their parent(s) or caregiver(s) to face their own traumas, grapple with their own guilt, and commit to reentering society. Therefore, if Selma continues to prioritize her children, she will eventually find herself having to choose between the needs and welfare of her children and her own

emotional coping mechanisms. Frontline practitioners must be prepared to support and guide women returnees through the mental minefield this opposition presents.

## A Legacy of Self-Reliance

Selma described herself to researchers as an introvert, remarking that, "*Since childhood, I've always loved my own space, and people would enter it from time to time, but I never liked forming deep relationships*." Yet, her interactions with interviewers were hardly introverted; she was open, expressive, and engaged, sharing her thoughts readily and often initiating new strains of conversation. This highlights how an individual's perception of self can sometimes diverge considerably from how they are perceived by others, and in that, invites discussion of self-discrepancy theory. Introduced by psychologist E. Tory Higgins, the theory posits that people hold a variety of self-concepts: the *actual self* (how a person sees themselves), the *ideal self* (how they wish to see themselves), and the *ought self* (how they think they should behave based on societal or familial expectations).[108] Selma's identification as an introvert may reflect her sense that an ideal or ought self is reserved, while her behavior reveals her actual self to be more social and expressive.

Selma also characterized herself as strong-willed and self-sufficient, arguing that there is no room for weakness in life, a mindset she learned from her widowed mother – who had to care for her small children during the war in BiH while navigating the challenges of internal displacement. Selma framed her own strength in generational terms, and as central to how she sees herself. "*My identity – being a capable, resourceful, strong woman – these are qualities that were somehow passed down from generation to generation. My grandmother raised her children on her own, and my mother did the same*." This history of self-reliance by women in Selma's

108 E. Tory Higgins, "Self-Discrepancy: A Theory Relating Self and Affect, *Psychological Review* 94, no. 3 (1987).

family was a point of pride for her. "*[W]e cannot wait for someone else to take care of things for us.*"

Selma's self-identification as strong-willed and capable due to the values and example of her mother and grandmother reflects a pattern observed in family systems therapy, according to which family beliefs and behaviors are passed down through generations to shape how individuals view themselves and the world.[109] The narrative of Selma's family is one of adaptation to adversity, particularly during the war in BiH, reinforcing qualities like resilience and independence. In this case, her mother's experience of raising children alone as a refugee closely mirrored the experience of her own mother (Selma's grandmother), further intensifying this inter-generational transmission of strength and self-sufficiency. This has thus become core to Selma's identity, leaving little room for vulnerability but strengthening the cohesion of the family system, in which values and expectations are passed down as survival mechanisms. Hence, Selma's strong will is not just a personal trait but an inherited family identity, deeply rooted in their collective response to trauma and hardship.

Though Selma recalled her childhood as generally happy, she did find her family's frequent moves somewhat traumatic. These relocations, especially after the war, had an enduring impact on her. In her early years, they lived in a Tuzla neighborhood full of refugees, who dispersed as locals returned, fragmenting the close-knit community to which Selma had grown accustomed. This was painful then, and left a lasting scar, particularly because budding friendships were lost: "*I've spent my whole life missing my two friends… we haven't seen each other since then*." This is illustrative of the way Selma feels her life has been marked and shaped by a transitory quality that has reinforced her need to be self-reliant.

109 Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Jason Aronson, 1978).

Selma has no memories of her father, and arguably, this is an absence tinged with trauma as well. This has also meant that Selma's mother played the crucial role in shaping her views on men and on male-female relations. Selma emphasized her mother's strength, resourcefulness, and sharp tongue, and said she taught her to keep her guard up when it came to men. While her mother told her stories of what an ideal marriage should look like, and Selma longed for this, she understood it was not to come at the cost of suffering any disrespect. In fact, Selma attributed her values of privacy and intimacy to her mother's emphasis on the importance of preserving her chastity and avoiding the deception of men. "*I always wore skirts that covered my knees, blouses, never anything too revealing… for years. So, it stuck with me*." She told researchers that this modesty was comfortable for her, however, and never left her feeling like she was waiting for her "*moment of freedom*."

Still, Selma's account of her upbringing as rather conservative and even rigid was contradicted by her mother, who said she had raised her children with an open and permissive attitude, indulging their whims and desires. She portrayed Selma's strong will as a means by which she "*always got what she asked for*." But she also described a deep bond and honesty between mother and daughter, even when Selma took up a habit like smoking. "*[N]othing was ever hidden... We had a close relationship. I can't quite describe it; I didn't have many friends, just my family. Her brother and Selma were everything to me, especially after we lost their father. They were my entire world*." The strength of these family connections was such that emotions were freely expressed in a healthy way, according to Selma. "*We all showed emotions, from anger to whatever else. Even today, I don't have a problem with getting into it with someone in the family and then laughing about it.*"

This offers a more nuanced perspective on Selma's upbringing, suggesting that her family's dynamics were characterized more by candid and loving

communication than by the gendered conservatism she first highlighted. This may indicate that Selma is presenting a narrative that attempts to minimize contradictions between her current and former selves, in order to present a cohesive identity that fits the ideological framework of her adopted Salafist community. Indeed, the expectations placed on women by Salafism are stringent, emphasizing inflexible gender roles that promote modesty, obedience, and a very specific interpretation of piety. This includes compliance with conservative dress codes, such as by wearing the niqab, as well as the limited public presence of women and their prioritization of domestic tasks. Salafist preachers frame these lifestyle prescriptions as intrinsic to women's devotion and moral integrity, meaning they are not just a matter of how women behave but how they construct their identities and interact with society. In Selma's case, she seems to have internalized these expectations in such a way that she now characterizes them as having been inherent to her since her youth, despite having adopted a Salafist lifestyle relatively recently. The effort to present these values as natural to her and not externally imposed suggests Selma has undergone a process known as identity fusion, wherein group norms are integrated so deeply that they feel inseparable from personal values, even if they contradict previous self-conceptions.[110]

## Finding Love Online

Selma's brother, six years her senior, took on a protective, almost fatherly role, as she matured. Like her mother, he encouraged Selma to be dubious of men. "*To him, every guy was a fool, an idiot, and there was always something wrong with each one*," she recalled. It is therefore ironic that, for Selma, choosing a partner her brother approved ultimately led her into danger. In fact, it was her brother who first brought Selma's future husband – with whom she would later travel to Syria – to her attention.

110 William B. Swann et al., "When group membership gets personal: a theory of identity fusion," *Psychological Review* 119, no. 3 (2012).

"*My brother showed him to me on Facebook… and there was something interesting about him. I sent him a friend request, and he accepted*." When the two later met at the mosque and started getting to know each other, Selma said she "*imagined being able to wake up next to him, and it felt right*," so she was eager to continue the relationship. It did not hurt that she found him physically attractive, a point she made throughout her interview, mentioning repeatedly how good-looking she found him. As Selma sees it, her husband is an archetypal strong, masculine figure: "*He's a man in every sense of the word. He has control, or tries to take control, to keep the rest of us calm.*" And then, speaking in the past tense because of his imprisonment in Syria, she added, "*He always thought rationally and was resourceful.*"

Interestingly, Selma's mother also described the appeal of her daughter's husband in terms of his physical attractiveness and masculinity, emphasizing his acuity for problem solving and his comfort in navigating the world. Both Selma and her mother placed a high value on these qualities, and seemed to find a deep sense of ease in the protection a strong male figure brings, despite identifying so fiercely as a family of independent, self-reliant women. On top of this, Selma's beau was romantic, and charming. He showered her with gifts, such as a cake, after defending her thesis. As her mother put it, "*He gave her a bit of male attention, and we women… we'd go anywhere for a flower*."

Yet, Selma's future husband had a past conviction for terrorism; something she and her mother both knew before Selma married him, and both downplayed in interviews. It is hard to understand how her mother and brother, who were so protective of Selma, were not more alarmed by her involvement with a man who had been convicted on these charges. Though, according to Selma's mother, she had been powerless to influence Selma's decision-making when it came to her now-husband and had

grown to believe that if she interfered in their relationship, she risked pushing her daughter away.

After marrying, Selma and her husband fell easily into their new life, their relationship deepening over time. Initially fuelled largely by physical attraction, their bond grew stronger, especially after they left for Syria and found themselves navigating the complexities of life in a war zone. Selma laughed as she recalled him as a strong, rational man who kept their lives stable in an unstable place. Unlike some other women returnees, Selma did not share her husband with other wives in a plural marriage, and she told researchers that she could never live in a polygynous community, due to the emotional ramifications. "*The idea of my husband looking at another woman feels more like an emotional betrayal to me. I couldn't accept it; it would lead to us going our separate ways*." Asked about women who do accept polygyny, she argued that "*[f]or some [women], it's perfectly fine*," calling plural marriages "*extreme*" but asserting that women in these marriages "*see it as a way to share responsibilities with someone else*."

For Selma, an observant Salafist who defends Salafism as a way of life, this rejection of polygyny appears to be an assertion of the independence she attributed to the lineage of strong women of which she is a part, and the self-respect she said her mother engrained in her. By acknowledging that she cannot accept sharing her husband with another woman, Selma is emphasizing her own need for emotional exclusivity and clear boundaries to protect her sense of self within the relationship. This represents a departure from communal norms, and one which extends from her prioritization of personal convictions about what defines a healthy relationship. This selective adherence to Salafist practices suggests that Selma engages in a complex negotiation of faith (an external locus) and individual ethics (an internal locus), both conforming to and resisting the ideological norms of her community.

In fact, one could argue that Selma adheres to a Salafist interpretation of Islam that is all her own, as she links it not to the Arab traditions typically associated with Salafism but to her vision of what traditional Bosnian Islam once was in pre-communist times. She thus characterized her choice to adopt the ideology not as a move away from Bosnian Islam but as "*a return to the old tradition,*" highlighting that, "*A hundred years ago, women [in BiH] wore veils; my grandmother wore one when she was young, and it was communism that banned it*." Selma also made a distinction between her views and those of people who "*follow Saudi traditions*," emphasizing that she disapproves of those traditions as "*something completely contradictory*" to Bosnian values. She underscored that she is not in favor of "*marrying close relatives or not prioritizing education*," and was critical of the fact that, "*In Syria… it was normal [for fighters] to have two wives*."

## A Woman in Niqab

Selma does not diverge from the Salafist community on the question of wearing the niqab, however. In BiH, this is a highly contentious issue because quite a few people see the practice as imported, and do not associate it with traditional Bosnian Islam. For women who do wear the niqab in public, this means that their legal freedom to do so does not prevent them from facing significant challenges, such as being seen as a security threat and facing bias in employment. For example, women who wear niqab may not be chosen to fill public facing jobs, by public or private entities.

As Bosnian society grapples with how to realize women's rights, the experiences of women who exercise their religious freedom in wearing the niqab are crucial to understanding the implications of this choice in both personal and public spheres. Overall, debates surrounding the niqab reflect broader discussions about women's rights, religious rights, and identity in BiH. For Selma, her religious identity – to which the niqab is cen-

tral, notwithstanding her rejection of other imported practices – lies at the heart of how she sees herself, and how she views her place in society.

Reflecting on her sense of religious freedom, Selma noted feeling much freer wearing the niqab in BiH now, than she did 10 to 15 years ago. The social landscape has changed and instances of discrimination, such as women having their hijabs and niqabs pulled off, are less common. Selma observed that generational shifts have led to a more open-minded society, particularly regarding personal expression. She celebrated this freedom while emphasizing that she has no desire to impose her beliefs on others, arguing that if someone can walk down the street in a bikini, she should be able to dress as she chooses without judgment.

Selma did not wear a niqab, or even a hijab, before marrying, but saw that as the opportunity to fully embrace doing so. Her mother initially opposed this choice, but came to accept her decision over time, even speaking quite positively to researchers about the practice, framing it as protective for women. Selma's mother now views the hijab and niqab as symbols of women's dignity and security that should confer respect in society, and as a woman's declaration that she is under the care of a male figure. Her experience as a single mother, though linked to a collective family identity of self-reliance, may have taught her that the absence of this male figure is a vulnerability. This was certainly the tone of comments Selma's mother made to interviewers, contrasting the life of her daughter-in-law with that of Selma. She highlighted repeatedly that her daughter-in-law is "*taken care of*" and "*protected*" by her husband (Selma's brother), and appeared to prefer this traditional arrangement, contrasting it with her own struggles as a widowed mother and with those of Selma (whose husband remained imprisoned).

Selma described her decision to wear the niqab as a deeply personal one, rooted in an attraction to the garment that began when she was young.

This reflects the experiences of women who adopt the practice in other contexts: the niqab is more than just a garment; it is an embodied expression of a deep spiritual journey. This journey is unique in every case, involving a complex blend of doctrinal understanding and lived experience, as women navigate the integration of their religious practice into daily life. Often, women who wear the niqab align their religious agency with a sophisticated rights-based framework to justify this choice, challenging the notion that it signifies submission. This is the frame in which Selma has placed the practice, and this empowered interpretation of faith and commitment to living a life that so overtly diverges from the norm – especially in societies where anti-Muslim sentiment is prevalent – requires some degree of both true belief and courage.[111]

**A Muslim in Catholic School**

Selma noted that she does not consider it a burden to wear the niqab and claimed she hardly thinks about the fact that she's covered when moving through her daily life in public. When interactions take place to remind her that she stands out, such as with a security guard or at an x-ray machine, she said she tries to ease the tension. It has been from people within circles much closer to her that Selma has experienced the strongest reactions regarding her adoption of the practice. While her family initially disapproved, they came to accept it; but friends from her Catholic high school had more drastic responses and Selma lost contact with all of them.

Researchers asked Selma about her experience attending Catholic school, and how that may or may not have informed or influenced her choice to explore Salafism; wondering for example if perhaps, as a Muslim student in a Catholic school, Selma felt like an outsider or an outcast. Yet reflecting on her high school years, Selma had only positive things to say, com-

111 Natasha Bakht, "Getting to Know the Other: Niqab-Wearing Women in Liberal Democracies," *Religions* 13, no. 4 (2022).

menting that she appreciated the strong discipline and dress codes that were upheld, as well as the quality of the instruction. And interestingly, though her classmates could not accept her decision to wear the niqab, Selma recounted that after adopting the practice, she saw a former teacher, a nun, with whom she shared an emotional and warm reunion that ended in an accepting embrace.

In many ways, Selma's experience as a Muslim attending a Catholic school in the postwar years was stereotypically Sarajevan. Her upbringing in Republika Srpska (RS), has affected her identity formation. For Muslims in RS, she suggested, ethnonational identity acquires heightened significance precisely because it is continually challenged. She explained. "Today, national identity is very important because it is being lost in RS, and we there strive more to bring it to the forefront."

This shaped not only Selma's understanding of herself, but also her relationship with the broader community. Her observations echo dynamics faced by Muslim communities elsewhere in Europe, where dominant political narratives often cast Islam as incompatible with national identity. In such environments, identity is not taken for granted but must be asserted—sometimes through visible religious practice, sometimes through ideological affiliation. The push to reclaim or emphasize one's ethnoreligious roots in the face of marginalization becomes both a personal and political act.

Selma described her environment as one marked by displacement and stagnation, calling it a "land of the elderly" and saying she feels like "a citizen of a territory you don't want to belong to." While her experiences are not marked by direct conflict, her perception of marginalization is strong—and, as research shows, perceived discrimination can be just as psychologically impactful as actual incidents of exclusion.

## A Sudden Departure to Syria

Selma identified two major turning points in her life, which otherwise unfolded rather uneventfully: moving to Syria, and returning. She described the decision to go to Syria, made when she was 23 years old, as having filled her with enthusiasm and a sense of purpose that overrode logic. She gave no consideration to what would happen if she had children there, for instance, and characterized her mood at the time as one of "*youthful infatuation*," driven by a romanticized view of the war, recalling with a laugh that, "*we believed we could save [Syrians], like superheroes*."

According to Selma, the choice to depart was "*a joint decision*" made between she and her husband, almost spontaneously, though she was reticent about discussing this decision in any detail. She also offered no reflection on how difficult this choice had been for her mother, brother, and extended family. This non-response suggested some cognitive dissonance on her part, wherein individuals experience discomfort when their behaviors conflict with their self-image or values.[112] Presenting the choice to travel to Syria as having arisen from a sudden, shared desire to indulge a "youthful," almost naïve, need to help faraway victims of war may allow Selma to more easily reconcile her past actions with her present self-perception. Furthermore, her reticence about the effects of her actions on her family may indicate some emotional avoidance – a common psychological defense mechanism used to cope with guilt, shame, or traumatic experiences.[113] This avoidance shields Selma from confronting the painful emotional impact of her decisions on others. It is not uncommon for individuals who undergo radicalization or extreme ideological shifts to exhibit these coping patterns, and to reframe their own decision-making process as part of a broader, almost inevitable, collective movement; to

112 Eddie Harmon-Jones and Judson Mills, "An Introduction to Cognitive Dissonance Theory and an Overview of Current Perspectives on the Theory," in *Cognitive Dissonance: Reexamining a Pivotal Theory in Psychology*, edited by Eddie Harmon-Jones (American Psychological Association, 2019).

113 Courtney N. Forbes et al., "Emotional Avoidance and Social Support Interact to Predict Depression Symptom Severity One Year After Traumatic Exposure," *Psychiatry Research* 284 (2020).

justify past actions while shunning the intense emotional repercussions of these actions.

For Selma's mother, her daughter's sudden departure was shocking and confusing. The decision devastated her, and all the more so because Selma relayed the news only after she had already crossed the border into Syria. Recalling the late-night message she received from her daughter, Selma's mother said that reading it had felt to her like the world was ending. Her will to live diminished and nothing seemed to matter anymore, not even her own survival, because her daughter was in a war zone. The shock was so intense, she told researchers, that her only reaction was to let out a solitary earsplitting scream.

Selma's brother struggled with the news as well, and her mother remembered feeling entirely alone, without anyone to lean on, as the whole family reeled. Selma's sudden departure was simply incomprehensible to all of them. Her aunts, as stunned as her mother, were able to offer little comfort as they struggled to cope with the news themselves. A shared grief and bewilderment left the family paralyzed. The sense of abandonment and loss Selma's mother experienced was profound, and she characterized this as one of the darkest times in her life. This pain was complicated by the stigma and shame that accompanied the departure of her loved one to Syria. Public perceptions of those who departed can intensify feelings of dishonor and isolation for families, further compounding the emotional repercussions.

Despite the trauma of her departure, Selma's mother is deeply grateful for her eventual return and commented that she admires Selma for her resilience and strength in such difficult circumstances. This tendency to focus on her daughter's response to the choices she made and not on those choices suggests Selma's mother is seeking a way to extract positive meaning from this difficult experience. To manage her own emotional

pain and confusion, she appears to be attributing an affirmative value to Selma's actions.

It is also true that Selma did survive a life in Syria that posed many challenges. The difficulties arose almost immediately, as smugglers guided her and her husband into Syria. At one point, they encountered a tank, and later, Selma overheard locals identifying them as mujahideen and urging their arrest. They managed to escape by making their way through pepper fields. Even so, Selma described life in Syria as much better than she had anticipated, for the most part. Compared to war-torn BiH, she was struck by the freedom and abundance she found there. Selma and her husband adapted readily to their new life, and their relationship deepened. They expanded their family, and Selma felt comfortable going through her pregnancies in Syria, which had excellent hospitals and doctors, and affordable private hospitals. She thus had regular check-ups and proper medical care. Though the area in which they lived lacked schools, they later moved to an area with more Syrians, where their children were able to attend well-organized schools that offered subjects like history, geography, and English.

Still, Selma's life in Syria was marked by a series of adaptations. She acknowledged that financial challenges quickly arose, as the men received only a small monthly stipend, and they survived primarily on money sent by their parents. Worse than this, the persistent threat that her husband could die weighed heavily on her. She wrestled with a relentless fear that he would be killed, and watching other women cope with this loss only intensified her distress. She lived in a community where these women were supported and protected, as opposed to facing exile in a *madhafa* alongside other widows, so it was not this fate that Selma feared; hers was an anxiety rooted in the true love she felt, and continues to feel, for her husband. And over time, conditions deteriorated. Bombings increased, and Selma recalled the feeling of being constantly targeted.

Notably, the narrative of resilience conveyed by Selma's mother acknowledges this reality in a way that Selma's own relatively positive portrayal of her life in Syria seemed to selectively downplay or delete. This speaks to what Peter Goldie has observed, "especially where the past is in some sense tragic or traumatic," that within the narrative thinking which allows us to "evaluate, and respond emotionally to, our own past lives" – the core of what it means to have a narrative sense of self – "the possibility raises its head of a narrative that satisfies the narrator, that gives her emotional closure, but that is still deeply self-deceptive."[114] It could be that Selma is deceiving even herself when she brings attention to the safety and normalcy she experienced in Syria, both as a way to rationalize her decision to live there and to avoid confronting the broader moral implications of this decision. While this selectivity suggests a disregard for the suffering of others under the Islamic State regime, such as the many women who were forced into sexual slavery, it allows Selma to maintain a coherent self-narrative and minimize the cognitive dissonance she experiences.

Whether self-deception or not, Selma maintained that living under Sharia law had not been difficult for her, as she and her husband had been motivated to live in Syria by a sense of Muslim belonging. But at the time they arrived, Sharia had not been applied across all the territory eventually claimed by ISIL, meaning that levels of repression varied depending on the location. When asked if she would willingly live in a state regulated by Sharia law now, Selma did not reject the prospect outright but did reject the idea of living where it is unsafe. She added that she would never just take her children and leave in the sudden way she departed at 23 years old.

Though Selma mostly glossed over the challenges of her past in Syria, she did admit that she thinks sometimes about the loss of two friends. "*Two of my friends died there, and I think about how I'll never see them again*." She also spoke about two traumatic incidents involving her children. She

114 Peter Goldie, "One's Remembered Past: Narrative Thinking, Emotion, and the External Perspective," *Philosophical Papers* 32, no. 3 (2003).

recounted one time when her middle son fell ill, explaining, "*They said that Assad was tampering with the medicine… my son had diarrhea, and he would cry when he needed to go to the bathroom. One evening, when he did go, I saw the diaper was full of blood.*" Yet, it is clear that Selma's most traumatic experience occurred when a bomb exploded nearby and her youngest daughter, only six months old, began vomiting and showing signs of severe illness, including diarrhea and lethargy. Fearing her child was dying, Selma made the desperate decision to go in search of help, packing their belongings and carrying her barely responsive daughter until they were finally picked up by a cattle truck. They eventually reached Hasakah, where Selma was told her daughter was severely dehydrated and would need to be admitted to hospital, but that Selma would have to leave her there. For ten agonizing days, Selma waited to hear whether her child had survived, leaving a deep wound that obviously still felt raw as she recounted this story. With tears rolling down her face, she described how her daughter had been *"slipping away, her eyes rolling back,"* and remembered thinking "*it was the end. If she hadn't survived, I might never have returned [to BiH] because my child would have been buried there.*"

## The Road Back to BiH

As the bombing crept nearer and the territory in which Selma and her husband lived in Syria continued to shrink, he urged her to surrender to the Kurds, who they believed would relocate women and children to safety. Instead, the Kurds ordered them to pack their belongings and, as they did so, targeted their trucks in what Selma referred to as a "massacre," claiming many were killed. Still, in the end, they managed to get to Al-Hol camp, where Selma said that it brought her some comfort to hear people from Belgrade speaking her language.

Life in the camp was difficult, but Selma avoided trouble by keeping to herself and following the rules. For example, unlike other women, she did

not risk owning a mobile phone, for being caught with one could have led to her imprisonment and separation from her children. Selma's focus remained squarely on staying away from conflict and ensuring her children's safety. But some women did manage to establish contact with the outside world and were learning about the process of being returned to their home countries. Deportations were already being organized; upon arrival, they had all been registered for deportation with the Red Cross and were already identified for repatriation.

Rumors about returning home did not make life in the camp any easier. Selma described the camp as a perilous environment wrought with frequent violence. She and her children lived in a tent, without heating, water, and food, and had no contact with her husband – who had initially planned to escape with smugglers but after seeing other Bosnians betrayed, and handed over to the Kurds, made the decision to surrender. This led to his imprisonment in Syria, and if he returns to BiH, he will face the same fate there.

Selma's mother nearly lost faith that Selma would ever return herself. When the day finally came, she said she could hardly believe Selma was really on the flight. After they were reunited, Selma's mother described watching her daughter and grandchildren sleep, overwhelmed by relief. As for Selma, she had little notion of what to expect when she returned. "*I thought I'd just go home*," she remarked, adding that she was not worried about being arrested. On the question of her own legal culpability, she noted, "*I left before the law on foreign battlefields was enacted, so I don't think that I committed any sin or crime*." She said her experience in the reception center was generally positive, commenting that the women returnees "*all stuck together, and when you keep people together who know each other, there's a sense of security*."

## A Waiting Game

Throughout her interview, Selma spoke warmly of her husband. There was no evidence that she feels any moral conflict over his involvement with ISIL. Her desire for his return was obvious, and she expressed that her "*love for him remains strong*." Carefully avoiding direct discussions about the role he played in Syria, it is clear Selma is aware that, to many, her husband is not a hero but a terrorist. This tendency is not unique to Selma; many women returnees struggle to critically assess the choices and actions of their partners. However, this can undermine rehabilitation efforts and complicate the reintegration of these women into society, if they continue to justify extremist beliefs in order to create a permission structure for their husbands. Nuanced rehabilitation approaches that address emotional ties and ideological dissonance are therefore necessary with women returnees, to promote a deeper reflection on their past within a broader moral framework.

Selma knows that if her husband returns, he faces time in prison, but she finds some solace in the fact that at least she will know precisely where he is. She simply wants him close. According to Selma, many Bosnians were scared to return "*because they feared sentences of 20 to 30 years*," but as she sees it, the sentences handed out so far to returned fighters have not been very long, "*and they have food and all the necessities in prison*." Even the notion of her own prosecution did not faze Selma, who argued that "*at least I'm in my own country*," contrasting that with her husband's detention abroad. "*He's been somewhere locked up for three years, and that time (served) doesn't even count [in BiH].*"

Her husband's continued detention in a faraway place has loomed over Selma since her return to BiH. Psychotherapy has therefore been a crucial source of support for her. She said she prefers one-on-one therapy over group sessions, as she often finds this kind of engagement with other returnees triggering, and feels she lacks the strength to listen to their

problems. It is her family, especially her brother, that has been her strongest support, though. Unfortunately, she does not have the same relationship with her in-laws, and they are now estranged. This follows years of tension, extending from Selma's characterization of her husband's family as dysfunctional, and her mother-in-law's allegation that Selma is to be blamed for his departure to Syria.

The support from her family has helped Selma remain at home with her children. Her mother showed little concern about the fact that Selma is not working, and thereby taking advantage of her university education, and they both appear to share the sentiment that everything will improve once Selma's husband returns to BiH. Her mother commented that Selma remains deeply in love with him, noting that her first impulse every morning is to check her phone for news about his possible return. Selma's daughter also speaks frequently of her father and fondly remembers the time she spent with him in Syria, picnicking by the river and going to the park. These memories and her clear attachment to her father highlight the strong emotional bonds that were nurtured within their family despite the violent context in which they lived. For children, attachment to their parents or caregivers is critical, and they may cling to positive experiences as a way of creating a sense of security and normalcy. Even in traumatic or violent environments, children gravitate toward moments of comfort and use these experiences to build a narrative of safety and love, to feel connected and secure, even if this conflicts with reality.

Selma's behavior does not suggest that she has fully confronted or processed the gravity of her husband's actions as an ISIL-affiliated fighter, from a moral standpoint. She sees her husband not through the lens of his actions but as the person who once provided her with emotional security. This is a form of denial that can prevent her from grappling with the implications of his involvement with a terrorist organization. This kind of denial and idealization were seen in both Selma and her mother,

each of whom positioned emotional attachment and talk of the future as defenses against the painful truths of past and present circumstances.

Yet while Selma's emotional reliance on the idea of her husband's return offers her comfort, it simultaneously leaves her children suspended in a fragile psychological space, in which memory, fantasy, and unprocessed trauma intermingle. Her daughter's idealized recollections of Syria, coupled with the continued absence of her father, construct a reality that is emotionally rich but potentially misleading. For children, especially those entering adolescence, such idealization can hinder the formation of a coherent and realistic sense of self.

Psychological assessment of the children returnees shows that many of them show signs of delayed emotional development and difficulties in regulating their feelings, particularly around themes of loss and identity. Selma's child, for instance, was observed to be actively mourning a father she barely knew—compensating for his absence by imagining shared futures, celebrations, and adventures. While developmentally typical as a coping mechanism, such fantasies, when left unchallenged, can entrench cognitive distortions. Children in these contexts may begin to interpret their father's absence not as abandonment or consequence of extremist violence, but as injustice or martyrdom, especially when surrounded by familial silence or glorification.

This is where the silence of mothers, like Selma, and their reluctance to speak truthfully about the past becomes more than a coping strategy. It becomes a vector of transmission. Several children from returnee families were found to have limited or romanticized knowledge of their fathers' roles in Syria. Others had no information at all. In either case, the vacuum left by silence was filled by assumptions, half-truths, or emotionally tinted fabrications. For children, especially boys aged 11 to 13, this period marks the onset of identity formation—asking themselves not only

who they are, but where they come from. Without credible answers, they may turn to peer groups, online narratives, or community whispers that offer certainty where the home does not. Our research further reveals that many of these children are being raised within rigid frameworks of religious orthodoxy, paired with socially permissible, but inwardly conflicted, behavior. In other case studies, Ajla's children (next chapter) may attend birthday parties or school events, but do so with a sense of guilt or obligation, believing that joy itself is haram. In this dissonant environment, between what they are told at home and what they experience in society, many children develop strategies of social camouflage, presenting acceptable faces to the outside world while privately internalizing values that isolate them.In adolescence, this becomes perilous. Emotional volatility, a desire for belonging, and a burgeoning need for moral clarity all intersect. If the only clarity they find is within a narrative that presents their group as righteous and the rest of society as misguided or corrupt, the seeds of radicalisation are not far from sprouting. Add to this a family culture where pain is neither named nor processed, and where trauma is inherited rather than healed, and the developmental terrain becomes not just difficult, but dangerous.What emerges is a portrait of children quietly burdened by a past they are not allowed to question and a future they are not equipped to imagine differently. The challenge is not only to support Selma, but to interrupt the quiet inheritance of grief, distortion, and idealization that risks taking root in her daughter. The longer that silence persists, the louder the unspoken story becomes.

There is a certain emotional pragmatism in this, and Selma displays a tendency for pragmatism more generally. Given the inevitability of her husband's imprisonment in BiH, for example, Selma shared that she already prepared everything he will need in advance. "*I've bought him clothes and hygiene products; everything I heard he would need in prison, I got. When the dry period comes, Muslims go to pray for rain, and they bring umbrellas with them because they're ready for it. I'm prepared, and now I'm just waiting*."

## Between Love and Rehabilitation

Selma has remained steadfast in her religious principles since her return to BiH, particularly when it comes to covering herself in public. She said it would be difficult for her to accept a job if it required her to dress differently, as her identity is closely tied to wearing the niqab, and the choice not to wear it should be one she makes freely. Nevertheless, Selma emphasized that she is mindful not to impose her own desires or standards on her daughter. She feels it is important that her daughter explore faith and identity on her own terms, without pressure; and despite valuing the niqab so strongly, Selma is open to the possibility that her daughter may make different choices.

Ultimately, Selma's focus is on her children's wellbeing. She took great care to shield them from the trauma of war when they were in Syria, downplaying dramatic events to limit their fear, and they seem to be adjusting well in BiH. Her younger children adapted particularly quickly to their new environment, and though her older child faced some difficulties due to the pandemic and the need for online schooling, they have all made considerable progress. Selma's daughter, who is thriving socially, is popular in her class and quick to make friends. This is something Selma takes pride in, given all her family has been through.

Even so, Selma's rehabilitation and reintegration process has been marked by psychological and practical challenges. Her ongoing preoccupation with her husband's fate has distracted her from bringing full attention to her own needs, and thus to those of her children. After years apart, albeit involuntarily, Selma still struggles to envision a life without him. She clearly has the capacity to care for her children, and loves them unconditionally, but this fixation hinders her recovery.

Selma also faces a range of significant health concerns, from gallstones, liver problems, and pancreatic issues, to ovarian cysts and high blood

pressure – all of which are exacerbated by stress. She told researchers she often feels fatigued and struggles to find joy in life, expressing a sense of hopelessness and framing herself as a sort of tragic-romantic character. Yet, the depressive depiction of self that Selma presented does not match the way her therapist described her. This practitioner, who has worked with Selma for a significant length of time, noted that she is open, self-assured, and intelligent, with well-considered opinions and perspectives on a broad range of topics. In one-on-one psychotherapy sessions, she articulates her thoughts clearly and confidently, and in group settings, assumes a leadership role.

In many ways, Selma is full of surprising contradictions. She demonstrates profound loyalty to her religious beliefs, demonstrating a deep understanding and adherence to Salafism and defending its practices against Western criticism, while also offering very candid criticism of certain aspects of the ideology and the behavior of some of its leaders. As noted above, she has even reframed the origin story of her own Salafist practices, by linking them to traditional Bosnian Islam, and therefore delinking them in some ways from their Saudi roots. And, compared to other women returnees, Selma displays a keen interest in social trends beyond the religious sphere, such as the latest makeup and hairstyle fashions. She also engages with intriguing and entertaining social media content outside of the religious realm.

**Conclusion**

Selma identifies strongly with her religion, but more than anything, she identifies as a mother, and it is her primary objective to be a supportive parent who actively seeks to better herself and improve the life she can provide for her children. It is promising that, since her return, she has become much more open to institutional support, and generally more trusting in the services provided by frontline practitioners. This is im-

portant because Selma still carries the unprocessed weight of multiple traumatic experiences and seems to have rationalized an avoidance of these traumas. Her thinking is shaped by cognitive dissonance, and various coping mechanisms, including denial, rationalization, and moral disengagement. Like many people struggling with past trauma, especially intertwined with guilt, Selma wants to move forward and focus on the future without fully confronting or addressing the mistakes she made in the past, or how her choices impacted others, including her children. Yet, as she looks forward to her husband's return, they will both have to accept that reuniting and picking up where they left off is no longer feasible. They cannot continue as they were and will have to commit to a genuine rehabilitation process in order to be the parents she envisions.

For Selma, an unquestioning loyalty to her husband, and her reluctance to engage critically with the implications of her past association with ISIL, have complicated rehabilitation and reintegration. Despite her clear dedication to the wellbeing of her children, this remains a barrier to her parenting goals, by limiting her own capacity for growth, and thus her ability to hold space for her children, emotionally. Selma's obsession with her husband's welfare has served as a shield against her own self-reflection, so that she has not only failed to confront the impact of her own choices but also to reexamine some of the most extremist elements of Salafism. This is particularly notable given that she has already shown a willingness to analyze the ideology critically in other contexts.

For rehabilitation programming to be effective, it must encourage, if not demand, that returnees explore and address these deep emotional questions. Experiential approaches that facilitate critical thinking without direct confrontation are essential to fostering an environment conducive to this kind of reflection. For returnees like Selma, it is also vital that she can engage in activities to develop new social identities and build emotional resilience, as a means of transforming her worldview and creating

a meaningful path toward reintegration. Her struggle to envision a future beyond her current circumstances, and her inability to imagine one at all without her husband in it, suggests a diminished sense of agency that must be restored through structured support.

Selma's children must also be engaged as part of reintegration efforts, to ensure they have access to appropriate psychological care. This is necessary for any returnee children, but in Selma's case, it is especially important as a way of reducing the likelihood of further intergenerational transmission of trauma; a pattern seen for at least three generations of women in Selma's family already. Ultimately, Selma's story illustrates the need for a holistic approach to rehabilitation and reintegration for women returnees that acknowledges the complexities of their emotional and lived realities while actively working to reorient their sense of loyalty and purpose.[115]

115 See more in: Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Responses to returning foreign terrorist fighters and their families*, 2nd ed. (2022).

# Ajla and Ehlimana

*Shared Yet Divergent Journeys*

## Introduction

Ajla's life, marked by instability and loss, and a search for security and belonging, resulted in underlying vulnerabilities that paved the way for her eventual attraction to extremist ideology. Born in Bijeljina, Ajla was a child when the Bosnian War erupted, forcing her family to seek refuge in Austria. This displacement during her formative years contributed to a profound sense of cultural and social dislocation. Speaking with researchers, Ajla recalled the confusion and isolation she felt in this new environment, as "*the new kid, different from everyone else*," explaining, "*I didn't understand why they treated me differently*." The challenges of integrating into a foreign culture during a period of identity formation can be destabilizing, and for Ajla, this sense of being an outsider laid the groundwork for later identity struggles. In other words, her journey into radicalization – like all such journeys – did not occur in a vacuum but

was shaped by a complex interplay of personal, psychosocial, and cultural factors.

Her family dynamics further deepened the sense of instability Ajla felt as a child, as her father was largely absent due to his demanding work schedule. This left her longing for a connection with him that was never fully realized. Ajla's mother, Ehlimana, was always there for her, but the functional absence of her father left a void. This became even more pronounced following his sudden death, which occurred shortly after the family's return to BiH.

It was her mother's turn towards a more devout lifestyle after her husband's death that significantly shaped Ajla's conservative religious outlook. While the decision to adopt religious practices such as covering herself in public was a personal coping strategy for Ehlimana, it served as a model for Ajla. Yet, Ajla would come to adopt even more extremist practices than her mother, after being exposed to radical interpretations of Islam online. This online environment provided Ajla with religious "guidance" while offering her a community of like-minded individuals who reinforced her newly adopted beliefs. As she became more engaged with this virtual community, her commitment to a more conservative form of Islam solidified.

This commitment would lead her, through Facebook, to her husband; and he would lead her to Syria. Ajla said she found some semblance of peace, and a degree of freedom, when they initially arrived, but the escalating violence quickly brought the grim realities of life in a war zone to the fore. Her husband's frequent absences and the ambiguity surrounding his activities made her fearful and uncertain.

Her mother, thinking she could travel to Syria and bring Ajla home, made the journey herself, only to find that "*the bombings had started, and*

*there was no way out*." Then, when Ajla's husband was killed, both mother and daughter faced forced displacement, and the need to migrate within the conflict zone compounded this instability. Ajla and Ehlimana would eventually find themselves in a camp for women and children affiliated with ISIL fighters, awaiting repatriation. Though Ajla worried about the possibility of being separated from her children, the conditions of their life had devolved so considerably by then that surrendering to authorities and voluntarily returning seemed to be their only options. Since returning, reintegration has been a challenge for Ajla. While she readily expresses regret about her decision to go to Syria, she has been burdened in her rehabilitation by the significant after-effects of trauma.

## The Shape of a Void

When Ajla's family was displaced from Bijeljina to Austria during the war, her experience was initially one of social isolation and discrimination. She remembered that conditions improved only after she "*took the situation into her own hands*," in response to the harassment of a classmate. "*I just snapped when this one kid started provoking me*," she explained. "*I realized that no one could help me except myself, so I fought him*." This endeared her to her erstwhile bullies, with whom she became friends, but it also appears to have impressed upon Ajla that she "*had to take action*" on her own behalf and could not rely on her teachers or parents for help.

This was due in part to the regular absence of her father, which made her feel as if she could never spend enough time with him. "*He worked a lot*," she noted, "*and when he was home, there was little time for us. I was left longing for my father*." This sense of deprivation, this early emotional void, may have contributed to Ajla's later search for belonging and external validation. Her mother also worked a lot, and so Ajla's brother was tasked with caring for her after school. Ehlimana "*would leave them food and everything else they needed*," and Ajla remembered feeling her moth-

er was always there for her emotionally, but work obligations meant she could not always be there for her children in the literal sense.

When Ajla's father died shortly after the family returned to BiH in 1999, a particularly turbulent period of their lives began. His death was sudden and unexpected, from a heart attack, and the family found itself in a precarious financial situation. Ajla shared that her father had "*wanted to start a business, but then [when] he died… everything collapsed. The debts fell on my mother*." This had a profound impact on the family's stability, and it placed an added burden on Ajla's mother that strained family dynamics. Still, Ajla described her mother as her "*emotional rock*," always present and supportive. This is probably why it was so distressing for Ajla that when her father died, her mother started having panic attacks. "*That was the hardest time for me*," Alja recalled.

The combination of her father's death and her mother's compromised mental health reshaped their home environment, infusing it with anxiety and grief, just as Ajla reached adolescence. As Ajla described it, "*When he died, everything fell apart... and I had to grow up fast*." Her mother sought ways to cope, moving toward a more devout religious practice that influenced Ajla's religious outlook as well. "*After my father's death, that's when she started*," Ajla remembered. "*The doctor even advised her to turn to Allah for her own sake. She covered herself three years before I did*." By adopting these more conservative religious practices, Ajla's mother provided a framework that Ajla would later take on and intensify.

Ajla enjoyed a relatively typical teenage experience, however, participating in various activities and easily making friends. She reflected on these years with a sense of nostalgia, describing it as "*the happiest time*," when she had "*freedom, friends, and a good life*." Yet, at the same time, the trauma of her father's death and her mother's emotional struggles left Ajla feeling unsupported and alone within her family, at critical moments in

her development. It is not uncommon for children who lose a parent to face long-term effects, including depression, anxiety, or prolonged grief. In fact, in up to one in five people, unresolved bereavement can result in prolonged grief disorder, also known as complicated grief, marked by "intense separation distress, lack of meaning/purpose… and impairments in day-to-day functioning."[116] This is distinct from overlapping conditions like depression and can lead to long-term difficulties in forming relationships, heightened fear of loss or abandonment, and struggles with emotional regulation.[117]

As she grappled with her grief – not only for her father but for the family life lost when he passed – Ajla gradually followed her mother's lead, turning toward religion to find structure and meaning in what she called a "*chaotic life*." The themes of hope, redemption, and healing that are often featured in religious teachings can be particularly profound for individuals experiencing grief, who may find that their adherence to religion helps them develop a sense of resilience and enables them to face loss with a greater sense of hope for the future.[118] As her religiosity deepened, Ajla began to disconnect from her social circles. She told researchers that she did so because she "*wanted to be closer to Allah*."

For Ajla, her developing religiosity imparted a sense of identity and purpose that she felt was lacking. Her decision to wear the hijab, and later the niqab, affirmed for Ajla that she had chosen the proper path, and significantly shifted the way she saw herself and the way she was perceived by others. She described the choice as both liberating and challenging: "*It was hard at first because people saw me differently... but I felt closer to God and more at peace*." The way Ajla recounted her journey to conservative Islam suggests that her exploration of religion served as a means of orga-

116 Kara L. Klingspon et al., "Unfinished Business in Bereavement," *Death Studies* 39, no. 7 (2015), 387.

117 Kathryn R. Cullen, "Persistent Impairment: Life After Losing a Parent," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 175, no. 9 (2018).

118 Kenneth I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice* (Guilford Press, 2001).

nizing the hierarchy of identities which compose the self, and religious devotion became a means of asserting control over her life while finding significance and social belonging.[119] The more she immersed herself in her faith, the more she distanced herself from secular influences.

## Ideological Extremes in Online Spaces

Though her mother had served as a model for religious piety, it was on the internet that Ajla found a pathway to deeper, and more extreme, religious convictions. As she watched videos emphasizing the need for strict adherence to Islamic principles, they resonated with her growing desire for spiritual fulfillment. One in particular had a considerable impact on her: "*I watched this video, I think it was called 'Pearls of Islam,' about major sins and how women are obligated to cover themselves... It scared me, but it also made me feel like I had to do more*." This illustrates the power of online content to radicalize by preying on people's fears and moral insecurities, but also how this content targets women by linking the legitimacy of their devotion to practices that impose control of women under the pretense of protection.[120]

The community Ajla found online offered her "religious education" but was also made up of like-minded individuals whom she trusted. This made it easy for them to reinforce her increasingly extreme beliefs; and so, as she engaged further with this virtual community, her commitment to a more deeply conservative interpretation of Islam solidified and intensified. This is consistent with research demonstrating that women who access ideological content and virtual peer support online may undergo

119 See: Lori Peek, "Becoming Muslim: The Development of a Religious Identity," *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 3 (2005); Arie W. Kruglanski, "Violent radicalism and the psychology of prepossession," *Social Psychological Bulletin* 13, no. 4 (2018); and Arie W. Kruglanski et al., "The psychology of radicalization and deradicalization: How significance quest impacts violent extremism," *Political Psychology* 35, no. S1 (2014).

120 Majda Halilovic, Aner Zukovic, and Nejra Veljan, *Mapping online extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Findings and reflections* (Atlantic Initiative, 2019).

a relatively accelerated subsequent radicalization process.[121] For many of these women, and for Ajla, online communities became spaces of learning, connecting, and perhaps most importantly, belonging.

Ajla's story is emblematic of a pattern observed in many individuals who radicalize; wherein an initial, benign curiosity about religion slowly transforms into a more rigid worldview, drawing them toward influences, especially online, that validate a greater and greater level of extremism. That said, this is somewhat notable in Ajla's case, given her early exposure and family tradition of moderate, Bosnian Islamic practice. There has been much scholarship on the role of and need for religious education in preventing extremism, on the premise that religious literacy can essentially desensitize people to the allure of more extreme interpretations of religion.[122] Yet, for Ajla, the stresses of displacement, loss, and familial instability that converged in her adolescence seem to have proved more powerful, leaving her vulnerable to online religious content that instrumentalized her fears and self-doubts to pull her toward a much more rigid, authoritarian form of Islam. This content manipulated her desire to commit more fully to her religious practice, compelling a critical transition, from a religious identity that was tolerant and culturally embedded to one that was narrower and ideologically driven.

Ajla's susceptibility to extremist content appears to have been rooted in her sense that the disorder of her life could be made orderly if she was sufficiently pious. She mentioned feeling "*scared of her sins*" after she viewed the "Pearls of Islam" video discussed above, and this moment seems to have marked a turning point, when fear and guilt played a more prominent role in her decision-making and transformed what had been a gradual religious exploration into a more urgent compulsion to comply with perceived

121 Halilovic, Zukovic, and Veljan, *Mapping online extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*.

122 For example, see: Ratna Ghosh and W. Y. Alice Chan, "The role of religious education in countering religious extremism in diverse and interconnected societies," in *Religion and Education: Comparative and International Perspectives*, edited by Malini Sivasubramaniam and Ruth Hayhoe (Oxford, UK: Symposium Books, 2018)

spiritual obligations. This is consistent with a need for "cognitive closure," which can lead individuals who are overwhelmed by uncertainty to seek rigid frameworks that promise clear-cut answers and a sense of purpose. As Kuglanski and Webber have noted, "the motivation toward cognitive closure may affect the way individuals process information *en route* to the formation, alteration, or dissolution of knowledge." They describe an "urgency tendency" related to "the inclination to 'seize' on closure quickly," and a "permanence tendency" driven by "the desire to perpetuate closure."[123]

It may have felt somewhat natural for Ajla to embrace (or "seize") the more conservative form of Islam she encountered online and on social media, in part because of external influences to which she had been exposed. For example, her family lived in close proximity to the village of Gornja Maoča, where a community known for its strict interpretation of Islam is located. Her older brother also holds very traditional views on gender. Ajla's mother explained that his wife (her daughter-in-law), who is well-educated, didn't finish her studies after they married, despite having been a top student "*from first grade to university*." Her strong academic performance aside, he apparently told her that because she is a woman, her coursework would be too challenging.

Moreover, after Ajla began covering, her mother recounted that "*many young men came to propose to Ajla because they had heard about [her brother's] pious and beautiful sister*." The pressure this created from within her family was reinforced by the videos she was watching online, which encouraged her to conform to gendered expectations. This strongly influenced Ajla's decision to pursue marriage. Hence, when she met a man from Gornja Maoča, she chose to fully immerse herself in this insular, extremist community, which hardened her increasingly conservative belief system while simultaneously isolating her from any moderating influences.

123 Arie W. Kuglanski and Donna M. Webber, "Motivated Closing of the Mind: 'Seizing' and 'Freezing,'" *Psychological Review* 103, no. 2 (1996), 265.

## Marriage via *Mahrem*

In BiH, Gornja Maoča is known for the radicalized Salafist community that calls the village home. A strict interpretation of Islam prevails, and social structures are designed to maintain loyalty to the group and enforce ideological compliance. For Ajla, the move to Gornja Maoča was a defining moment in her religious development, as her once personal journey became a collective experience. Her evolving identity was validated and encouraged by others in her community who shared the same worldview, offering her a sense of belonging that transcended any doubt she may have encountered. In this context, the influence of earlier religious guidance by her family was systematically deconstructed, and ideological purity, obedience, and group loyalty were positioned as primary sources of identity and purpose.

Ajla moved to Gornja Maoča following her marriage, which came to be after an interested suitor had contacted her brother. "*He knew me from Facebook*," she explained, and "*inquired about me. He asked my brother… because my brother was involved for a time*." The involvement of her brother was as a *mahrem* (guardian), underscoring the traditional gender role he exerts in the family. With his oversight, their marriage was arranged swiftly, and Ajla relied on religious ritual to guide her decision-making, telling researchers that she "*prayed istikhara and decided immediately*."[124] She characterized the marriage as having unfolded "*according to the Sunnah, the way a true believer should marry*."

It is worth noting the part Ajla's brother played in her marriage as a *mahram*, for it reflects the deeply rooted mechanisms of control that operate within conservative communities. A *mahrem* is often cited as a religious obligation meant to safeguard women, yet in practice, the designation of a male guardian facilitates the strict regulation of women's autono-

124 In Islam, *istikhara* is a prayer for guidance, and is often part of the decision-making processes of devout believers.

my, and their further integration into patriarchal structures.[125] This raises questions about the degree to which Alja's choice to marry was made for personal reasons or to meet family and communal expectations, and illustrates how an adherence to gender norms and religious diktats can more deeply enmesh women like Ajla in radicalized networks.

Ajla acknowledged the significant shift that occurred in her lifestyle when she moved to Gornja Maoča, as a function of its isolated and conservative nature. "*[T]here were no stores nearby*," she recalled; "*I had always lived more freely*." In very little time, her world contracted to include only those within the community, reinforcing the insularity that serves as a bulwark for radicalized enclaves against external influence. A key to Ajla's acclimation to this new life was her relationship with her husband's first wife, with whom she became very close. "*She became my best friend*," Ajla explained.

In this way, marriages and interpersonal relationships in Gornja Maoča, or any similar radical enclave, are not merely personal unions; they function as mechanisms for reinforcing social bonds and maintaining internal cohesion within tightly knit, extremist communities. The extent to which Ajla had become integrated into this community not as an individual but as a faceless part of the whole was evident to her when her husband left for Syria, without informing her, and she learned of his departure from a community leader. According to her mother, Ajla was told to "*imagine he doesn't exist*," and was pressured to remarry. This highlights the community level emphasis on preserving stability through an internal structure contingent on gendered relationships and roles. In such contexts, marriage is as much a religious commitment as it is a means of ensuring the group remains ideologically aligned and resilient, even amid disruptions and crises. In other words, if the community structure remains intact, its

125 Gul Ozyegin, ed., *Gender and Sexuality in Muslim Cultures* (Ashgate, 2015).

ideological tenets are sustained. For women, this imperative perpetually subsumes them into the collective.

Despite her husband's sudden, wordless departure, Ajla accepted the constraints of life in Gornja Maoča in part because of her deep love for him. She referred to him as "*everything; a friend, a husband, just everything to me*." Her mother spoke in similarly glowing terms about her son-in-law, contending that Ajla would "*never find such a man again*." She also commended the fact that Ajla's husband had "*treated her like a child*," evoking a paternalistic relationship in which her husband had exercised a considerable level of control, suggesting that Ajla's autonomy and independence may have been limited. Nevertheless, both Ajla and her mother appear to have idealized the bond between Ajla and her husband – for whom, it should be noted, she was a second wife – and this romanticized portrayal may conceal an underlying attempt to reconcile the reality to which Ajla subjected herself by choosing to marry him.

## The Pull of "Freedom"

Ajla framed her departure to Syria not as an ideological choice but as a personal one. Speaking of her husband, she told researchers, "*He disappeared for a few months, and I didn't know what happened. Why would he leave me when he was such a good man? When he returned, he expressed his wish for us to go [back] together; he said everything was fine there, you could live freely and religiously*." For Ajla, the prospect of reuniting with her husband and fulfilling her role as a wife was more important than the political or religious aims of the conflict in Syria. Still, she and other women returnees emphasized the promise of freedom in Syria, where they believed they could live according to the strict religious prescriptions of Salafism without confronting any judgment or stigma, which many had experienced in BiH, particularly for wearing the niqab. As Ajla put it, "*I wanted to live a free life, whether I was covered or uncovered,*

*without anyone bothering me*." Confident in her husband's assessment that Syria was not only free, but "fine" in terms of the risk they may face, she willingly departed, with their young son in tow.

What Ajla found in Syria, however, was not freedom, but a life under constant control. Almost immediately, she was disillusioned, all romantic notions of the "free" Islamic state quickly shattered: "*When I realized I couldn't leave whenever I wanted, I broke down in tears. I hadn't even unpacked yet*." The feeling that she was isolated from her family, especially her mother, exacerbated Ajla's distress. It was not long before bombings and escalating violence in their proximity brought her face to face with the growing conflict. She grew increasingly fearful and uncertain about the future, especially as her husband's absences became more frequent.

Pregnant, Ajla reached out to her mother, not just in search of long-distance support over the phone but to convince Ehlimana to travel to Syria. By this time, the reality on the ground was already far from ideal. Her mother recounted that she "*came thinking I would take [Ajla] back, but once I arrived, it was impossible*." With the conflict intensifying, Ehlimana – who intended to stay only temporarily to talk her daughter into leaving and offer support during her pregnancy – was forced to settle into life in ISIL territory. The initial comfort she felt, being with family, was replaced by a dread that accompanied the suffocating presence of bombings and the struggle to get by with limited resources. On top of this, Ajla's health was poor. "*She was so weak, barely 40 kilos, and unable to eat... It was the pregnancy that pushed her to keep going*," her mother recalled.

The death of Ajla's husband marked a significant turning point in their life. The loss devastated Ajla. According to her mother, "*It was like the ground disappeared beneath her*." Suddenly without his protection, Ajla grew even more dependent on Ehlimana, and fell further into feelings of fear and uncertainty. This was compounded by the instability of forced dislocations within the

conflict zone, and then by their placement in a *madhafa* – a shelter for widows. While ostensibly designed to protect women who lost male guardians, these shelters were sites of confinement, psychological strain, and coercion.

As Azadeh Moaveni detailed in *Guest House for Young Widows*, the *madhafa* were intentionally inhospitable and overcrowded, to create environments in which women could be more easily pressured to remarry, in order to escape the conditions. Moaveni notes, "it was a place of such deliberate torment and uninhabitability that few women could stay long without going mad."[126] This practically ensured that most of the widows and divorcees living in a *madhafa* would remarry, but almost all of them made this decision out of desperation rather than free will. What Moaveni observed was reflected in Ajla's description of her time in the *madhafa.* "*We were all cramped together, three rooms shared by four or five women and their children*," she recalled. They were surveilled and constantly monitored. "*There was no freedom; you were not able to leave the house, and everything you did had to be approved*." Ajla's experience illustrates how these shelters, far from offering sanctuary, served as tools of social control, designed in part to coerce women into maintaining the gendered relations that helped structure the extremist community surrounding ISIL, and to reinforce that a woman's place in the so-called caliphate was at the side of a husband and nowhere else.

## The Pressure of the Patriarchy

For Ajla, the decision to remarry was motivated by her desire for a better life for herself and her children. But the dynamics of this second marriage were complex from the start; she married the husband of her best friend from Gornja Maoča. Her mother explained that Ajla initially resisted the idea, telling researchers that "*her best friend kept offering her husband in marriage, but Ajla couldn't understand it... She never wanted to marry him*." This reluctance was eventually overcome by the pressures

126 Moaveni, *Guest House for Young Widows*, 263.

of the *madhafa*, which led Ajla to accept the arrangement. Her mother "*begged her not to go through with it*," but Ajla felt she had no choice.

Her hopes for stability quickly deteriorated, however, as it became clear to Ajla that her new husband was abusive. The promise of a better life gave way to control and manipulation. Ajla recalled that, "*[a]t first, things seemed better… But then I realized how he was. Everything needed his approval – 'Can I visit my mother? Can I buy this?' – It was all up to him*." Compared to her first marriage, Ajla thus depicted her second marriage as more thoroughly saturated in the misogynistic and patriarchal values that tend to underpin male violence.[127] She found this more intimate form of domination deeply traumatic. "*He didn't hit me physically*," she claimed, "*but mentally… it was worse than the war itself. He crushed what little self-confidence I had left… It destroyed me more than the war ever could*." Ajla's mother echoed her daughter's description of her second marriage, noting that it was tightly controlled and oppressive. According to Ehlimana, Ajla "*wasn't allowed anything… [and] everything was monitored*," to such an extent that "*he would pour oil into a pot for us*" when they needed it to cook.

With the encouragement of a friend, mother and daughter decided to confront Ajla's husband and demand he grant her a divorce. Ajla had suffered a miscarriage, and had "*finally gathered the strength to ask for a divorce*," aware that if she failed to do so she risked "*losing myself entirely*." And so, with her mother by her side, she formally declared her intention to leave, and with the help of friends, they moved out, voluntarily returning to the insecurity of life in a conflict zone for two "unprotected" women. Their story is illustrative of the dual pressures women face in trying to survive both conflict-related violence and intimate violence, though, because even after making the decision to leave her husband,

127 Bettina Rottweiler, Caitlin Clemmow, and Paul Gill, "A Common Psychology of Male Violence? Assessing the Effects of Misogyny on Intentions to Engage in Violent Extremism, Interpersonal Violence and Support for Violence against Women," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2024).

Ajla was bound by the requirement to observe a three-month waiting period known as *iddah*, to ensure she was in fact no longer pregnant. During this time, her husband still had the right to take her back, leaving Ajla in a sort of liminal state, her autonomy uncertain, still subject to male authority. Her agency remained fragile, in the hands of a man, despite her having taken the very difficult step to leave him.

The requirement of *iddah* – a practice entrenched in the notion of male ownership of women, meant to reinforce male supremacy within both private and public spheres – extends from the gendered norms and religious practices adopted by ISIL, which rely on a model of hypermasculinity to justify the control of women. This extends to the *madhafa* system, and after her divorce, Ajla and Ehlimana again found themselves in one of these shelters. Despite the grim conditions, the environment was familiar. Still, the *madhafa* offered no path to a future, and as Ajla learned that more and more people were surrendering to Kurdish forces, who would transfer them to camps, she began contemplating this option. Despite initial fears that such a surrender would mean her children would be taken from her, or she would face violence or imprisonment, she began to see that entire families were being taken to the camps, and all indications were that their children were not being taken away. She "*had the desire to leave, to go back to Bosnia*," and as her fears over the surrender itself began to subside, the uncertainty the camps presented began to feel less daunting than the prospect of living interminably in the *madhafa*. Finally, Ajla recounted, "*I talked it over with my mother, and we decided to go*."

This decision to surrender had not been reached easily, but the relentless stress of their deteriorating circumstances had left them with few choices. The *madhafa* was suffocating and unsanitary, but worse, the conflict had started intensifying. Ajla described the final days before their surrender as the hardest: "*There were bombings, people were getting injured, burned... It was becoming unbearable*." When a temporary ceasefire and the pres-

ence of Kurdish forces offered them a way out, Ajla and her mother took it. Lacking the thousands of dollars it cost to be transported to the camps, they were instead among those whose journey to the camp was fraught with danger. The harrowing trip, made with little food, was marked by a constant fear of what lay ahead, and Ajla worried about losing her children, being beaten, or worse. Upon surrender, they had been met with hostility and suspicion, and Kurdish forces had taken from them "*whatever they wanted*," including Ajla's tablet, jewelry, personal documents, and money. Yet, for Ajla and Ehlimana, the surrender and the journey that followed nonetheless represented a sliver of optimism, a chance to finally leave the chaos behind and perhaps return home one day.

## Surviving in the Camp

Ajla's experience in the camp where she was housed before returning to BiH was grueling and dehumanizing, very much reflecting the reports of human rights organizations.[128] Upon arriving, Ajla recalled being taken "*to this room, concrete floors, a blanket, everyone crammed together... when the food started coming, there was vomiting. It was awful*." With the loss of her passport and other documents, which she had clung to as a last vestige of hope, any immediate chance of return to BiH had also been lost. "*It felt horrible*," she told researchers. "*I was angry*."

The camp was makeshift, far from the structured environment one might imagine. According to Ajla, "*It was more like a prison camp... but you had to fend for yourself for everything. Food was given monthly, but for anything else, you had to find a way to buy it*." Survival in the camp therefore relied on communal aid and the resourcefulness of the women who lived there. Ajla explained, "*There were women in the camp who somehow managed to get money, I don't know how*," but she and her mother "*relied on*

128 Georgiana Epure, and Duru Yavan, "Why hundreds of European children living in Syrian camps must be repatriated," Open Society Justice Initiative, 22 July 2021, https://www.justiceinitiative.org/voices/why-hundreds-of-european-children-living-in-syrian-camps-must-be-repatriated

*each other*." Together, they managed to purchase a small gas burner and started baking cakes and pies to sell in the camp's makeshift market. "*We had no oven, so we'd turn the pie in the pan... it was all very expensive, but we managed [to get by].*"

Ajla described their living conditions in the camp as abysmal, emphasizing the overcrowded spaces, scarce resources, and constant surveillance. She highlighted that "*[t]wenty children and fifteen women [were] sharing one toilet*," for example, and that any sign of defiance was met with punishment. Ajla said she limited her interactions to women she trusted, primarily fellow Bosnians, and even then, "*only… the Bosnians I knew… I was always afraid because you never knew who might be around (and listening).*" Despair was her constant companion. "*There were times when I lost hope… not just once, but many times*," she recalled. The fact that her children lacked access to the simplest pleasures weighed particularly heavily on her as a mother. "*It hurt me that I couldn't give my child a chocolate or a toy.*" Still, she found strength in her role as a mother, and was determined not to let her own despair affect her children. To that end, her own mother's presence in the camp was a vital source of support. Ajla admitted, "*If she hadn't been with me, I feel like I might have fallen apart… she kept me going.*"

Ehlimana was able to support her daughter in this way in part because she had adopted a much more philosophical, and tempered, view of the camp. "*[I]t wasn't so bad*," she contended, "*it was a huge relief that there was no more shelling.*" The comparative safety they found in the camp, despite the difficult conditions there, offered Ehlimana a semblance of peace, and she found solace by focusing on this and by celebrating everyday victories. For instance, schooling was informal and was conducted in tents, but she made efforts to create a sense of normalcy and routine, teaching basic skills like writing and drawing to the younger children. Ehlimana did acknowledge that the camp was vast and overcrowded but

noted that she and her family had managed to stay on the outskirts, somewhat shielded from the worst of it. Though they faced moments of fear, such as when guards fired shots into the air, they found ways to cope. And importantly, Ehlimana said, medical assistance from international and local volunteers in the camp had been crucial to the children's wellbeing.

The uncertainty that enveloped the camp was punctured one day by the unexpected announcement that some Bosnian women and their children would be repatriated. "*[T]hey just came and said 'Bosnia, you're going'… they called our names, and that was it*," Ajla recalled. However, the journey back home would not be quite so straightforward; fraught instead with confusion and false starts, and disappointment for Ajla and Ehlimana when they were sent back to the camp after a first attempted departure. As Ajla told it, "*We thought we were going home, but then we were sent back… it was crushing*." Finally, after multiple attempts, a small group of women, including Ajla and her mother, were finally transported out of the camp with their children, handed over from Kurdish to US forces. Ajla remembered that "*when the Americans took over, it felt like maybe, just maybe, this was real*."

## Back to Life in BiH

Ajla's repatriation to BiH generated a complex mix of emotions, she said, from relief to trepidation. "*I was afraid, not just of the flight itself, but of what would happen when we landed*." The women were transported on a military plane, with soldiers seated behind them, which Ajla found "*strange and unsettling… they seemed to be guarding us as if we were a threat*." But Ajla's biggest fear was the possibility of being separated from her children, a worry that had plagued her since they had decided to surrender to Kurdish forces. "*I thought [the Bosnian authorities] might take my children away, imprison me, and that would be the end*," she explained. Rumors she had heard in the camp about women being detained

or placed under house arrest in their home countries only amplified her concern. Nevertheless, she recounted feeling an overwhelming sense of relief when the plane touched down on Bosnian soil. "*When I stepped out of the plane, I couldn't believe it… it was an incredible feeling, just to be home, to feel safe again*."

Yet, Ajla, like many women returnees, noted that she was met with suspicion by some of the officials she interacted with upon returning, and this upset her. As she saw it, "*they looked at me… as if they were daring me to make a wrong move*." Ajla's perspective, that these authorities presumed her guilty before innocent, reflect years of conditioning in an authoritarian environment where trust was not dispensed freely; and is shared by many other returnee women. Thus, rehabilitation and reintegration efforts must acknowledge and manage a deep distrust that exists between returnees and state institutions. For example, Ajla's belief that Bosnian law enforcement officials viewed her as "*the worst criminal*" set the tone for her initial interactions with these officials, who she perceived as hostile.

The sense among returnee women that they are being judged harshly, or even targeted, by authorities is understandable. But at the same time, state institutions are obligated to take certain precautions when engaging with returnees. In other words, Ajla was undoubtedly a person of interest given the amount of time she spent in Syria, her association with individuals involved in conflict there, and her possible radicalization. Her claim that she was subjected to aggressive interrogation, during which she "*felt like they were trying to pin something on me*," is in fact consistent with the procedures used in high-risk repatriation cases. Though Ajla's view is that the measures taken in her case were unnecessary, they were contextually appropriate, as it is the state's priority to assess and contain risk. Inevitably, this can create friction with individuals like Ajla, who see themselves as victims of circumstance and not as potential security

threats, particularly when this self-identification as a victim serves as a way of avoiding responsibility for the gravity and impact of their decision to travel to Syria and align with ISIL.

One could argue that Ajla's fear of being imprisoned and her assumption that she was viewed as a criminal by officials speak to her underlying awareness that her past decisions were not unassailable and had perhaps been ill-advised or even wrong and harmful. She recounted how this made her initial processing in BiH extremely tense, as she feared being separated from her children. "*Every time we moved from one room to another for questioning, I was terrified they would take my children away… or that they would question them, and they might say something wrong*." When her son mentioned having seen a video of a beheading, something Ajla had been unaware of, she told researchers that she "*froze*," assuming the authorities would "*accuse us of exposing him to that, and that it would be used against us*."

It was not until Ajla was finally allowed to leave with her children by her side that she began to believe they would not be separated after all. She explained, "*Only when I got home, and everything settled down, did I realize they weren't going to take my children away*." For her, the initial repatriation process had been a harrowing experience by bringing her face-to-face with her deepest insecurities and uncertainties about returning home, but in the end, it was those fears and insecurities that had been at least as daunting as the process itself.

## The Reintegration Rollercoaster

Ajla's experience of return, in which her initial sense of relief was quickly tempered by the complexities of reintegration, is not uncommon. Beyond what she considered harsh treatment by law enforcement actors, she faced various logistical challenges, particularly in securing essential

documents for herself and her children. Her frustration over "*shameful*" bureaucratic delays that meant it took three years for her child to get necessary documents highlights a critical gap in the reintegration process, and one that was noted by other returnees as well. This ought to be a lesson learned and integrated into rehabilitation and reintegration programming for returnees, which must prioritize the swift provision of legal documentation and key services to prevent any further marginalization of returnees and their families.

What Ajla's case also underscores is the significant challenge some returnees have had in accessing sustained psychological support. She was initially included in a group therapy program, alongside other women returnees, but when this ended, both Ajla and her mother were unable to transition into individual psychotherapy treatment due to a lack of mental health professionals in their community. This gap in service represents a critical shortfall in reintegration efforts in BiH, where psychological care is often inaccessible to returnees in remote or rural areas.

In Ajla's case, even after a social worker proposed a solution that initially showed promise, by arranging psychological support through an organization in a nearby city, logistical challenges including the need for frequent travel eventually led Ajla to cancel. This is why it is essential that rehabilitation programming is designed to ensure that returnees can access the psychological care they require, and can do so sustainably over time, taking into account the financial and logistical barriers they may face. For instance, program design which appreciates that individuals who are given structural pretexts to engage selectively in the rehabilitation process may do so, to their own detriment, should make allowances for the fact that some returnees need financial support to secure transportation to other locations if such care is not available in their own community, as a means of ensuring returnees receive the full breadth of support they need.

Ajla spoke with mixed feelings about her interactions with social services in BiH. She had positive things to say about a social worker who provided empathetic and personalized support but was critical that more comprehensive medical and psychological evaluations had not been conducted on all returnees upon their return. In her view, a more holistic reintegration process should be implemented in BiH, to more comprehensively address the physical and mental health needs of returnees. Though the state provides support, it often falls short of what is truly necessary for the long-term recovery and reintegration of women and children struggling to reconcile profound traumas. Women like Ajla will need accessible, sustained mental healthcare for years, and the state must ensure that these services are available and affordable, and that practitioners remain knowledgeable about the unique psychosocial challenges faced by returnees and their families.

Programming that offers a range of services, including one-on-one counseling and peer support, is vital to helping returnees like Ajla cope with their past and present experiences, and rebuild their lives. Ajla, her children, and her mother will all need expert support to help them integrate their traumatic experiences and move forward in their lives.[129] For, when caregivers have not confronted and reconciled their own trauma, they are often unable to provide adequate support to children who are confronting their own painful emotions in response to trauma.[130] But for mothers like Ajla, reaching the point where they are able to hold emotional space for their children can be crucial to their own rehabilitation. Service providers in BiH should thus consider the development of parenting interventions meant to more effectively support parents and families following traumatic experiences, for use in returnee rehabilitation but also other contexts.

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129 Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma* (Viking, 2014).

130 Brenda Jones Harden, Joy D. Osofsky, and Chantel Alexander, "The Effects of Trauma on Parenting and Caregiving," in *WAIMH Handbook of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health*, edited by Joy D. Osofsky et al. (Springer Cham, 2024).

One challenge many returnees face in their local communities is social stigma, which can complicate reintegration. Ajla said she has been met both with positive reactions, from people who "*were so happy to see us, they cried*," to those expressing alienation and hostility; but she described an incident in a store, when a man insulted her, that has made her anxious about being judged or even attacked in public. To address and mitigate the stigmatization of returnees, community-level outreach and education may be necessary, to foster understanding and acceptance and help communities understand the value of including, as opposed to isolating, their returned neighbors.

This can be difficult to ask of community members who remain uncomfortable with the conservative ideology many returnees continue to follow, or who question whether the state has done enough to sanction their choice to depart for Syria. Yet, there is little to be gained by further marginalizing returnees from their communities, and it may reinforce their sense that they are discriminated against or victimized for their beliefs. For example, Ajla has struggled to find employment, despite her willingness to work, and speculated that she was rejected from a job at a local factory "*because of the niqab or because I was in Syria*." Considering that economic reintegration is a cornerstone of successful rehabilitation, Ajla's experience suggests that more needs to be done to ensure that returnees who are eager to enter the job market can access meaningful employment opportunities without discrimination. This could take the form of job training that is tailored to the specific needs of returnees, but it should also involve the introduction of anti-discrimination messaging and efforts to engage local businesses in actively supporting reintegration initiatives.

Such an approach would go a long way toward reframing returnees as misguided but not maladjusted and would likely reduce the extent to which returnees themselves assume, as Ajla does, that "*people think we*

*are all terrorists*." That said, returnees must also acknowledge the implications of ISIL's actions and of their choices to affiliate with such an organization. It may be a coping mechanism for Ajla to distance herself from the actions of ISIL by instead emphasizing the injustice of being labeled a terrorist by association, but this also highlights the tension many returnees face as they try to reclaim a personal identity apart from the extremist collective that ties them to a discomforting guilt, within a community that continues to tie them to that collective.

This dynamic, and this identification of returnees with extremism, has haunted Ajla's oldest son. Taken to Syria as a baby, he lost his father at a very young age, lived amidst the violence and instability of war, and has faced significant emotional and psychological challenges upon returning to BiH at nine years old. Deeply traumatized by loss and conflict, the wounds of these experiences were only exacerbated by difficulties he encountered reintegrating into Bosnian society. He seemed to be adjusting well at first, but as time passed, Ajla saw that he was facing harassment and violence from his peers at school. He was subjected to relentless bullying, both physical and psychological, over his family's past and their association with the conflict in Syria. He was taunted and isolated, adding a new layer of trauma to the already heavy burden he carried, and he found it devastating. For Ajla, who was struggling with her own reintegration and mental health, it was incredibly painful to witness her son being treated so cruelly and to understand the toll it was taking on him. He began to show signs of significant psychological distress, including behavioral changes, as his unresolved past trauma interacted with the violence he was experiencing at school to create a volatile mix, severely impacting his emotional wellbeing.

This is a kind of "polyvictimization" that professionals who work with children – including teachers, counselors, medical professionals, social and child welfare advocates, and legal and justice sector actors – should

be knowledgeable about, because "children who experience repeated victimizations and several types of victimizations may be at greater risk for… complex trauma."[131] Research shows that complex trauma exposure in children often leads to "lifelong problems that place them at risk for additional trauma exposure and cumulative impairment."[132] Hence, frontline practitioners who are familiar with polyvictimization and are able to recognize its effect in children are better able to identify the most vulnerable youth in their orbit, and can take the necessary steps to protect them from further harm.[133]

For Ajla's son, just as for Ajla and her mother, the inability to access psychological support in their community has meant he has been left to navigate his layered trauma largely on his own. The consequences of this lack of consistent and specialized psychosocial care may be profound for him over time, including by increasing his risk of experiencing problems in school, engaging in risky behaviors as he grows older, and developing a range of potentially debilitating mental health issues later in life.[134] Moreover, the social isolation he has endured could lead to long-term difficulties forming healthy relationships and building trust with others. In a life already marked by so many past hardships, Ajla's son now faces a future in which his unresolved traumas could manifest in harmful ways, due to gaps in the system that are failing him in the present. His story thus highlights the critical need for comprehensive care for children returning from conflict zones and a system that not only provides immediate but also long-term psychological and social support services, no matter where returnees live in BiH.

131 David Finkelhor et al., "Polyvictimization: Children's Exposure to Multiple Types of Violence, Crime, and Abuse," *OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, U.S. Department of Justice, October 2011, 2.

132 Alexandra Cook et al., "Complex Trauma in Children and Adolescents," *Psychiatric Annals* 35, no. 5 (2005), 2.

133 Finkelhor et al., "Polyvictimization," 2.

134 Andrea Danese, et al., "Psychopathology in children exposed to trauma: Detection and intervention needed to reduce downstream burden," *BMJ* 371 (2020).

These services must be equipped to address the challenge of PTSD in children. The abnormal processing of trauma, causing a persistent re-experiencing of an event through intrusive and distressing memories or nightmares, can be extremely disruptive and upsetting to traumatized children. While fully dissociative symptoms, such as flashbacks in which a sense of time is lost, are less common in children, the distressing nature of their memories can impact them in significant ways. In fact, the toxic stress some children experience can be so dysregulatory that it results in "disruption of the development of brain architecture."[135] Ajla has struggled to protect and support her son as he confronts these challenges, and has felt helpless to mitigate his suffering, aware that his early experiences in Syria have been compounded by more recent peer violence, intensifying feelings of insecurity and vulnerability in him that she can do little to alleviate.

Due in part to the way it has impacted her son, Ajla expressed deep regret over her decision to go to Syria. "*I lost everything I had*," she told researchers. Her advice to other women awaiting repatriation is that they seek in-person psychological services when they return, and "*do not rely on medication alone*." The work of rehabilitation, she has learned, requires individualized care and therapeutic approaches that dive deep to address the emotional and psychological scars of trauma.

For Ajla, the future still feels uncertain. She dreams of moving to a city like Zenica, which she finds "*particularly beautiful*" and more accepting than her community, but she is acutely aware of the practical challenges that such a move would entail, including the need to secure employment and housing. Still, she is not without hope and has a strong desire to continue her education, possibly in languages like German and English. She also wants to obtain her driver's license, as a means of supporting her self-improvement and independence. She will need to overcome finan-

135 Danese, et al., "Psychopathology in children exposed to trauma," 1.

cial and logistical barriers to realize these dreams, however, and in this way, Ajla's case demonstrates both the potential and the shortcomings of current rehabilitation and reintegration efforts in BiH. While some elements of institutional support have been effective, offering Ajla enough stability to think optimistically about her future, the significant gaps that remain – particularly in addressing the social stigma, psychological trauma, and economic barriers that returnees face – have served as obstacles to her progress along the way.

A more comprehensive, holistic approach to reintegration that ensures returnees have swift access to legal documentation, health screenings, and targeted economic support is necessary. This should be complemented by community-based initiatives to reduce stigma so that returnees like Ajla, and their children, can successfully rebuild their lives and fully reintegrate into Bosnian society. With trauma-informed care and guidance, women like Ajla can be supported in rebuilding their identity and finding new, positive ways to relate to their children and to their own emotional needs.

Ajla's mother does not appear to have struggled to the same degree as her daughter with this transition, and with the trauma they experienced in Syria. In fact, for Ehlimana, their return to BiH marked an opportunity to make new choices, and she decided to stop wearing the niqab. "*My son told me, 'Mom, you're an older woman, you're not required to wear the niqab*'," she recounted. This was all the push she needed, given that she "*never really preferred the niqab*" and said she had been "*forced into [wearing] it*." Even so, she is protective of Ajla's choice to wear the niqab and told researchers that, when they have encountered people in public who have responded to Ajla with fear or confusion, Ehlimana has confronted this ignorance directly and has defended her daughter's right to cover.

This issue has created tension within their family as well, especially straining relations with Ajla's paternal relatives, who refuse to acknowledge her at all. And on Ehlimana's side of the family, her brother "*stays in touch, but others, like [Ajla's] aunt, want nothing to do with her*." Ajla's re-socialization process has been marked in this way both by steps forward and persistent barriers. She has encountered a mix of support and suspicion in her community, commenting that, *"People said they were glad to see us, but how genuine was that, really?"* Indeed, across Bosnian society, there remain many questions about returnees, and even people who express outward support may hold deep-seated fears and prejudices about the ideology that drove people to depart for Syria.

Ajla's frustration with this dynamic is understandable. Yet, it also exposes the limits of her own self-awareness. While she positions herself as a victim of prejudice, her narrative is devoid of any reflection on the reasonable concerns of many Bosnians about what it means to reabsorb and reintegrate returnees from conflict zones where violent extremism was rampant. In other words, the mistrust she encounters is not baseless; it stems from the genuine risk assessments made by communities and institutions that must balance inclusivity with security. Ajla's inability, or unwillingness, to fully engage with this perspective indicates that she may not entirely grasp the gravity of her past actions.

## Conclusion

The journeys of Ajla and Ehlimana both offer critical insights into the complexities of rehabilitation and reintegration for women returning from conflict zones, particularly for those who have been deeply affected by radicalization and war. Their experiences illustrate the multifaceted challenges that these processes entail, spanning bureaucratic, psychological, social, and family domains. In Ajla's case, her reintegration has been impeded by both systemic barriers and personal trauma, underscoring the need for more efficient and responsive bureaucratic processes to address the immediate needs of returnees and highlighting the inadequacy of sustained mental health support in BiH, particularly in rural or underserved areas. The severe impact of peer violence on her son, who has already endured significant trauma from his early experiences in Syria, also brings to the fore the lack of appropriate psychological support for child returnees. Absent such support, the risk of long-term psycho-social issues for children like Ajla's son is exacerbated.

Meanwhile, the experience of Ehlimana reflects the tension between deeply ingrained traditional values and the realities of reintegration. Her influence played a considerable role in normalizing religious conservatism within her family, and yet she has chosen to remove the niqab upon returning to BiH, where this visible indicator is now associated by many Bosnians with the extremism of ISIL. Her steadfast support of Ajla's choice to cover is undeniable, however, and Ehlimana's reflex to defend her daughter in public reflects the blend of concern and control that has long marked their relationship. This should serve as a reminder to frontline practitioners that complex family dynamics can strongly shape the reintegration process, and that decision-making within families may reflect broader social pressures or even appear inconsistent, making it all the more essential that these dynamics are understood and considered in the development of more effective intervention strategies.

Additionally, Ajla's struggles with employment discrimination clarify the need for anti-discrimination measures and more inclusive economic opportunities within reintegration frameworks. While the mistrust returnees often encounter in their communities is understandable, everyone benefits if returnees are able to recapture a sense of agency, are empowered to support their families, and feel they can contribute to society in a meaningful way. This points to the necessity for community-based initiatives that foster understanding of the returnee experience and reduce stigma.

Such initiatives should be an integral part of reintegration programming, to bridge the gap between returnees and their communities. Indeed, effective reintegration requires a coordinated and society-wide effort involving mental health services, legal support, economic opportunities, and community engagement, and must be sensitive to the individual experiences of returnees. The stories of Ajla and Ehlimana, and the differences in how they have each processed the trauma of their time in Syria and their return home, exemplify why tailored support systems capable of addressing the complex needs of returnees are so vital.

# The security perspective

*An overview of the "foreign fighter phenomenon" in BiH*

At least 266 adults (192 men and 74 women) are known to have departed from BiH to ISIL territory in Syria and Iraq. Analysts, and legal systems, generally consider any man who made this journey to have acted as a foreign fighter; and because the role of women in ISIL varied so widely but included some who acted as combatants, adult women are also counted as part of the "foreign fighter phenomenon." These adults transported more than 100 Bosnian children with them.[136] Nearly four out of five of these departures from BiH occurred in 2013 and 2014, though the last was registered in November 2016, at which point this outflow came to a complete stop.[137] In the meantime, over 120 children were born to Bosnian parents (one or both) in ISIL territory, and more than 140 Bosnian men, women, and children were killed there or died of natural causes (see Table 1).

136 The term child is used here in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, as "a human being below the age of 18 years."

137 The end to departures was linked to: (1) the fall of the "Islamic State"; (2) intensified regional and international efforts to criminally prosecute aspiring and returned fighters; (3) an escalation in the fighting, making it more difficult to cross into and out of ISIL territory; and (4) an exhaustion of the pool of individuals willing to fight.

**Table 1. The fate of Bosnian citizens who traveled to Syria and Iraq (2012–2021)[138]**

| | Departures | Killed/Deceased | Returned | In Syria |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Men | 192 | 90 | 47 | 39 |
| Women | 74 | 12 | 11 | 42 |
| Children | 104 | 42 | 20* | 133 |
| Total | **370** | **144** | **78** | **214** |

* Of these, 8 children have so far been deported from BiH to other countries because they are foreign nationals, though their parents were originally from BiH.

Individuals who have returned from ISIL territory to BiH can be grouped into two distinct clusters, depending on whether they returned prior to or as part of the organized repatriation that took place in 2019, described at the opening of this text. There is also a prospective third cluster, comprised of returnees arriving in the future. Women and children in the second cluster, who are the primary focus of case studies in this text, are analyzed in particular detail below.

## The first cluster of returnees to BiH

Individuals who returned from Syria and Iraq to BiH anytime between 2012 and the end of 2019 fall into the first cluster of returnees. These were typically voluntary, individual returns, overwhelmingly of Bosnians who lived in the Sarajevo and Zenica-Doboj cantons. As Figure 1 shows (below), these were among the places the foreign fighter phenomenon took the strongest hold in BiH.

138 Figures used here were provided by official security and judiciary sources in the fall of 2020. This data may not reflect individuals who traveled to Syria and Iraq from the Bosnian diaspora in the West and hold citizenship in more than one country, or individuals considered missing or presumed but not confirmed as dead.

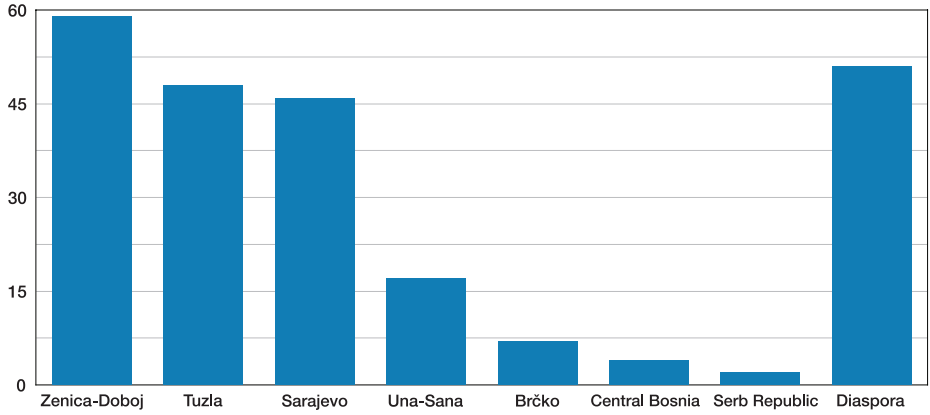



**Figure 1. Departures from BiH to Syria and Iraq by cantonal residency**

We now know that many Bosnian returnees in this first cluster were disillusioned by their experiences in Syria and Iraq, as they found realities on the ground stood in stark contrast to portrayals made to them during the recruitment process. For example, returnees reported that ISIL affiliated fighters were not operating within solid command structures and lacked basic resources, forcing them to obtain equipment for themselves; others said the formations they joined had no medical personnel, and left soldiers with non-lethal wounds to die on the battlefield; and others had witnessed soldiers switching sides or surrendering positions for money.[139] Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that some returnees in this first cluster came home to BiH not because they were disillusioned but because they felt they had contributed their fair share to a cause they continued to view as noble.

Over the years, this first cluster of returnees has been rather discreetly absorbed and gradually reintegrated into their local communities, which have provided for their needs – from accommodation, to interpersonal support, to part time employment, and more. Child returnees from this

139 For more, see: Vlado Azinović and Muhamed Jusić, *The Lure of The Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2015).

cluster have been attending school and appear well-integrated with their peers. In other words, practically speaking, both adult and child returnees in this cluster have by now resumed "normal" lives, and none have been the source of any security-related or other problems. Even men in this cluster who served time in prison for their involvement in foreign fighting are, for the most part, reintegrated into their communities.

Whether returnees in this cluster have completely disowned the ideology that led them to ISIL in the first place is another matter. There is a little evidence to support the idea that these returnees engaged in a wholesale rejection of fundamentalism, which is why many remain under surveillance by domestic security services. Nevertheless, most of these individuals have blended back into their local communities through a rehabilitation and reintegration process that was largely self-driven and was undergirded by the support of closely-knit micro-communities.

## The second cluster of returnees to BiH

The group repatriation depicted in the Introduction to this text, which took place on 19 December 2019 with the assistance of the US military and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), was approved by the tripartite Bosnian Presidency in a rare show of unity among leaders typically at odds with one another.[140] The effort brought a second cluster of returnees to BiH, comprising 7 men, 6 women, and 12 children (ages 1 through 8, 11 of whom were born in Syria).[141] These returnees were met at Sarajevo International Airport by security and medical services and were individually processed in an improvised airport-based facility. Men were re-

140 See: Emina Dizdarevic, "Bosnian Presidency Calls for Swifter Repatriations from Syria," *Balkan Insight*, 3 December 2019, https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/03/bosnian-presidency-calls-for-swifter-repatriations-from-syria/.

141 Among them was one orphaned child, a female, who was four years old at the time. She survived a carpet bombing near Baghouz in which her parents were killed, sustaining severe burns. Once in Sarajevo, she was united with her maternal grandmother, but the two had never met and could not understand one another, as the child was born in Syria and spoke only Arabic.

strained, brought out of the transport aircraft one-by-one, and processed first; all seven would subsequently be arrested and detained, and were eventually charged and sentenced. Then, women and children were processed.

Forensic evidence was collected and compared to existing databases to establish the identities of all returnees, before medical checkups were performed by two teams of emergency medicine practitioners. Two psychologists joined these teams for the examinations of women and children, and made initial observations about their mood, affect, orientation, and overall behavior, and any signs of trauma. These same psychologists maintained contact with women and child returnees over time, first during their one-week stay at a shelter outside Sarajevo – where additional medical checkups, vaccinations for children, interviews, and security debriefings took place before returnees were released to their families and home communities – and later in individual and group therapy sessions that not only involved returnees but also their immediate family members.[142]

The repatriation of this second cluster of returnees introduced a number of security and socio-economic challenges that did not arise or only arose rarely with the first cluster. For instance, birth certificates had to be issued to many children in the second cluster, who were born in conflict-affected areas in internationally unrecognized territory, so that they could access healthcare, schooling, and psychosocial counseling provided as a function of their residency and citizenship. Women who returned in this cluster also required more counseling, employment assistance, and vocational training. It was worrying, too, that many individuals in this cluster remained committed to the ideology of the "Islamic State" when they returned. Some almost certainly would not have returned to BiH if ISIL

142 These psychologists provided valuable insight to security and social service providers based on their initial and follow-up observations of these six women returnees, including assessments of the group dynamics among them, offering early findings that were crucial to devising tailored approaches to their rehabilitation and reintegration.

had not experienced such a clear military defeat. Hence, interventions aimed at the rehabilitation and reintegration of this cluster of returnees were developed with this in mind, taking a risk management approach.

### *Women returnees in the second cluster*

In interviews for this research, psychologists providing services to returnees in the second cluster discussed the complaints of the women returnees with whom they have worked, in generalized terms, to protect their identities and maintain confidentiality. They explained that these women show visible signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression, and report having frequent panic attack and trouble sleeping. In some women, these feelings of anxiety and panic are intrusive; meaning, they are so severe as to interfere with their daily activities. Symptoms such as these can persist for a very long time, even if treated properly and in a timely manner, but can be especially hard to treat in the context of comorbidities; and these women also exhibit signs of other anxiety disorders, as do many of their children. Additionally, some of these women struggle with the stigma they face as returnees, and in some cases as visibly conservative Muslims (meaning, they wear *niqab*). This is a cause for concern not only because it affects them personally but because they worry it may negatively impact their children.

Initial assessments established that some women in this cluster had a personal history of trauma prior to their experiences in ISIL territory, having survived the war in BiH and in some cases the wartime loss of a parent (typically their father) or spouse. Almost all had experienced ethnic cleansing firsthand and had lived as refugees or internally displaced persons.[143] While the suffering of Bosnian Muslims in the 1992–1995 war never featured prominently in ISIL recruitment narratives, psychologists contend that individuals who suf-

143 For the most part, research has overlooked or downplayed these contextual circumstances in evaluating factors of radicalization and recruitment in BiH and among Bosnians in the diaspora.

fer these kinds of personal traumas, especially at an early age, may be more susceptible to victimhood narratives of any sort. And when Bosnians arrived in ISIL conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, additional layers of trauma only piled up further, as they were exposed to frequent shelling, airstrikes, the loss of (more) family members, and detention in camps.

For some women in the second cluster of returnees, their willingness to endure these conditions in order to remain with their husbands has been linked by psychologists to symptoms of Dependent Personality Disorder (DPD), understood as reliance on others to meet emotional and physical needs.[144] Yet, there is limited evidence that DPD fully explains their behaviour. Many of these women had shown competence and independence earlier in life, and the greater autonomy demonstrated by the two widows and one divorcee in this cluster suggests that dependency may be situational rather than a fixed trait. Applying personality disorder labels also risks stigmatising women by implying that their difficulties are inherent and unchangeable.

Alternative psychological frameworks provide a more nuanced interpretation. Learned helplessness occurs when repeated exposure to uncontrollable circumstances teaches individuals that their actions cannot influence outcomes.[145] Over time, attempts at autonomy may seem futile, and passivity becomes a survival strategy. In the lives of these women, every effort at independence risked punishment or further violence, which reinforced the belief that inaction was the safest path. Interventions must therefore focus on rebuilding agency through safe, structured opportunities to succeed, helping women to regain confidence that their choices can bring positive change.

144 See: Kendra Beitz and Robert F. Bornstein, "Dependent Personality Disorder" in *Practitioner's Guide to Evidence-Based Psychotherapy*, edited by Jane E. Fisher and William T. O'Donohue (Springer, 2006).

145 Steven F. Maier and Martin E. P. Seligman, "Learned Helplessness at Fifty: Insights from Neuroscience," Psychological Review (2016), PMID: 27337390, PMCID: PMC4920136, https://doi.org/10.1037/rev0000033.

Stein's coercive control and attachment model highlights how survival under domination often requires complete emotional surrender to the controlling figure.[146] The paradox is that the abuser is experienced both as a source of fear and as a source of safety, producing outward compliance and inward withdrawal. Even after separation, this psychological captivity can persist through internalised control and through rejection from the wider community.

Köhler's radicalisation pendulum extends these insights by showing how rigid ideological systems can function as emotional anchors during moments of trauma and instability.[147] For some women, strict belief systems provided the illusion of stability, belonging, and meaning, but at the cost of suppressing personal identity. This dynamic creates an oscillation between fear and the comfort of ideological belonging, making disengagement both complex and frightening.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that women's dependency is better understood as an adaptive response to coercion, violence, and rigid systems, rather than as traits of a disordered personality.[148]

For all the women returnees in the second cluster, the nine months following their return were something of a "honeymoon period," during which they tended to be cooperative and optimistic in the context of rehabilitation and reintegration. But the honeymoon ended in the summer of 2020 for these women, when they learned they would be called by prosecutors to testify against former ISIL fighters who had been deported alongside them in December 2019. For a variety of reasons, each woman

146 Stein, Alexandra. 2017. Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems. London and New York: Routledge.

147 Daniel Koehler, "The Radicalisation Pendulum: Introducing a Trauma-Based Model of Violent Extremist Radicalisation," CREST Security Review, November 13, 2022, Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/the-radicalisation-pendulum-koehler/.

148 According to psychologists, these women have shown a greater commitment to participating in online therapy sessions, even when that has meant having to borrow a cellphone and find the one location in their apartment where they can connect to a neighbor's wi-fi signal.

was unwilling to testify. Some had trouble differentiating between what it meant to be a witness and a defendant, equating any appearance before a court with their own condemnation. Some also feared retaliation or rejection by Salafi communities in both BiH and Syria if they testified against their ISIL "brothers," and their testimonies would undoubtedly have been viewed as an act of treason by some members of these communities. Interestingly, however, what these women told judicial officials they feared more than anything was that they would be "abandoning Islam" by appearing in a court that administers justice based on laws designed by man instead of God, and that this would make them apostates.

All efforts by prosecutorial authorities to convince women returnees to testify ended in failure, and the stress even pushed two women to attempt suicide. While the state saw it as something of a tacit obligation of these women to testify in court, each woman eventually underwent a psychiatric evaluation by a court-appointed expert to establish her capacity to do so, and in all but one case, was found *un*fit. This episode has thus been a considerable learning experience for all the stakeholders involved in returnee rehabilitation and reintegration in BiH.

### *Interventions developed for the second cluster*

In no small measure, the success of rehabilitation and reintegration programming for women and child returnees in this second cluster has been dependent on their ability to reconnect with immediate family members. This gives these family members themselves an important role to play, particularly when family dysfunction may have been a factor in prompting their loved one(s) to depart for ISIL territory. In fact, in interviews, psychologists indicated that some form of family dysfunction could have contributed, alongside other factors, to the decision of all of these women returnees to leave BiH. Still, after years of absence and uncertainty, the family reunions that followed their return have brought joy, especially as grandparents have met their grandchildren born abroad, for the first time.

As the years pass, however, there appears to be greater pressure exerted from within families for women returnees to assume more responsibility and care for themselves, including by actively seeking work. These women are mothers themselves now, with their own priorities and views, separate from those of their parents, and this has created tension between some parents and their returnee daughters. For some returnees, this has added to their sense of isolation, only making it clearer that family support is critical to the wellbeing of women returnees, and that families can serve as a powerful rehabilitation and reintegration tool. Families must be supported in this role through activities such as individual and group psychotherapy, and perhaps through financial assistance. In BiH, the families of the six women who returned in the second cluster have been paid an important if modest stipend (enough to cover basic provisions), though its effectiveness cannot be evaluated because disbursements have been random and uneven, with families in Sarajevo Canton receiving more reliable payments than families in Zenica-Doboj and Tuzla cantons.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that within these family dynamics, dependency may also serve hidden functions that complicate reintegration. For some women, remaining dependent helps maintain closeness with family members and ensures ongoing engagement with state or social services. This dynamic can shield them from re-experiencing earlier relational wounds marked by invisibility, lack of investment, and disbelief—experiences closely tied to the psychological concept of mattering, the fundamental human need to feel seen, valued, and important. In this sense, dependency may not only reflect immediate material needs but also unconscious strategies to avoid revisiting childhood pain associated with not mattering.[149]

149 Elliott, G.C., Colangelo, M.F. and Gelles, R.J. (2005) 'Mattering and Suicide Ideation: Establishing and Elaborating a Relationship', Social Psychology Quarterly, 68(3), pp. 223–238. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/019027250506800303. Billingham, L. and Irwin-Rogers, K. (2021) 'The terrifying abyss of insignificance: Marginalisation, mattering and violence between young people', Oñati Socio-Legal Series, 11(5), pp. 1222–1249.

### *Between de-radicalization and risk management*

Upon returning to BiH in the second cluster, the commitment of women returnees to a Salafist interpretation of Islam varied, but they all expressed a distaste for and resentment of imams and other representatives of the official Islamic Community (IC) of BiH, which advances a moderate interpretation of Islam. Significantly, this challenges a belief advanced frequently by analysts and others that moderate religious leaders like the IC and its imams should play a more central role in "de-radicalizing" returnees in the early stages of their return. Still, over time and as their children have grown, women returnees have gradually softened on this issue, allowing their children to attend religious classes organized by the IC. The IC has also extended humanitarian assistance to returnees and some women who returned in the second cluster have begun accepting this support. As a byproduct, they have slowly built relationships with women representatives of the IC.

Notably, psychosocial profiling indicates that the adherence of some women returnees to Salafism does not extend from a pursuit of spirituality per se. Instead, in women who exhibit a certain degree of interpersonal dependence on others, this personality of reliance can be reinforced by the rigidity and simplicity of a Salafist worldview, especially by elevating the importance of guidance from their husbands. Thus, interventions are likely to be more successful if they avoid directly engaging with the religious beliefs of women returnees, at least initially, no matter how divergent they may be from the local norm. Cognitive science research suggests similarly that it is "better… not to attack or persuade [believers] on the content of their sacred beliefs but rather to change their perception of what they assume their peers think are acceptable actions (aka social norms)."[150]

150 Nafees Hamid, "The Neuroscience of 'Devoted Actors' Within Extremist Groups," *Newlines Magazine*, 1 March 2021, https://newlinesmag.com/argument/the-neuroscience-of-devoted-actors-within-extremist-groups/.

Indeed, the notion of "de-radicalization" itself can constrain effective intervention, especially by too narrowly defining the process and its desired outcomes. If the repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration of returnees is viewed through the alternative lens of risk management, the focus shifts away from a need to change minds and toward the question of how emotional capacity building can be supported to ensure the full (re)integration of returnees into their communities. So far, this more nuanced (and frankly, more secular) approach has produced positive results with women in the second cluster. Before devising any interventions that engage the IC of BiH as a partner, it is therefore crucial that the role of religion as both a push and pull factor of violent extremism in BiH is better contextualized and understood.

Research that has linked the intensification of religious identity in recent decades with an over-abstraction of certain concepts and an over-emphasis on black-and-white and 'us versus them' categories that "impoverish critical thinking" implies that policymakers should "focus on interventions that raise the complexity of thinking," to prevent extremism.[151] Whether religious dogma can effectively "raise the complexity of thinking" is uncertain, and many practitioners interviewed for this study were doubtful about the extent and type of impact that religion or religious officials can have in the context of rehabilitation and reintegration. These interviewees largely rejected the notion that individuals who become "good believers" cannot be radicalized to extremism or terrorism. That said, some interviewees argued it is precisely the dogmatic character of religion, infused with an array of punishments and incentives, which makes it a powerful tool of rehabilitation and reintegration, and of preventing and countering violent extremism.

151 Sara Savage, "Extremism and Complexity of Thinking: The Psychological Reason for Investing in Education" in *How to Prevent Extremism and Policy Options*, edited by Khalid Koser and Thomas Thorp (Tony Blair Faith Foundation, 2015), 43.

### *Children in the second cluster*

Child returnees who arrived in the second cluster were quite young at the time they returned, ranging from just one to eight years of age. All have shown signs of PTSD, with some prompted by the mere sound of an airplane to scream in panic and run for cover; a response obviously related to airstrikes they endured in the conflict zone. Some of these children have exhibited selective mutism, which presents as the consistent reticence of children to speak in certain situations, such as in school, even when they can speak in other settings, such as in the home. Some have also been diagnosed with separation anxiety disorder, which means they experience intense anxiety that exceeds what is appropriate at their developmental level, relating to their separation from parents or parental figures. The hardships and abuse endured by children who lived under ISIL rule or in camps like Al-Hol amounted to cruel and inhuman treatment, and there is little question that this has traumatic implications which will reverberate across time.

Alongside the significant emotional challenges these children in the second cluster had to confront upon returning to BiH, one of the biggest obstacles to their reintegration was administrative. For years, access to services for children returnees born in Syria or Iraq was hindered by the fact that they lacked birth certificates or other documentation to facilitate their registration as citizens and residents. While this problem remained unresolved, social workers were forced to circumvent the law just to enroll these children in schools and ensure they could access health care. The question of these "invisible children" was finally resolved in 2023 and child returnees were registered as a Bosnian citizens, but only after protracted legal proceedings that had burdened their families with expenses ranging from the cost of an expert witness required to testify about when a child was born, to the fee for DNA analysis needed to prove a child's paternity.

This represented a form of official exclusion of child returnees by the state. But some children who returned to BiH have also faced a social stigma that marks their daily life with a more pervasive sense of discrimination and exclusion. Across contexts, this has been true of child returnees from ISIL territory, many of whom have reported being treated unfairly or neglected by teachers in school, for instance. There may also be a gendered component to the experiences of child returnees, as recent survey research found that girls felt they had no one to turn to for guidance or support in their home communities while boys were more likely to cite family and friends as sources of assistance and encouragement – which suggests that girls may face the risk of additional marginalization as a result of how gender shapes the social support networks available to children.[152]

On top of this, the conflict and camp environments children experienced in Syria and Iraq deprived them of a formal education, compounding the challenges they must overcome as returnees. Children often missed years of schooling, leaving them so undereducated that this, by itself, represents a significant barrier to their rehabilitation and reintegration. For many children, their experiences under ISIL rule also had a lasting impact on their trust in formal institutions.[153] For these reasons, the rehabilitation process for child returnees is thought to be more effective when it focuses on addressing the practical and psychological impacts of their life in ISIL territory and in displacement camps in Syria, rather than on ideology. Communities and service providers should therefore prioritize trauma-sensitive behavioral interventions, psychotherapy, and educational and social activities designed to support the reintegration of child returnees over the long term.

152 Jacqueline Parry, Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, and Siobhan O'Neil, *Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Children from Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation: Experiences from Iraq and Al Hol*, MEAC Findings Report No. 20 (United Nations, 2022).

153 Parry, Khoshnaw, and O'Neil, *Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Children from Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation*.

## Bosnian women and children who remain in refugee camps in Syria

A prospective third cluster of returnees to BiH would likely include approximately 100 women and children currently living in the Al-Hol and Al-Roj refugee camps, in northeastern Syria. Some 20 men also remain in prisons at officially undisclosed locations in Kurdish-controlled areas; and another 20 men, a dozen women, and more than 50 children are still believed to be living in the Idlib Governorate in northwestern Syria (see Table 2). UN experts have repeatedly emphasized the need to repatriate children, specifically, from Al-Hol and Al-Roj, "the two largest locked camps for women, girls, and young boys," and have called their detention "a violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirms no child shall be deprived of liberty unlawfully or arbitrarily."[154] In Al-Hol alone, there are about 64,000 inhabitants, 94 percent of whom are women and children, and 53 percent of whom are children under the age of 12.[155]

**Table 2. Bosnian citizens thought to remain in Syria as of early 2024**

| | In refugee camps | In detention | At large | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Men | - | 18 | 19 | 37 |
| Women | 30 | - | 12 | 42 |
| Children | 78 | 2 | 55 | 135 |
| Total | **108** | **20** | **86** | **214** |

In both Al-Hol and Al-Roj, detainees who remain devoted ISIL supporters have proven dangerous to others. This is part of why the UN warned by early 2021 that "thousands of people held in the camps are exposed to violence, exploitation, abuse and deprivation in conditions and treatment that may well amount to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment under international law, with no effective remedy at their disposal," asserting that "[a]n unknown number have already

154 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Children in Northeast Syria must be urgently repatriated: Un experts," press release, 31 March 2023, https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2023/03/children-northeast-syria-must-be-urgently-repatriated-un-experts

155 UNICEF, "Whole of Syria Humanitarian Situation Report: End-of-year 2020," 2 February 2021.

died because of their conditions of detention."[156] Kurdish officials who run Al-Hol attribute killings in the camp to ISIL adherents seeking to punish their enemies and intimidate anyone else.[157] Indeed, authorities have uncovered several ISIL cells inside the camp, and ISIL supporters have even carried out "trials," in some cases sentencing defendants to death for allegedly betraying the group.[158]

Renouncing ISIL can thus make one a target in the camps, and women who have done so live in constant fear of retribution by ISIL enforcers; typically meted out by setting a tent on fire, or throwing rocks at a woman and her children, but sometimes ending in murder. In the so-called caliphate, enforcers such as these belonged to units of the morality police, which regulated the behavior of other women. They delivered harsh punishment in ISIL territory, and have effectively reconstituted their mission behind the barbed wire of Al-Hol.[159] At least three Bosnian women have been among those attacked in Al-Hol, when they were severely beaten in 2021 by Russian women armed with iron bars (see Figure 2), who accused their victims of spying, removing their niqabs, and listening to secular folk music downloaded to their cellphones. These Bosnian women were eventually moved to a secure location for their own protection.

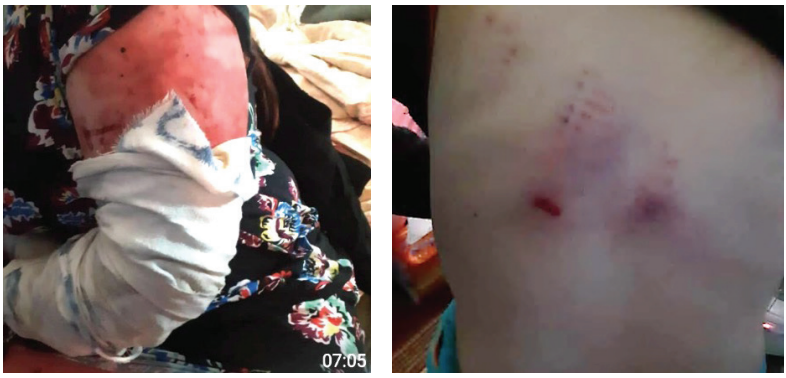
156 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Syria: UN experts urge 57 States to repatriate women and children from squalid camps," press release, 8 February 2021, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/02/syria-un-experts-urge-57-states-repatriate-women-and-children-squalid-camps?LangID=E&NewsID=26730

157 According to the Rojava Information Center and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, most of these victims have been shot in the back of the head at close range. See: Bassem Mroue, "Killings surge in Syria camp housing Islamic State families," *Associated Press*, 17 February 2021, https://apnews.com/article/killings-surge-syria-camp-isis-families-1aef71d9c11cc4b9f77ac22fa205601b

158 See: The Soufan Center, "Hunger Strike at Syrian Displacement Camp Highlights Security and Humanitarian Challenges," *IntelBrief*, 24 February 2021, https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-february-24/

159 The Soufan Center, "Hunger Strike at Syrian Displacement Camp Highlights Security and Humanitarian Challenges."

**Figure 2. Injuries sustained by Bosnian women in an attack in Al-Hol camp**




Despite this violence in the camps, and rising calls for countries to repatriate citizens stranded in Syria, repatriations slowed dramatically in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and have not been restarted with any urgency. Syrian researchers caution that if thousands of children are left to languish in places like Al-Hol, they will almost surely be radicalized, many to violence, making the camp a "womb that will give birth to new generations of extremists."[160] Many Bosnian women and children living in these camps have described appalling conditions in communications with their families, and women have expressed a willingness to return home even if it means facing trial and conviction in BiH.

Still, there are also some women from BiH who would rather remain in Syria or live elsewhere under the kind of Islamic rule promised to them by ISIL. They have conveyed their desire not to return home and appear to prefer the prospect of joining fellow Bosnians currently living in Idlib (see Box 2) – who were once on the "other side" in an ideological schism between rebel groups in the region. For these women, returning to an "apostate country" like BiH is viewed as such sacrilege that switching allegiances and reaching out to compatriots in Idlib is considered the lesser evil.[161]

160 Abdullah Suleiman Ali, as quoted in: "Syria refugee camp 'womb' for new generation of IS extremists as killings surge," *Sky News*, 18 February 2021, https://news.sky.com/story/syria-refugee-camp-womb-for-new-generation-of-is-extremists-as-killings-surge-12221571

161 Sources revealed in interviews that some Bosnian women in Syrian camps have turned to Salafi networks or family members in the diaspora for money, hoping to bribe Kurdish guards to smuggle them out, to Idlib.

## Box 2. Bosnians in Idlib

In 2014 and 2015, a group of Bosnians broke ranks with the larger Bosnian contingent in Syria by deciding to join the Al-Qaeda-linked group Al-Nusra Front for the People of the Levant (*Jabhat Fatah al-Sham*). They settled in the Idlib region, close to the Syrian border with Turkey, and remained there throughout the ideological and operational evolution of Al-Nusra, until it merged in February 2017 with four other groups to form *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS). HTS and its Bosnian contingent in Idlib fought against other jihadist groups, including ISIL, but also against Syrian regime forces. The group also enjoyed support from Turkey and served as a proxy force during a 2020 Turkish military incursion aimed at stopping the advances of the Syrian regime around Saraqib and Idlib.

The most prominent Bosnian in HTS is Nusret Imamović, the former leader of the Salafi community in BiH. Imamović departed BiH for Syria in January 2014 intending to mediate the ideological and military confrontation between Al-Nusra and ISIL but failed to prevent the rupture between these two factions. When he opted himself for Al-Nusra, many of his followers were dismayed, as they overwhelmingly chose to join ISIL. In 2016, Imamović was added to the UN Sanctions List for "participating in the financing, planning, facilitating, preparing, or perpetrating of acts or activities by, in conjunction with, under the name of, on behalf of, or in support of" Al-Nusra;[162] and in 2020, to the EU Sanctions List of persons and entities associated with or supporting ISIL and Al-Qaeda.[163]

162 United Nations Security Council Sanctions, "Nusret Imamovic" https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/nusret-imamovic

163 See: "UK Government has ordered to freeze assets of additional 300 persons related to ISIL and AL-QAIDA," *The Financial,* 3 October 2020, https://www.finchannel.com/world/opinion-3/78463-uk-government-has-ordered-to-freeze-assets-of-additional-300-persons-related-to-isil-and-al-qaida

Nevertheless, he resides in the Syrian village of Millis, near the Turkish border, with his family – which now includes a second wife – and a small congregation of followers; in many ways reminiscent of the Salafi community he once led in BiH.[164]

There are no indications that Imamović or other Bosnians in HTS have contemplated returning to BiH. Unlike their compatriots who opted for ISIL, members of HTS are still able to live freely in Syria and adhere to the core values of Salafism they first embraced in BiH under the influence and guidance of Imamović. For many Bosnian men who did choose to fight with ISIL and now sit in Kurdish prisons while their families languish in refugee camps, any animosity they felt for HTS has largely faded, and some view the HTS settlement in Idlib as a more attractive alternative than deportation back to BiH and arrest upon arrival. Many of their wives, still held in camps, share this perspective.

## The role of local communities in reintegration

Because the first group deportation to BiH from Syria in December 2019, which produced the second cluster of returnees, was relatively small, lessons must be learned and applied from the experience of this cluster to ensure that deportation of a potential third cluster – which could involve over 100 women and children from the Al-Hol and Al-Roj camps alone – is combined with the most effective, evidence-based rehabilitation and reintegration programming. This is more crucial than ever, given that the needs of these returnees will almost certainly be more profound than those of previous clusters, with returnees more widely dispersed across the country. Rehabilitation and reintegration programming for a third cluster of re-

164 Despite repeated claims in Bosnian media that Nusret Imamovic has moved to Libya to assume command of a Salafi military unit, knowledgeable sources in in Syria and BiH maintain that he resides in Millis with his family.

turnees should be grounded in the full mobilization of local social service and mental health centers, government and police, educational authorities, and civil society, with guidance and support from entity authorities. In the Federation of BiH, the government has worked with the Atlantic Initiative to develop protocols for multisector coordination, for instance. This framework can be enhanced by a mapping of the communities most likely to be affected by the arrival of a third cluster of returnees, to assess available capacities and plan appropriate awareness raising and training activities.

To strengthen these frameworks, it is also necessary to address explicitly the fears and disrupted social norms that have contributed to women returnees being seen as outcasts. Reintegration cannot be achieved solely through top-down coordination but must also work systemically at the community level, whether through training field workers and CSOs or by engaging directly with families. Given the relatively small numbers of returnees, such efforts can be targeted and tailored using systemic tools and strategies.

Equally important, women must be allowed the time and space to make mistakes, to experiment, and to try again without constant surveillance or the pressure of being judged as "good" or "bad." As some authors argued, successful reintegration requires individuals to have the freedom to rebuild their identities, emphasazing the emotional challenges post-release and the importance of supportive environments. For these women, the sense of an "invisible sentence" often persisted, shaped by the rigid control of their past relationships and reinforced by community dynamics, making access to a safe, non-judgmental space essential for rehabilitation.

The absence of a formal legal process has left some communities without a clear sense of justice, allowing unresolved tensions to linger in silence. Facilitating open dialogue at the community level—where fears, frustrations, and resentments can be voiced—can help residents feel heard and empower them to become active participants in reintegration. As Briggs shows, community engagement has been central in counter-terrorism ef-

forts elsewhere, creating opportunities for dialogue that bridge divides and foster mutual understanding.[165]

Finally, embedding women within community systems through voluntary work or local engagement provides opportunities for them to give back, demonstrate responsibility, and address the community's need for justice. Such activities should be non-religious and aligned with individual interests—for example, volunteering in schools for those interested in education, or in healthcare settings for those drawn to nursing. Restorative justice approaches, as Braithwaite (2002) highlights, foster trust and reintegration by repairing harm and involving both victims and communities in the process. Such strategies can reduce animosity and lay the foundation for sustainable rehabilitation.

Though knowledge about the Bosnian women and children who may be included in a third cluster is drawn from incomplete information received from multiple sources, some of the communities to which they are expected to return are shown below (see Table 3).[166] However, because Bosnian authorities have never established a regular presence on the ground in northeastern Syria, they could not independently confirm or verify this data.[167] Even incomplete, this mapping clearly points to the fact that the four cantons which saw the highest number of departures to Syria and Iraq (see Figure 1) are most likely to be impacted by the arrival of many new returnees in a potential third cluster. This analysis should help authorities prepare to deliver the necessary support to returnees, in their local communities.

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165 Briggs, R. (2010). Community engagement for counterterrorism: Lessons from the United Kingdom. *International Affairs, 86*(4), 971–981. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2010.00923.x

166 The International Committee of the Red Cross ICRC shared a list of 19 women, 47 children, and 11 late teenagers (ages between 16 and 19) of Bosnian origin in camps in northeastern Syria. However, when cross-referenced with other sources, their list fell short in identifying at least 11 women and 20 children.

167 This is because Kurdish political and territorial autonomy in the region is still internationally unrecognized and contested, as well as the fact that Bosnian authorities are very mindful of the perceptions of officials in Ankara, which does not recognize the Kurds and is actively involved in armed conflict against them, leading to concern in Sarajevo as to how Turkey may react if Bosnian officials were in contact with Kurdish authorities.

**Table 3. Destination of Potential Third Cluster Returnees, by Canton**

| Canton | Specific Location | Mother's Birth Year | Children (up to 19, b. 2006 or later) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **UNA-SANA** | Bužim | 1990 | **3** – b. 2015 (♀), 2016 (♂), and 2017 (♂) |
| **UNA-SANA** | Bužim | 1985 | **4** – b. 2007 (♀), 2013 (♀), 2014 (♂), and 2018 (♂) |
| **UNA-SANA** | Bužim or Cazin | 1985 | **4** – b. 2007 (♀), 2008 (♂), 2015 (♂), and 2018 (♂) |
| **UNA-SANA** | Cazin | Unknown | **4** – dates of birth unknown |
| **UNA-SANA** | Bosanska Krupa | 1969 | **3** – b. 2010 (♂), 2008 (♀), and 2006 (♀) |
| **TUZLA** | Tuzla | 1970 | **1** – b. 2006 (♀) |
| **TUZLA** | Gradačac | 1990 | **4** – b. 2008 (♀), 2012 (♂), 2014 (♀), and 2017 (♀) |
| **TUZLA** | Gradačac | 1967 | **1** – b. 2006 (♀) |
| **SARAJEVO** | Novi Grad/Ilidža | 1985 | **3** – b. unknown (♂), 2017 (♂), and 2018 (♂) |
| **SARAJEVO** | Novi Grad/Ilidža | 1987 | **2** – b. 2015 (♀) and 2018 (♀) |
| **SARAJEVO** | Novi Grad/Ilidža | 1988 | **1** – b. 2015 (♂) |
| **ZENICA-DOBOJ** | Zenica | 1988 | **5** – b. 2008 (♂), 2010 (♂), 2011 (♂), 2014 (♀), and 2016 (♀) |
| **ZENICA-DOBOJ** | Zenica | Unknown | **2** – b. 2017 (♂) and 2019 (♀) |
| **ZENICA-DOBOJ** | Tešanj | Unknown | **3** – b. 2006 (♀), 2015 (♀), and 2016 (♂) |

| Canton | Specific Location | Mother's Birth Year | Children (up to 19, b. 2006 or later) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **ZENICA-DOBOJ** | Tešanj | 1970 | **6** – b. 2008 (♂), 2010 (♀), 2012 (♂), 2013 (♀), 2016 (♀), and 2018 (♀) |
| **UNKNOWN** | Unknown | Unknown | **1** – b. 2014 (♂) |
| **UNKNOWN** | Unknown | 1990 | **1** – b. 2018 (♀) |
| **UNKNOWN** | Unknown | 1993 | **3** – b. 2013 (♀), 2018 (♀), and 2016 (♂) |
| **UNCLEAR** | Potentially: Zavidovići, Sanski Most, Gornja Maoča, or Austria | 1972 | **4** – dates of birth unknown |

Despite the urgent need to repatriate these women and children, calls for repatriation have been met with hesitation and obstruction, driven by concerns over the potential security risks these individuals pose. Hence, a significant number of Bosnian nationals, including children, remain in camps in Syria, facing uncertain futures. Leaving children to grow up in these harsh environments with limited access to education but ample exposure to the ideology of ISIL not only represents a human rights violation, however, but creates an ongoing security threat. Strategies to repatriate and reintegrate these children as soon as possible must be developed, in BiH and elsewhere, based on the recognition that intensive and tailored interventions facilitated through knowledgeable local practitioners offer the best chance for their rehabilitation, which is the most effective way to mitigate the threat these youth may pose at home or abroad.

In fact, the findings of this research confirm that BiH should make every effort to repatriate its citizens from Syria without further delay, so that the effects of the violence to which they have been subject and exposed

do not become insurmountable. The longer these women and children remain in the brutal conditions of camps such as Al-Hol and Al-Roj, the more trauma they will be forced to confront in the process of rehabilitation and reintegration. Policymakers must therefore build the capacity to provide these returnees with comprehensive, gender-sensitive care, and with support to navigate any legal or social barriers that may stand in the way of their full reintegration. This will require close collaboration across government and civil society, to deploy a holistic strategy that meaningfully supports reintegration, particularly for children at high risk of radicalization, while ensuring the security of the wider community.

# Conclusion

## *Rehumanizing Women Returnees in the Shadow of Securitization*

This research traced the deeply complex and often contradictory journeys of women from BiH who travelled to ISIL territory and subsequently returned. By integrating firsthand narratives and institutional perspectives, it offers a layered perspective that exposes the insufficiency of binary categories such as "perpetrator" and "victim," "radical" and "rehabilitated," or "threat" and "survivor." The thread running through all these women's experiences is not an ideological or moral clarity, but their negotiations of fear, identity, and trauma, and a search for meaning and belonging. Thus, any attempt to reduce their stories to static security typologies risks erasing the insights most critical to preventing future cycles of radicalization.

At the same time, rehumanization cannot be understood as a one-directional process. It is not only about society granting recognition to women returnees but also about the women themselves extending recognition

to others, including moderate Muslims in Bosnia, whose faith and way of life may differ from their own. Without this reciprocity, reintegration risks remaining superficial, built on tolerance rather than genuine mutual acceptance. True rehumanization requires both sides to engage in seeing and treating one another as full human beings, with dignity, rights, and the possibility of shared belonging.

In interviews, women returnees generously shared their rich internal lives and emotional vulnerabilities. This helped researchers understand the deeply gendered pathways that led these women into and out of violent extremism, for instance by illuminating the fact that their departures for ISIL-held territory had rarely been driven by the ideological militancy often associated with male foreign fighters but by personal crises of meaning, hopelessness, or the allure of community. In contrast, securitized framings have tended to emphasize male-centric models of radicalization, and this disjuncture is clear in the way state institutions understand threat vis-à-vis returnees. For security actors, threat is assessed through observable behaviors, digital traces, and associations. Yet, many returnees identify threats of another sort as push factors in their own radicalization; existential and internal threats like insignificance, abandonment, and purposelessness – which do not fit neatly into algorithms of risk prediction.

It should also be noted that the choice of legal and judicial officials to largely exempt women from prosecution in BiH, citing an absence of evidence or lack of agency, does not mean women returnees have been fully reintegrated into their communities. Even when these women have eagerly embraced rehabilitation, many continue to face what one interviewee called "*an invisible sentence*," levied through social stigma, institutional neglect, and public scrutiny. In this way, their stories highlight that successful reintegration is not merely logistical. Indeed, it is *fundamentally* emotional and relational, as women returnees must simultaneously

navigate the process of deradicalization on an internal level and the pressure of stigmatization on a community level.

At its heart, rehabilitation and reintegration is a transformative process, and several interviewees described needing to "*unlearn*" deeply embedded worldviews, not simply by renunciating ISIL and its ideology but by engaging in the painful process of confronting past decisions and reconstructing maternal and familial bonds disrupted by war and displacement. As these women portrayed it, this rehabilitative journey is less about rejecting a group and more about reclaiming a self. For some, this has involved reconnecting with children or family members they left behind; for others, it has meant redefining their faith outside the rigid and punitive lens of extremism.

Notably, many women returnees in BiH have moved through the transformative work of rehabilitation without receiving sustained institutional support. Psychosocial assistance, legal aid, and community reintegration programs have been inconsistent at best, and in many cases absent. The burden has therefore fallen almost entirely on women returnees themselves, and their families. While part of the reason for this is a lack of certain services in rural areas, other gaps in the system of rehabilitation and reintegration for women returnees in BiH are linked to the insistence but inability of institutional actors to neatly situate these women within conventional criminal-legal frameworks for counterterrorism. This produces an ambiguity that informs uneven responses for men and women. In fact, women are often seen both as potential security risks and passive victims of male extremist actors.

The truth may lie somewhere in between; and at any rate, is nuanced and complicated. For example, many of the women interviewed for this study acknowledged their own agency in choosing to depart for Syria, even when that decision was shaped by trauma, manipulation, or coer-

cion. And women who have remained committed to a more conservative form of Islam were among those who claimed to have been disillusioned with ISIL began almost immediately upon arriving in Syria, and to have grown more so as they witnessed the group's hypocrisy, repression, and gendered violence. Yet, the voices of these women remain peripheral in political and media discourses. This exclusion reinforces gendered assumptions about the inherent subordination of women in the context of extremism and effectively silences some of the most valuable perspectives on how extremism functions in practice.

Feminist criminological analysis urges us to resist oversimplifications that define women through binaries of power (i.e. victim, subordinate, dependent, etc.); and these case studies demonstrate that agency is rarely unqualified, or victimhood always absolute. Women returnees may be complicit in systems of repression – even if only through silence or conformity – and may also be victims of abuse and isolation themselves, leaving them deeply traumatized. The strength of this research rests in a refusal to resolve this ambiguity prematurely, and in doing so, it has demonstrated unequivocally that women returnees must be supported by rehabilitation and reintegration programming that is both gender- and context-sensitive.

The same is true for their children; and this was another key finding of this study. For, adult returnees remain the focus of institutional reintegration efforts, while their children – many of whom were born in conflict zones, endured bombings, and witnessed public executions – are treated as practically invisible. The result has been a lack of psychosocial support tailored to these children, as well as administrative obstacles, such as the difficulty mothers have experienced trying to register their foreign-born children to ensure they can access such services in the first place. Yet, delivering these services to child returnees is perhaps doubly important, as they are doubly burdened, by their own trauma and by the social stigma

attached to the choices of their parents; which means that their reintegration is often largely contingent on the reintegration of their mothers. A failure to fully consider the needs of these children at the institutional level by providing targeted psychosocial and educational support is a missed opportunity to intervene in a cycle of marginalization and prevent its replication.

For women and child returnees alike, generic or security-first approaches simply cannot address the complexity of the trauma they have experienced. And for women, these approaches are unlikely to meaningfully support the rehabilitative transformation that is so important to their own reintegration and that of their children. Facilitating the kind of support these returnees need will require fundamentally rethinking the way state institutions view successful reintegration, however. This will mean re-training professionals across sectors – from mental health, to social work, to education, to law enforcement – to emphasize not only the goal of ideological disengagement, but also personal empowerment, and the ability to restore relationships and find belonging. Returnees must be understood as people navigating trauma and identity reconstruction, and reintegration must be imagined as a social project.

At the same time, reintegration cannot be divorced from the broader question of how Bosnian society defines what is "moderate" and acceptable in Islam today. The line between conservative religious expression and extremism is not always clear, and expectations that women must abandon visible markers of religiosity to be accepted back into society can reinforce feelings of exclusion. If moderate Islam values women's choice, then this principle should extend to personal decisions around dress and practice, so long as these choices do not restrict women's participation in education, employment, or civic life. Hijabs, now common in Bosnia, can be understood in this way as expressions of women's autonomy, while niqabs present practical barriers to work and public engagement.

More broadly, society's focus should not be on outward appearance alone but on addressing the social, emotional, and identity needs that drew some women and men toward Salafist groups in the first place. By broadening the notion of belonging beyond religious conformity to include shared histories, cultural traditions, social values, and civic engagement, Bosnia can create space for diverse identities. This inclusive approach may not only reduce alienation but also strengthen resilience by offering alternative pathways for participation that are not dependent on strict ideological frameworks.

In this sense, reintegration is about more than individual rehabilitation. It is about constructing an inclusive social fabric where women and children returnees are not permanently marked as outsiders, and where communities can absorb diversity without fear of losing cohesion. Meeting the deeper needs of returnees and their communities through multiple pathways—emotional support, economic opportunity, civic participation—can reduce the appeal of exclusionary groups and strengthen Bosnia's resilience to future cycles of division.

At the same time, it should be acknowledged that what is being asked of women returnees exposes a troubling normative dualism at the institutional level related to which extremisms are securitized in BiH. These women are expected to partake in formal rehabilitation programming on the basis of their association with the violent extremism of ISIL, regardless of whether there is any evidence they engaged in or directly supported violence, while other citizens are free to express the extremist ethnonationalist rhetoric that fueled the 1992–1995 war. This includes the spouses of some convicted war criminals, who publicly justify the mass atrocities and wartime violence committed by their husbands. Despite the clear threat that ethnonationalism poses to social cohesion and stability in BiH, its advocates are rarely subject to any form of ideological scrutiny, psychosocial intervention, or demands for rehabilitation. Mean-

while, women returnees from Syria and Iraq are framed as high-risk, culturally dissimilated, and requiring surveillance, even if they have already disengaged from violent extremism and are seeking to rebuild their lives.

This double standard and selective securitization undermines the state's promotion of rehabilitation as a pathway to civic reintegration and, combined with institutional failures to proactively address far-right extremism and ethnonationalist narratives, has a corrosive effect on the credibility and sustainability of rehabilitation and reintegration programming aimed at returnees. Indeed, by remaining silent as war criminals are glorified, and genocide denial and hate speech are normalized, institutions send a dangerous message that some forms of extremism are tolerable, if not acceptable, but others are exceptional threats to national security. This weakens public trust, demotivates practitioners, and signals to returnees that they are being selectively held to a punitive standard. It also severely constrains the long-term effectiveness of any "whole-of-society" approach, as rehabilitation cannot be genuinely transformative in an environment where ideologies of violence and exclusion continue to be the norm. Hence, if the state is committed to strengthening institutional integrity and preventing ideological recidivism among extremist actors, it must pursue consistent and comprehensive measures that address all forms of extremism equally.

**Recommendations**

The question of selective securitization is a broader one and speaks to the underlying social currents that institutions will have to play a part in reorienting, to achieve true social cohesion in BiH. In the meantime, however, steps can be taken to improve rehabilitation and reintegration programming for women returnees from Syria and Iraq, and their families. To that end, the following key recommendations were drawn from the findings of this research and from insights shared by interviewees:

### 1. Facilitate comprehensive psychosocial support for returnees from the outset

Ensuring that returnees begin receiving ***mental health services immediately*** upon their repatriation is essential. This should include ***tailored therapy for both women returnees and their children***. Moreover, discrepancies in the psychosocial services available to returnees in different communities, and across regions, must be addressed. BiH should adopt a ***standardized approach to post-conflict rehabilitation and reintegration*** in order to guarantee that all returnees have access to consistent, high-quality psychosocial support, regardless of their location. This is essential to their successful reintegration, and therefore to the wellbeing of communities at large.

### 2. Provide psychosocial support to families from an early stage

The importance of family members in the rehabilitation process is clear. ***Family-centered support programs*** that provide counseling and direction to the relatives of returnees can help bridge communication gaps that complicate reintegration. The support of family is often essential to returnees, but families may need guidance to provide it. Thus, this should be available to family members at the earliest stages of their loved one's reintegration process(es).

### 3. Standardize a non-judgmental approach

It is a good reminder for frontline practitioners that women returnees emphasized the importance that they be approached with ***compassion and non-judgment***. To be truly competent, professionals supporting women returnees through the processes of rehabilitation and reintegration must be trained in the psychology of radicalization and extremism but also the psychology of gendered abuse and violence. And they must be conscious

of how trauma can intertwine and interact with both. Performing this work with compassion means recognizing that women returnees may have been manipulated and/or coerced by a series of authority figures, perhaps throughout their lives, and may have suffered trauma that impacts the extent to which they trust others and themselves. Interviewees indicated a desire for psychosocial care from professionals who are understanding, exhibit empathy, and do not pre-judge.

**4. Institutionalize alternatives to prosecution that conditionalize rehabilitation**

BiH should introduce ***structured alternatives to prosecution that incorporate mandatory participation in psychological rehabilitation, deradicalization activities, and social reintegration programming***. These alternative measures – such as conditional suspended sentences tied to progress in therapeutic and civic reintegration – should be developed in consultation with legal, mental health, and social work professionals. This would enable individualized approaches that address ideological disengagement while minimizing the collateral harm that criminal justice interventions can inflict on vulnerable families and children.

**5. Protect the autonomy of frontline professionals against political pressure**

Psychologists, educators, and social workers involved in the work of rehabilitation and reintegration with returnees often find themselves caught between ethical imperatives and political pressures. ***Institutional mechanisms should be established to protect practitioners from political interference***, while increasing investment in their training, supervision, and mental health. These frontline workers must be equipped not only to deliver services competently, but to operate with autonomy, even in hostile political environments.

### 6. Embed returnee reintegration within broader community resilience frameworks

Reintegration should not be treated as an isolated intervention, but should be integrated into local peacebuilding, education, and youth development programming. Community dialogues, school-based prevention work, and civil society engagement can all help create the social conditions necessary for inclusion, and these community-wide efforts also serve as a buffer against the stigmatization of returnees. ***Local government, at the municipality and cantonal levels, must be supported in developing these resilience strategies***, in close collaboration with civil society and returnees themselves.