

## **The IS (Islamic State) returnees to Turkey**

**by Anna Rajkowska**

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## 1. THE CASIS PROJECT

The 'Counterterrorism And Safeguarding in response to Islamic State' (CASIS) project aims to critically analyse and map states' responses to young returnees from Islamic State, to understand differing state responses. It explores how states have acted towards minors seeking return from Iraq and Syria, with particular focus on repatriation and citizenship deprivation, as well as considering the wider impact this has on European solidarity and polarisation towards migration, and the challenge that counterterrorism policy poses to democracy and human rights.

*European University Institute & London School of Economics*

[www.casisproject.eu](http://www.casisproject.eu)

**Project coordinator:** [Jeffrey Checkel](#) (EUI)

**Lead Researchers:**

- [Caitlin Procter](#) (EUI)
- [Richard McNeil-Willson](#) (EUI)
- [Georges Fahmi](#) (EUI)
- [Shereen Fernandez](#) (LSE)

## 2. TERMINOLOGY

**Female IS volunteers** – the term refers to the women who joined the IS group. It includes women who moved to IS-occupied territories in Iraq and Syria and those who are a part of the IS networks in the country of citizenship. It highlights women’s voluntary participation in the ideological and territorial expansion of the Islamic State. It emphasizes their active roles in the IS structure that benefited the group’s agenda.

**IS networks in Turkey**<sup>1</sup> – the term refers to the official and unofficial IS networks operating on the country’s level. The IS networks in Turkey were providing ideological and logistics support to jihadists who wanted to join the IS-occupied territories. Currently, some of the networks are suspected of providing financial support to jihadi returnees through charities, and organizing the returnee’s groups meetings<sup>2</sup>:

- The official IS networks were previously associated with al-Qaeda and were responsible for sending jihadists to significant conflicts involving the Muslim population since the late 1980s. After the Islamic State emergency, most groups pledged an alliance with the Islamic State. They provided ideological and logistic training to IS volunteers who decided to move to the IS-occupied territories.
- The unofficial IS study groups were established by the IS supporters directly after the emerge of the Islamic State in various Turkish cities. Their goal was to gather people interested in jihad and help them to join the IS-occupied territories.

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<sup>1</sup>For further information see: Doğu Eroğlu, IŞİD ağları: Türkiye’de radikalleşme, örgütlenme, lojistik (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2018); Erk Acarer, IŞİD ve Türkiye: ‘Katili Tanıyoruz’ (İstanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınları, 2017); Onur Güler, Ortadoğu’yu Savunmak, Yahut IŞİD/ DAESH HUKUKU (İstanbul: MATBAA, 2021); İsmail Saymaz, Türkiye’de IŞİD (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2017)

<sup>2</sup>Interview with the former intelligence officer, İstanbul, 2021

### 3. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Turkey has become a transit country for foreign fighters joining various armed groups in Iraq and Syria.<sup>3</sup> Along with the territorial gains of the IS group as of 2013, dozens of female IS volunteers began crossing the Turkish border to reach the IS-occupied territories in those countries. Compared to IS volunteers from other countries, Turkish citizens could cross the border without leaving any traces of joining the jihadist group due to the proximity of states and the lack of border controls between them. Therefore, it is difficult to assess either how many IS volunteers crossed the Syrian border without being stopped by a border patrol or how many IS volunteers have illegally returned to Turkey.

According to a report published by the International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR) in 2019, the approximate number of Turkish IS volunteers who joined the IS-occupied territories ranges from 7,476 to 9,476. This figure includes 2,000 Turkish female IS volunteers and 476 minors who traveled with their families or were born in the territories occupied by the IS.<sup>4</sup> It is estimated that the Turkish government will have repatriated 243 minors by 2019. However, Turkey has not officially confirmed the number of Turkish IS volunteers who joined the IS group in Syria and Iraq and those who returned.

As a result, most of the research on Turkish IS volunteers and minors is carried out by journalists and independent research centers that receive information through unofficial channels or media reports; numbers may vary according to the political affiliation of the research and media centers.

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<sup>3</sup> Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Turkey's contribution to anti-Daesh coalition," Available at [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey\\_s-contributions\\_s-to-anti\\_daesh-coalition.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-contributions_s-to-anti_daesh-coalition.en.mfa) [Accessed 14 Sep, 2022]

<sup>4</sup> Joana Cook & Gina Vale., "From Daesh to 'Diaspora'II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate," International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), no:12/6 (2019): 1-39.

### 3.1. Jihadi family unit

Most Turkish female IS volunteers joined as a part of the family unit,<sup>5</sup> with their children and husbands. In the case of a single woman, IS networks introduced her to male IS volunteer so they could get married. The marriages between the volunteers often took place over a mobile phone.<sup>6</sup> The procedure was not legally binding by the Turkish state's law, but was recognized as a legitimate in terms of religious law.

Turkish IS networks frequently cooperated and were responsible for matching the male and female IS volunteers from different cities. The woman was then a part of a family unit and was permitted to join the IS group in Iraq and Syria. There have rarely been cases where a woman joined the IS as a single.<sup>7</sup>

IS, like other jihadist groups, strives to ensure the continuity of its legacy. The group needs men, women, and children to ensure this continuity. Man is a husband, a father, and a jihadist fighter; woman is a wife, a mother, an educator, and a jihadi activist. Depending on their biological sex, children are taught to fulfil the same roles as their parents when they grow up.<sup>8</sup>

Most of the women who were married to key Turkish male IS members did not join the IS-occupied territories in Iraq and Syria and remained in Turkey because were deemed too important for the legacy of a jihadist unit to be disrupted by their death or imprisonment. Some are purportedly responsible for recruiting, and logistical operations from the country's base and working in charities providing income to families of male IS volunteers who have died or been incarcerated in Iraq and Syria.<sup>9</sup>

Given the specificities of the jihadist unit in the context of Turkey and the gendered roles assigned to each sex, women and children are responsible for the continuation of the jihadist legacy. Therefore, de-radicalization programs for the female IS volunteers and children's should not be designed as separate from the broader understanding of the family unit, in which each family member is required

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<sup>5</sup>“Calibrating the Response: Turkey’s ISIS Returnees,” International Crisis Group, no. 258 (2020): 1-33.

<sup>6</sup>Court files of Umm XXX, Turkish female reurnee

<sup>7</sup>Interview with the lawyer representing female IS volunteers, Bursa, December, 2021

<sup>8</sup>Interview with the former security officer, Istanbul, December, 2021

<sup>9</sup>Interview with the former security officer, Istanbul, December, 2021

to fulfil a different role based on a jihadist understanding of the gender roles intended for each biological sex.

#### 4. TURKISH FEMALE IS VOLUNTEERS

The profiles of Turkish female IS volunteers vary and show that female jihadists are a heterogeneous group. A common reason for joining the IS was the belief that a legal caliphate had formed and the desire to partake in the jihadists' struggle. Most of the Turkish IS volunteers are of Sunni origin,<sup>10</sup> and have joined the IS as part of a family unit.

There have also been a few cases of women claiming that their husbands forced them to join the IS. However, it is difficult to judge to what extent these statements are factual or constitute victimism in order to avoid legal liability. Moreover, some pieces of the stories often show the volunteer's support for the jihadist cause, such as not leaving IS territories when they have had the chance, or fulfilling roles that strengthened the IS influence grid.

##### 4.1. Legal process

In Turkish legal discourse, Turkish female IS volunteers are considered victims of circumstances forced by their husbands to join the Islamic State. Therefore, throughout the legal proceedings, women are not treated as individuals but by the assumption that all women who joined the Islamic State were victims.

According to several court statements and explanations of judgments, it is assumed that IS treats women as commodities and does not accept them as group members. Court proceedings often do not analyze the cases of female returnees on an individual basis, but treat them as a homogeneous group.

Occasionally, women are given prison terms with only overwhelming evidence of their participation in physical combat and in military training.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> "Calibrating the Response: Turkey's ISIS Returnees," International Crisis Group, no. 258 (2020): 1-33.

<sup>11</sup> Court files of Umm XXX, Turkish female returnee received from the lawyer working on the case, 2021

## 4.2. Life after the IS

The profiles and stories of women returning from IS vary. There are examples of women acquitted of membership in a terrorist organization and remarried to men involved in jihadist activities in Turkey. Some maintained contact with other returnees and organized informal group meetings. Others do not want to have any associations with the IS, and most of all regret joining it, claiming they have abandoned religion because of their experiences in IS-occupied territories.<sup>12</sup>

There are some cases of foreign female IS volunteers who were (religiously) married to Turkish IS volunteers, and are currently in Turkey living with their husbands' families. Some of these women's lawsuits were pending in Turkey,<sup>13</sup> and after serving their sentence, stayed in the country. Others, who were not found by the state authorities, stayed in Turkey illegally.

There are no governmental P / CVE programs for female IS returnees in Turkey.

## 4.3. Attempt to repatriate Turkish female IS volunteers

Turkey tried to repatriate Turkish IS volunteers from prisons in Iraq without any further success due to Baghdad's disagreement. Turkey, however, intervened to end the death penalty after 16 Turkish IS volunteers were sentenced. After serving the death penalty on two of them, the sentences of the remaining 14 were converted into prison terms. Efforts are visible in the Turkish state's approach to repatriating citizens and improving their standard of living in Iraqi prisons.<sup>14</sup>

It is not known when Turkish IS volunteers serving prison sentences in Iraq will return to Turkey, as a final sentence issued by an Iraqi court is not binding and is often extended based on decisions by prison authorities. This has prompted

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<sup>12</sup> Court files of Umm XXY, Turkish female returnee received from the lawyer working on the case, 2021

<sup>13</sup> Court files of 5 non-Turkish female IS volunteers received from the lawyer working on the case, 2021

<sup>14</sup> "Türkiye'ye getirilen IŞİD'lilerin 250 çocuğu travma tedavisine alındı", T24, 2017. Available at <https://t24.com.tr/haber/turkiye-ye-getirilen-isis-lilerin-250-cocugu-travma-tedavisine-alindi.834805> [Accessed 19 Sep. 2022]

Turkish IS volunteers trapped in Iraq to consider employing human smugglers to bring them back by illegal means.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. TURKISH CHILD RETURNEES

The Turkish government has come under pressure from families of Turkish IS volunteers who have contacted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and police units requesting to repatriate children and grandchildren from prisons and resettlement camps in Iraq and Syria. Some of the families made arrangements with human smugglers and local leaders to bring back children by their means.<sup>16</sup>

In mid-May 2019, the Turkish ambassador to Iraq, Fatih Yıldız, announced that an agreement was reached on the Ankara-Baghdad line regarding repatriates from Turkey. Turkey has since been working on repatriating Turkish minors from Iraqi prisons.

During the repatriate process, Turkish officials interviewed female IS volunteers and children declaring Turkish citizenship. DNA tests and screening tests were then carried out to confirm their identity, the DNA samples were compared with those of their relatives living in Turkey and reassessed by both the Iraqi and Turkish authorities. Female IS volunteers, whose parental tests confirmed the biological relationship with the children, had to sign a document authorizing the return of the child to Turkey.<sup>17</sup>

In case when female IS volunteers have not provided a permission, the child have to stay with them in the prison. Under Iraqi law, children who are 9 years old are not considered minors and therefore judged as adults in the Iraqi judicial system.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with the attorney who provided legal advices to female IS volunteers serving the prison sentecne in the Baghdad's prisons, Bursa, December, 2021.

<sup>16</sup>Hale Gönüültaş, "Şiddet kampındaki çocuklar: IŞİD'in elinde 600 Türkiyeli çocuk var", Duvar, 2017. Available at <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2017/05/16/siddet-kampındaki-cocuklar-isisin-elinde-600-turkiyeli-cocuk-var> [Accessed 23 Sep. 2022]

<sup>17</sup>"Türkiye'ye getirilen IŞİD'lilerin 250 çocuğu travma tedavisine alındı", T24, 2017. Available at <https://t24.com.tr/haber/turkiye-ye-getirilen-isis-lilerin-250-cocugu-travma-tedavisine-alindi.834805> [Accessed 19 Sep. 2022]

<sup>18</sup>"Human Rights Watch Submission to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) of Iraq's periodic report for the 74th CEDAW Session (21 October – 8 November 2019)," Human Rights Watch, (2019): 1-7. Available at [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/IRQ/INT\\_CEDAW\\_CS\\_S\\_IRQ\\_37338\\_E.docx](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/IRQ/INT_CEDAW_CS_S_IRQ_37338_E.docx) [Accessed 29 Sep. 2022]



Most Turkish female IS volunteers agreed to the return of their children, fearing Iraq would prosecute them. Female IS volunteer from outside Turkey, who had children with a Turkish citizen and after his death had children with a foreigner, could only send back children whose father was Turkish. Consequently, the repatriation of Turkish children resulted in a separation between half-siblings who had the same mother but different fathers.

According to the news reports there were more than 280 Turkish children imprisoned in the Iraqi territory.<sup>19</sup> Thanks to the extensive journalistic work of Hale Gönüldaş on child returnees, it is known that, due to these Ankara-Baghdad negotiations, about 250 minors were brought back to Turkey, and began to receive help at the trauma treatment centers.<sup>20</sup> Child returnees are now protected by the state and are undergoing state-provided trauma therapy. After the trauma therapy is completed, the children will undergo a pedagogical program aimed at their integration both at the educational and social levels. The Ministry of Family and Social Policy declared to provide psychological consultations to children's relatives living in Turkey before granting them legal custody of the children.<sup>21</sup>

The detailed information regarding the rehabilitation process of the child returnees and the family programs had not been made public. Therefore, the concrete measures taken by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy are based on circumstantial evidence and informal interviews with the officials working on these programs.

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<sup>19</sup>"Türkiye'ye getirilen IŞİD'lilerin 250 çocuğu travma tedavisine alındı", T24, 2017. Available at <https://t24.com.tr/haber/turkiye-ye-getirilen-isis-lilerin-250-cocugu-travma-tedavisine-alindi.834805> [Accessed 19 Sep. 2022]

<sup>20</sup>Hale Gönüldaş, "Türkiye'ye getirilen IŞİD'lilerin 250 çocuğu travma tedavisine alındı", Duvar, 2019. Available at <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2019/08/14/turkiyeye-getirilen-isislilerin-250-cocugu-travma-tedavisine-alindi> [Accessed 25 Sep. 2022]

The government has not officially confirmed if the children have been brought back to Turkey.

<sup>21</sup>Hale Gönüldaş, "Türkiye'ye getirilen IŞİD'lilerin 250 çocuğu travma tedavisine alındı", Duvar, 2019. Available at <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2019/08/14/turkiyeye-getirilen-isislilerin-250-cocugu-travma-tedavisine-alindi> [Accessed 25 Sep. 2022]

## 6. DE-RADICALIZATION INITIATIVES IN TURKEY

The authorities responsible for de-radicalization programs in Turkey are the government institutions operating within the Justice and Development Party (Turkish: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP)). Opposition political parties and non-governmental actors are usually excluded from participating in the development of de-radicalization programs due to the ruling party's distrust of political opponents, NGOs, and civil society initiatives.<sup>22</sup> Some P / CVE initiatives have been developed in collaboration with intergovernmental organizations, such as the Delegation of the European Union to Turkey and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Most of Turkey's de-radicalization efforts are not primarily focused on IS volunteers. Instead, Turkey applies a mixture of the same de-radicalization programs and preventive measures to all groups recognized as terrorists under state law. However, these groups differ ideologically; individuals who join them come from different social backgrounds and are driven by different motivations.<sup>23</sup> As a result, it prevents the success of CVE programs due to the lack of a well-adjusted strategy that could prioritize the target group's needs.

The development of de-radicalization programs targeting IS female volunteers, children, and their families is still under preparation. The Ministry of Family and Social Policy has made some efforts in the field of child returnees' trauma treatment programs; however, the success rate of these programs is unknown and the details have not been released to the public.

National de-radicalization and rehabilitation initiatives rely heavily on surveillance and detention,<sup>24</sup> and are carried out by the security forces. The

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<sup>22</sup>Ebru Ece Özbey, "Turkey's fight against youth Radicalization: Small steps on a long path," EuroMesco Policy Brief, no. 78 (2018): 1-13.

<sup>23</sup>Nazlı Özekici, "De-Radicalisation in Europe and beyond: Detect, resolve, re-integrate: Stakeholders of (De-) radicalisation in Turkey," Project Co-founded by the Horizon 2020 Programme of the European Union, no D3/1 (2020): 1-40.

<sup>24</sup>"Calibrating the Response: Turkey's ISIS Returnees," International Crisis Group, no. 258 (2020): 1-33.

programs are primarily targeting male militants. Turkish female IS volunteers are rarely considered a security threat due to the presumption that women who joined the IS were forced to do so by their male family members.

The individuals who are suspected of having relationships with a terrorist group are taken under security surveillance. The CVE involves reaching out to potential suspects by the security forces. Subsequently, they are detained for short periods in the belief that it will deter them from committing terrorist crimes in the future.<sup>25</sup> However, this could cause the opposite effect and drive potential jihadists underground. Another problem concerns the misconception by the authorities of how jihadism is defined, and confusing it with other Salafi currents. As a result, security forces are detaining individuals, who are unrelated to jihadist groups, subsequently increasing distrust towards government institutions.

Another institution involved in the de-radicalization efforts is the Directorate of Religious Affairs (tr.: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, known as Diyanet). Diyanet is responsible for carrying out work related to faith and worship, interpretations of the religion of Islam, as well as for the management of religious institutions in Turkey.<sup>26</sup> There are a few initiatives from the side of Diyanet, such as delivering sermons in mosques with anti-jihadist messages, publishing reports on the IS, or consulting inmates on practices of Islam and its ethics. In the prison facilities located in Turkey, there are approximately 600 imams, of whom 530 are men, and 70 are women.<sup>27</sup> The meetings are not compulsory and all inmates, including non-IS-affiliated prisoners, are entitled to ask for them. This initiative has been questioned on the basis of its success in reaching out to IS returnees: The IS volunteers oppose the very idea of the existence of the Turkish state and regard all its endeavours, including the religious ones, as blasphemy. Consequently, the likelihood that the IS returnee will request the services of an imam is very low.

Diyanet also published reports on "Religious Exploitation and the ISIS Terrorist Organization," which focused on explaining why IS' understanding of religion

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<sup>25</sup>"Calibrating the Response: Turkey's ISIS Returnees," International Crisis Group, no. 258 (2020): 1-33.

<sup>26</sup>Presidency of Religious Affairs, "Establishment and a brief history," Available at <https://www.diyamet.gov.tr/en-US/Institutional/Detail/1/establishment-and-a-brief-history> [Accessed 17 Sep, 2022]

<sup>27</sup>"Calibrating the Response: Turkey's ISIS Returnees," International Crisis Group, no. 258 (2020): 1-33.

does not align with the Islamic faith and why people should not join the IS group.<sup>28</sup> Again, it is difficult to estimate how influential these reports were and whether they prevented members from joining IS or helped de-radicalize those who have returned.

### 6.1. Intergovernmental cooperation and P / CVE methods

Following resolution 30/15 "Human rights in preventing and countering violent extremism," Turkey claims to take soft measures as part of its de-radicalization programs and plans to involve various government bodies to achieve this goal.<sup>29</sup> The main initiatives developed under this resolution include religious counselling, community policing, family support, and education and employment initiatives. The programs are very broad and target different social segments where young people from disadvantaged families, women, orphans, homeless people, refugees, disaster survivors, etc., are all defined as main targets of P / CVE programs. As a result of incorporating several different objectives into the P / CVE activities, it is difficult to pinpoint which policies are intended for IS volunteers and child returnees and what methods are being used to reach them.

The Delegation of the European Union to Turkey supported a twinning project between Turkey and Spain on Preventing Radicalization in Prisons. The project aims to reach prisoners exposed to violent extremism and educate the prison staff personnel on how to interact with them. The project's outcome includes the identification of the likelihood of the offender's further radicalization, establishment of disengagement and de-radicalization programs, and training on interventions and communications with prisoners.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Diyaret İşleri Başkanlığı, Dini İstismar ve Tedhiş Karakteri DAEŞ (Dini Yayınlar Genel Müdürlüğü, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2019), Available at <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=NeAoEAAAQBAJ&pg=GBS.PT1&hl=en> [Accessed 19 Sep, 2022]

<sup>29</sup>"Turkey's Contribution to the Report to be Prepared In Accordance With Resolution 30/15 "Human Rights In Preventing And Countering Violent Extremism," he Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, (2015): 1-8. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/RuleOfLaw/PCVE/Turkey.pdf> [Accessed 24 Sep, 2022]

<sup>30</sup> Delegation of the European Union to Turkey, "EU supports Prevention of Radicalisation in Turkish Prisons," (2019). Available at <https://www.avrupa.info.tr/en/pr/eu-supports-prevention-radicalisation-turkish-prisons-9545> [Accessed 24 Sep, 2022]

## 6.2. Conclusion and further suggestions

The de-radicalization programs and P / CVE initiatives do not target a particular terrorist group. Instead, they are used to counter the radicalization of all terrorist groups recognized by Turkish state law. The programs lack a gender-sensitive approach that prioritizes the needs of female IS volunteers and child returnees. The lack of data on government-led projects makes it difficult to assess their success and prove their existence.

Some initiatives have been taken in cooperation with intergovernmental organizations. However, none mentions child returnees and female IS volunteers in particular. These programs are designed to counter violent extremism and help Turkey introduce soft measures that would improve its de-radicalization strategies overall, without identifying a target audience.

More work needs to be done to implement P / CVE programs that could help the families of returnees, female IS volunteers, and child returnees in particular. Turkey could greatly benefit from the help of civil society actors, researchers, and NGOs operating in the country as they have better access to the target population. It would also help if government institutions provided open access to the data on the numbers of the IS returnees and the P / CVE projects they claim to work on.

