



# Life at ISIS: The Roles of Western Men, Women and Children

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## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Since March 2011, Syria has been torn by civil war. With the conflict being in its seventh year, it has been estimated that more than 400,000 people have been killed to date (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 2017). In addition, over half of the Syrian population has been forced to leave their homes. Whereas almost 5 million Syrians have fled their country as refugees, there has been a considerable group of foreigners who made the reverse journey (UNHCR 2017). They travelled to the war-ravaged region to participate in some way in the conflict. Initially, it mainly concerned individuals from surrounding Arabic countries. However, soon they were followed by citizens from EU member States, Turkey, Russia and even countries such as Australia, the United States and China.

Estimations of the number of individuals who have travelled from the European Union to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq range from 3922 to more than 4294 (Van Ginkel and Entenmann 2016, 4). A significant number has joined the ranks of jihadi-salafi groups such as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)<sup>2</sup> and *Jahbat al-Nusra* (now called *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*).

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<sup>1</sup> Sections of this article have been published before as part of Weggemans, Daan, Ruud Peters, Edwin Bakker, and Roel de Bont. 2016. "Destination Syria: An Exploratory Study into the Daily Lives of Dutch 'Syria Travellers'." *Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University*.

<sup>2</sup> This organisation has been referred to in various ways during the past few years (examples include: 'Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant' (ISIL), 'Islamic State in Iraq and Syria' (ISIS), more recently as 'Islamic State' and in

While over the last decennia many countries have been confronted with individuals traveling to foreign conflict areas, the sheer number has been a reason for increased concern. These concerns are not limited to the families and communities who fear for the loss of their youth in an increasingly violent civil war; governments and security agencies are especially worried about the potential security threats these individuals pose (Bakker, Paulussen and Entenmann 2013, 3). It is feared that (returned) foreign fighters may foster the radicalization of others as well as play a role in the preparation or committing of terrorist attacks (Byman 2015; AIVD 2016; Ministry of Security and Justice 2017).

Over the last years a considerable number of national and international publications have focused on the backgrounds and motives of western fighters in Syria and Iraq. What prompted them to move to this area of conflict? Their involvement in serious human rights violations has also been a central focus of attention. A subject much less written about has been the daily lives of foreigners at or behind the battlefield. One of the reasons for this is, off course, the dangerous situation in the country during the height of the conflict. Only a handful of journalists and scientists were brave enough to conduct local studies. Also, it has proven to be difficult to come into contact with people in Syria by telephone or via the internet. Sometimes technology simply does not allow for it, in other cases it led to major safety risks for those involved.

With ISIS losing territory in the Middle East, it is expected that many European nationals who travelled to the caliphate will consider to return to their homelands (Reed, De Roy van Zuijdewijn and Bakker 2015). When this scenario will become reality, it is important to gain more insights into their experiences in Syria and Iraq. What is life like in Syria for the average person who travelled to Syria to join ISIS? Those who travelled to Syria to join ISIS (or another jihadist group) are oftentimes labelled as jihadist ‘foreign fighters’ by scholars, politicians, practitioners and journalists alike. But do they by default actually become fighters, or are there other options too? Such questions are not only relevant for the prosecution of individuals who left for Syria and Iraq, but also for those organizations who are involved in their reintegration. Against this backdrop, this article aims to outline the roles of men, women, and children in ISIS territory. In what follows, we will first address the study’s methodology. Subsequently, we will discuss some general factors that greatly influence what daily life looks like in ISIS territory. This is followed by an outline of what daily life looks like respectively for men, women, and children. The article is concluded with a reflection and some notes on what implications these insights hold in terms of responding to returning jihadists.

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Arabic as ‘ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī l-‘Irāq wa-sh-Shām’ shortened to Da’ish or Daesh). For the sake of readability of this article, the authors have opted to consistently use the abbreviation ISIS.

## **Methodology**

The work presented in this article is mostly part of an independent expert-study that was commissioned by the Dutch court. With this study the Dutch court hoped to gain more insights in the daily lives of Dutch nationals in Syria in the year 2014. For the purpose of the present article, we somewhat shifted our scope. First, given the current pressure on ISIS and the likely resulting flow of returnees to their home countries, this article specifically zooms in on the lives of foreigners at ISIS. Second, instead of mainly focusing on Dutch cases, we focused on the overarching patterns that shape the lives of these Dutch – and other – Western individuals. As such, the article can be tailored to presenting more generally applicable experiences and roles. This makes the presented insights not only valuable for the Dutch case, but also for other western countries. Finally, we choose to not solely focus on the year 2014, but to provide a more general overview on daily life in ISIS territory. This meant conducting some additional research, which allowed us to incorporate more recent insights on daily life in the caliphate.

### *Data collection*

The presented data is based on open sources, a number of legal dossiers and in-depth interviews. Open sources include government reports, newspaper articles, research literature, weblogs and social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook and Telegram). This also includes insights from leaked ISIS documents as well as multiple Arabic sources. Moreover, we studied a number of official legal case dossiers of individual who allegedly attempted to travel to Syria or Iraq or were suspected of involvement in terrorism. Unfortunately, these official reports did not provide much relevant additional information that could not be found in the above mentioned sources. Finally, a series of ‘semi-structured’ interviews has been conducted. Semi-structured interviews are held on the basis of pre-set topics, but at the same time allow for space to raise additional questions and subject. The order of topics discussed in the interviews did not follow a pre-determined structure. Semi-structured interviews make it possible to talk about complex and sensitive subjects. The researcher can probe when relevant information about a certain these is discussed. This method offers the opportunity to vary the way in which certain topics are discussed. Because we interviewed people with different social, cultural and professional background for this study – in both English and Dutch – it is possible that certain words and concepts have different meanings for the respondents. The possibility to deviate from certain questions makes it possible to take these different backgrounds into account (Harrell and Bradley 2009; Weggemans and De Graaf 2015, 19). The analysis of the interviews ultimately focused on their latent content (the underlying meaning) rather than their manifest importance (the specific use of words and definitions).

### *Selection of respondents*

The respondents for the interviews were selected on the basis of their experiences and expertise. We aimed to interview people who were living in Syria, as well as for individuals or organizations that were in direct contact with people in Syria. In some cases, these individuals were found in our own networks. In other cases, we were able to contact them on the basis of information from the media, or we came into contact with relevant discussion partners through others (convenience sampling). Some contacts were also made via social media.

The short time window of the study and the willingness to cooperate proved to be major restrictive factors for the organization of the interviews. Some people we interviewed were afraid of the publicity, while others feared that by taking part in the study, they may eventually become subject of legal investigation. Some organizations feared for their reputation in terms neutrality when taking part in a legal study. Moreover, in the Netherlands, the number of returnees is limited (approximately 40 when conducting this study). Contacting people who were still in Syria or Iraq also proved to be increasingly difficult. And, given the dangerous situation in the region, conducting fieldwork locally was not considered an option. In total 26 interviews were conducted. The backgrounds of the respondents range from academics and individuals currently residing in the conflict area, to people with an extensive network in Syria (including in ISIS territory) and individuals who lived in Syria for their entire lives and recently left the country.<sup>3</sup>

### *Validity*

During the data collection process, there were many instances of recognition: fragments that gave an insight into daily life had already been discussed during other interviews or encountered in other sources. Insights confirmed by several sources may be proof for a bigger validity of the findings of this study. In addition, based on the expertise of the respondents, we can also derive confidence in respect of the validity of the findings. However, the study remains subject to various restrictions. First, it is a study into the past. Although much of the data is also validated by other sources, the risk of the interviews is that the reconstruction of the situation in 2014 contains incorrect elements. People may have forgotten things or stored them incorrectly.

A second potential restriction is that interviews do not tell you all about a person's precise ideas and experiences. A person may have various reasons for intentionally telling or sharing a different version of the story on social media than the actual event. This study recognizes the relative value of the interviews conducted. By means of triangulation

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<sup>3</sup> Note that, given the somewhat shifted scope of this article in comparison to the initial study, not all of the conducted interviews were equally relevant for this article.

(combining different methods and sources) we have tried to prevent these problems for the validity of the study.

### **Daily life in the context of the Syrian civil war**

#### *War-torn Syria*

In 2011, the ‘Arab Spring’ reached Syria. In a number of cities, protesters took the streets to demonstrate for more freedoms, democratic reforms and the release of prisoners. These local acts of confrontation with representatives of the regime would soon develop into a nationwide uprising against the Syrian regime as a whole (Ismail 2011, 539). The Syrian regime responded by launching a series of large-scale military operations. This would prove to be a milestone towards what would ultimately result in a civil war with hundreds of armed parties involved (Cafarella and Casagrande 2014; Blanchard, Humud and Nikitin 2014). After this escalation, three main fighting opposition parties can be identified: nationalists (e.g. the Free Syrian Army), local groups (e.g. the Kurds) and jihadist movements. The position of nationalist or secular rebels who revolted against corruption and human rights violations by the al-Assad regime has weakened considerably, partly in view of the emergence of these jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic Front coalition (whose participating organizations have since either been absorbed into other groups or returned to being separate entities) and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. In addition, the Kurds have also been playing an increasingly prominent role in the conflict and many foreign states as well as organisations outside of Syria have become (directly or indirectly) involved in the conflict over the years.

#### *The ISIS administration and the establishment of the caliphate*

A key event during the conflict was the establishment of the caliphate by ISIS. In the summer of 2014, the Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shura*) of ISIS proclaimed a transnational ‘Islamic state’ and named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph. ISIS was henceforth to be known as Islamic State – no longer containing specific country names to underline the global character of the caliphate. Muslims from across the world were called to settle in this newly proclaimed caliphate (*hijra*) and to contribute to the continued building and expansion of this state. That this state does need more than fighters to function is shown by al-Baghdadi’s speech on July 1st, 2014, at the Great Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul.

We make a special call to the scholars, *fuqaha*’ (experts in Islamic jurisprudence), and callers, especially the judges, as well as people with military, administrative, and service expertise, and medical doctors and engineers of all different specializations and fields. We call them and remind them to fear Allah, for their

emigration is *wajib 'ayni* (an individual obligation), so that they can answer the dire need of the Muslims for them (Al-Hayat Media Center 2014, italics added).

### *Effects of the war and ISIS rule on daily life*

Until August 2014, the danger for ISIS was mainly concentrated at its frontlines. Those residing in ISIS territory away from the frontlines were initially relatively safe. This changed when the US-led coalition against ISIS commenced its campaign in August 2014. The US-led coalitions – as well as the Syrian and Russian air forces – have been targeting both frontlines and hinterland, causing a distinction between the two to blur. When under attack, ISIS has also been known to resort to using civilians as human shield. Yet the effects of the war are not limited to violence. Many ISIS controlled areas have been confronted with increased poverty, inflation, food and water shortages and a lack of medication. This is especially the case for areas at the frontlines, where citizens of besieged cities see their already scarcely available resources dwindle.

Life in ISIS controlled territory is also greatly influenced by ISIS rule. Life in the caliphate is subject to strict rules. Ministries (*diwans*) were installed to govern the controlled territories and to enforce new laws. Through these ministries, ISIS holds a firm grip on what daily life in the caliphate looks like. This includes aspects like education, the position and roles of men and women, clothing regulations, taxes and law enforcement. Along with revamping society towards ISIS ideology comes harsh punishment for those who do not submit to these new rules. Executions and other punishments take place in public on an almost daily basis, oftentimes in front of the local population forced to watch. The severity of these punishments, as well as their arbitrary nature and the ease in with which they can be imposed, have resulted in high levels of fear among many of the citizens in ISIS territory. Consequently, the daily lives of many of the local residents in the caliphate largely moved indoors during the course of 2014.

The above constitutes the scene to which tens of thousands foreigners travelled towards (Neumann 2015; Schmitt and Sengupta 2015). This environment greatly shaped the daily lives of these men, women, and children – which will be discussed below.

## **The role of men**

### *Screening procedure*

Foreigners that travelled to Syria from Turkey are brought to an 'application centre' (safe house) by an ISIS member which facilitates the border crossing (employee Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, personal communication, December 2015; researcher and anthropology expert, personal communication, December 2015). Here, the men and women are separated,

as each follows a different path henceforth.<sup>4</sup> After being separated from the women, the men take an oath of loyalty (*bay'a*). By this oath, a recruit declares that he will carry out all duties assigned to him by ISIS leadership. Then, the recruits undergo a process of questioning and monitoring. For a period of approximately two or three weeks, they will be extensively interrogated and closely monitored to safeguard against infiltration (former employee organisation for social support, personal communication, November 2015; Groen 2015). New recruits are questioned on a variety of topics, including their name, blood type, origin, marital status, educational level, previous occupation and level of sharia expertise. Other questions concern whether the person previously engaged in jihad, whether the person has a recommendation (*tazkiyya*) and what kind of role the person would like to fulfill within the ranks of ISIS. Answers are filled out in 'registration forms' and well documented, as is shown by the mass leak of ISIS registration forms in 2016 (e.g. see Ramsay 2016; Dearden 2016; Dodwell, Milton and Ressler 2016). In general, the interviews take longer for someone who was involved in another local group prior to this period than for a 'new recruit'. Those who used to be a member of another organization have to complete a process of forgiveness or repentance (Speckhard and Yayla 2015). Despite these screening measures, it has been relatively easy to join the ranks of ISIS – especially in comparison to other jihadi groups such as the now called Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.<sup>5</sup> Still, the requirements to join have become considerably stricter over time, with *tazkiyya* seeming increasingly important.

### *Training*

Many foreigners arrive in Syria without any military or security experience upon which jihadist organizations can draw (Perliger and Milton 2016, 37). Hence, after the screening phase in the safe house, the men are taken to a training camp.<sup>6</sup> Other than in the safe houses, there is no clustering according to origin in these camps; all nationalities train together. This encourages foreigners to learn Arabic, which is the primary language during the preparation and execution of military operations. Training at training camps includes lessons in Arabic, lessons in religion and military training. One's training trajectory usually starts with theological issues to explain the basis of the religion. The subject matter then turns more political. The religious curriculum is said to be completed with a Sharia exam. The military curriculum concentrates on physical development, dealing with hunger and cold, handling various weapons (particularly the Kalashnikov, rocket propelled grenades and hand grenades) and becoming familiar with combat techniques and strategies (employee Dutch Ministry of

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on travelling to Syria (routes, the border crossing, reception at safe house), see: Weggemans et al. 2016; Dodwell, Milton and Ressler 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Previously known as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (July 2016 – January 2017) and Jabhat al-Nusra (January 2012 – July 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Note that there are also instances in which the screening and training phase take place rather simultaneously at a training camp.

Security and Justice, personal communication, December 2015; researcher and Islamologist, personal communication, November 2011; head of press agency focussed on Syria, personal communication, November 2015; French Ministry of Justice 2015; Hassan 2015; Al-Tamimi, 2015).

A typical day at a training camp seems to start with morning prayer (*salat al-fair*) at the first break of day. This is followed by endurance training in the morning and lessons in religion in the afternoon. Training days usually end with weapon and combat training (family member of Dutch foreign fighters, personal communication, December 2015, French Ministry of Justice 2015). During training, recruits are generally not sent to the front lines. However, they can be assigned with guard duty (*ribaata*) at border regions or checkpoints (Hassan 2015; employee Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, personal communication, December 2015). This serves as a first practical experience in being part of a fighting force and taking part in an armed struggle.

A recruit's average training phase seems to take between one and two months (researcher and Islamologist, personal communication, November 2011). However, recruits might receive fewer or additional lessons based on factors such as learning pace, competences and wishes (e.g. specializations). Consequently, the period spent at a training camp can vary considerably from person to person, ranging from a couple of weeks to over a year (Hassan 2015). That this training phase can be physically demanding is evidenced by several stories from family members about their relatives who went to Syria to wage jihad losing a lot of weight during this stage.

### *Deployment*

After the training phase, recruits will, in principle, be deployed on the basis of their competences and wishes, as well as the current needs of the organization. In practice, most newcomers from abroad are given a choice between a fighting role, a supporting job or carrying out a suicide attack (AIVD 2016, 7). Most foreigners will become fighters (researcher and Islamologist, personal communication, November 2011; researcher [1], personal communication, November 2015; co-founder local activist group in ISIS territory, personal communication, November 2015; inhabitant ISIS territory [1], personal communication, November 2015; inhabitant ISIS territory [2], personal communication, November 2015; former employee organisation for social support, personal communication, November 2015; employee Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, Personal communication, December 2015; AIVD 2016). The foreign fighters will be assigned to a battalion (*katiba*) under the command of an *emir*. For practical purposes, these battalions seem, like the safe houses, to be organized on the basis of a shared language (journalist [1], personal communication, October 2015; co-founder local activist group in ISIS territory, personal communication, November 2015;

French Ministry of Justice 2015) – partly negating the earlier stimuli to learn Arabic. However, in due time, several of these ‘national battalions’ have been dissolved by ISIS due to unintended consequences of having homogeneous groups enjoying different treatment than local ISIS fighters. (Weiss 2015) According to the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), when these ISIS battalions capture new territory, it is not unusual that ISIS members – whether ordered to do so or not – resort to torture and rape (AIVD 2016, 7). These battalions are not constantly engaged in combat. A considerable amount of time is spent on other armed military tasks, such as guard duty and patrolling. At times, this may involve combat activities or inflicting corporal punishment. Moreover, as in all armies, periods at the front lines are alternated with activities in the hinterland. This may include guard duty, *dawah* (i.e. inviting others to Islam through dialogue) or simply enjoying spare time.

Other ISIS members choose or are assigned a supporting role. Such options appear diverse and include, among others, a job as an engineer, a doctor, an administrative worker, a cook, a driver, or a job at the religious police or a Sharia court (researcher and Islamologist, personal communication, November 2011; aid organisation focused on Syria, personal communication, November 2015; employee Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, personal communication, December 2015; head of press agency focused on Syria, personal communication, November 2015; journalist [2], personal communication, December 2015; French Ministry of Justice 2015). ISIS requires individuals with such backgrounds in order to function as a state. This need is explicitly mentioned in the above presented quote by al-Baghdadi in July 2014. Such supporting activities are nonetheless often difficult to see separately from the violent jihad. Violence seems inherent to certain supporting jobs. For instance, agents of the *Hisbah* (religious police), are engaged in addressing, arresting, and punishing those who have violated the rules of ISIS. The boundaries between a violent and non-violent role are also blurred by the fact that recruits usually receive a rifle (usually a Kalashnikov), and are expected to be armed (journalist [1], personal communication, October 2015; family member of Dutch foreign fighters, personal communication, December 2015). Moreover, regardless of one’s day job, it appears all can be expected to have a fighting role (Dodwell, Milton and Ressler 2016, 28). This becomes apparent when looking at the ISIS registration forms. Newcomers are asked whether they want to be a fighter, a suicide fighter or a suicide bomber, as well as what their ‘specialty’ is. Options for the latter are ‘fighting’, ‘Sharia’, ‘security’ and ‘administrative’. While there appears to be some overlap between these two questions, both likely address a different level of involvement in the organization (ibid). In practice, individuals at ISIS (and other jihadist groups) have indeed shown to take on multiple roles. Examples include foreigners being engaged in fighting as well as making propaganda, and foreigners being both a fighter and a liaison with other fighting groups

(Perliger and Milton 2016, 37; employee Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, personal communication, December 2015). That fighting may be expected from all members also becomes apparent when looking at the implications of swearing allegiance. As stated above, new recruits need to swear an oath of allegiance. Consequently, they can – regardless of their assigned role – be called upon to engage in combat or otherwise violent activities (family member of Dutch foreign fighters, personal communication, December 2015; employee Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, personal communication, December 2015; journalist [2], personal communication, December 2015; AIVD, 2016). In other words, everyone who is not a fighter is thus de facto a reservist. Therefore, not only the fighters, but also those who are mainly deployed for duties other than fighting, end up being part of the military structure of ISIS after the training phase.

### **The role of women**

#### *Key responsibilities: Serving society from behind the scenes*

The life of women is rather different than that of men, with their key responsibilities revolving around supporting their families (Winter 2015). Against this backdrop, unmarried women who joined ISIS are housed in a guarded dormitory (*maqar*) until a suitable husband is found whom they can marry. Oftentimes, these women already made contact with their future husbands via social media. Once married, couples move in together and they are expected to have children soon. Married women who joined ISIS are, as indicated above, separated from their husbands upon arrival at the safe house. Families are reunited after the husband has completed their training. In both scenarios, the woman's future is one of serving society from behind the scenes. Her primary role is to quickly (re)marry, to raise many children, and to obey her husband (researcher [2], personal communication, November 2015; family member of Dutch foreign fighters, personal communication, December 2015; Winter 2015). To that end, women are largely obliged to stay at home; to live a sedentary existence (Winter 2015; family member of Dutch foreign fighters, personal communication, December 2015). Venturing outside is usually only allowed under the supervision of the husband or another immediate male family member (inhabitant ISIS territory [1], personal communication, November 2015; Inhabitant ISIS territory [2], personal communication, November 2015). In these cases, a women is obliged to wear an *abaya* and *niqab* (Moaveni 2015).

#### *Other roles*

Although a women's key responsibility is to look after her family, there are several other roles women can fulfil. Many women were engaged in distributing online propaganda. As such, women played an important part in convincing other women to travel to Syria (researcher [3],

personal communication, October 2015). The role of women in distributing propaganda has however waned due to restrictions on their use of Internet. In some exceptional circumstances, women are exempted from the rule that they are to remain indoors. As both healthcare and education are separated according to gender in ISIS territory, women are allowed to work as a teacher or a doctor. Furthermore, a woman may also leave her house to study theology. A woman can also independently leave home if she is expected to take part in the armed jihad through an official legal directive; a *fatwa* (Neurink 2015, 67; Winter 2015). However, no such directive has been issued thus far (NCTV and AIVD 2017, 13).

This is not to say that women do not exercise violence. Women can join the ranks of the so-called *Al-Khansaa* brigade. This all-female counterpart of the above discussed *Hisbah* controls the adherence of women to moral conduct according to ISIS standards. Like the *Hisbah*, it has the mandate to enforce ISIS's laws and to punish those that disobey these rules, such as by whipping. Furthermore, there appears to be a recent shift in ISIS's position whether or not women can participate in combat (Winter and Margolin 2017, 23). Up until recently, the message conveyed by ISIS on the role of women underlined the key responsibilities as outlined above: to have and raise many children, to obey her husband, and to maintain a sedentary lifestyle. However, an article in the July 2017 edition of *Rumiyah* – ISIS's official magazine – stated that the time had come for women to take up arms and participate in the violent jihad (Rumiyah 2017, 15). Although it is currently unclear to what extent this apparent ideological shift changed the role of women in practice, there are increased recent (although mostly unverified) reports of alleged female suicide bombers and snipers in ISIS territory (e.g. see al-Bagdadiya News 2017; Trew and Shamary 2017; Al-Hakkak 2017; Reuters 2017), which might suggest that the shift could already be underway (Winter and Margolin 2017).

### **Children in ISIS territory**

#### *Preparing for adulthood*

The roles of men and women, as outlined above, start at an early age, and preparation for these roles starts even earlier. Children attend primary school from about the age of six. ISIS has drastically changed the primary education by adding a layer of a strict interpretation of Islam to the provided classes. Terms such as 'homeland' and 'Syria' have been replaced with terms such as 'the land of the Muslims' and 'Islamic State'. Education at primary schools mainly consists of Koran lessons, Sunna lessons and history lessons about the caliphate of the Rashidun during the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Al-Tamimi 2014). Other classes cover Arabic, math, warfare, gymnastics and, for the children of Western fighters, English (family member of Dutch foreign fighters, personal communication, December 2015, AIVD 2016; NCTV and AIVD 2017). This

primary education in the caliphate serves to indoctrinate children with ISIS ideology and to instill them their future gender-based roles (Sullivan 2015).

At school, girls learn how they can best support their future husband. They need to wear a head scarf (*hijab*) at school from the fifth year of primary school. Outside, they need to be fully veiled. Girls are expected to marry an ISIS fighter when they reach puberty, but already can get married when as young as nine years old. From that moment onwards, their role will be as described above: bearing many children and supporting the family. For boys, there is special attention for physical training. In addition to such trainings being provided at primary schools, boys can also be sent to special training camps for youngsters from the age of nine. Boys can be either selected to join a training camp or be sent to one by his parents. At these camps, they receive lessons in Sharia, firearms, melee weapons and executions (Al-Tamimi 2015; AIVD 2016, 9).

#### *Confrontations with violence*

The Netherlands General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) underlines that life for children under ISIS is hard and traumatic. Being confronted with air strikes, death and destruction is a proven stressful experience for youngsters in ISIS territory (NCTV and AIVD 2017, 9). Many have had to cope with the loss of a family member. Children also run the risk of being injured or killed themselves. At training camps, boys can receive a beating if the instructor is dissatisfied. After training, boys can be used by ISIS for executions, fighting or a suicide attack (AIVD 2016; NCTV and AIVD 2017). With ISIS increasingly losing fighters and territory, the group has been increasingly sending children to the frontlines. Furthermore, ISIS members regularly take children to a public display of punishment, where they are forced to watch executions or corporal punishments. In some cases, parents have photographed their children with the remains of those executed (AIVD 2016, 9). Hence, the caliphate is a very stressful environment for youngsters. This constitutes a major challenge in terms of dealing with children upon their return to their home countries (see contribution by Van der Heide and Geenen elsewhere in this journal).

#### **Conclusion**

With the recent expulsion of ISIS from Mosul and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) closing in on Raqqa, the number of returnees travelling back to Europe is expected to rise. This will cause European countries – more than before – to face the complex challenge of how to effectively respond to these citizens who have been or still are part of the ISIS machinery. Against this backdrop, it is important to zoom in on the lives these citizens led in the caliphate. Although difficult to project on an individual-level basis, the analysis above provides

important insights into the ‘luggage’ returnees carry with them in terms of roles and experiences in ISIS territory.

In the case of men, this includes experience with weaponry. In principle, ISIS recruits receive military training upon joining ISIS. Most recruits have subsequently been assigned a fighting role, yet there are also examples of foreigners having other responsibilities. In case of the latter, this might still include exerting violence (e.g. as a religious police officer). In the case of women, key responsibilities revolve around being a wife and mother. However, women can also become engaged in other supporting duties by becoming a teacher, doctor, student (of theology), or an *Al-Khansaa* agent. In addition, many women have acted as recruiter. This means that not all ISIS women hold ‘back seat’ roles. Finally, in terms of children, preparation for these future roles of men and women start from the age of six. In addition to the fact that these children are already exposed to the horrors of war, the indoctrination and training these children undergo are deemed traumatic.

These insights are of particular relevance in various domains in which professionals are confronted with the phenomenon of (potential) returnees from ISIS held territory. They may be useful in the domain of mental health care in order to anticipate and threat adverse psychological effects among both children and adults who have been exposed to the Syrian civil war. Moreover, these insights may heighten awareness of parents and frontline professionals of what is really happening under ISIS rule and the importance of preventing radicalization. For professionals working in the security domain, the analysis presented here provides insights in the various activities, modus-operandi and network-structures of ISIS and its members which may be relevant for determining potential security threats. Lastly, these insights are relevant for the judicial domain as they can, and in the Netherlands already have been, used for the prosecution of persons who have joined the ranks of ISIS.

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