

Female Returnees from Syria to the Western Balkans: Between Regret and ‘Caliphate Nostalgia’

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Abstract

From the beginning of the armed conflict in Syria, in 2012, more than a thousand foreign terrorist fighters and their family members moved from Western Balkan countries to Syria and Iraq, many of whom ended up joining ISIS. The countries with the highest number of departures—Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Albania—are also the countries with the highest concentration of returnees, primarily women and children. This article aims to explain and compare the motivations and expectations that fueled the decisions of women to travel initially to the war zone and their feelings and aspirations after return. It also provides insights into their lives in the ‘Islamic State’ and explores their sentiments toward the ‘caliphate’ after returning to their home countries—something that can affect their reintegration. The article seeks to shed light on women from Western Balkan countries who supported or participated in violent extremist organizations as well as the potential consequences stemming from this.

Keywords: Balkans, caliphate nostalgia, female returnees from Syria and Iraq, foreign fighters, ISIS

Introduction

In 2012, upon the start of armed conflict in Syria, the Western Balkans saw an unprecedented outflow of volunteer fighters to the Syrian theater; having once attracted foreign fighters to aid Bosnian Muslims during the 1990s, the region became an active supplier of fighters willing to return the favor to oppressed Muslims in the Middle East. For several years, some 1,070 foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their family members moved to Syria and Iraq from the Western Balkans.[1] In 2014, their motivation grew with the proclamation of the caliphate and ISIS leader al-Baghdadi’s call for Muslims around the world to migrate to ISIS-held territory and help build the self-declared ‘Islamic State’—framed as a modern-day *hijrah* (the journey of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina): “Therefore, rush O Muslims to your state. Yes, it is your state. ...O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing *hijrah* to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because *hijrah* to the land of Islam is obligatory.”[2] A willingness among people within the region to both return the favor paid in the 1990s and perform the religious duty of *hijrah*—along with the promise of a life of luxury in Syria that made the weak economic potential in their home countries even less appealing—resulted in one of the highest rates of mobilization into terrorist organizations in Europe relative to population size.[3]

Although the whole region has been affected by the foreign fighter phenomenon, the countries with the highest number of departures from 2012 to 2016, when most countries recorded their last foreign fighter departure, are: Kosovo, with approximately 355[4]; Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), with around 297[5]; North Macedonia, with 156[6]; and Albania, with 140.[7] The Western Balkans also currently has the highest concentration of returned FTFs and their family members in Europe. Some 485 of them have either returned on their own or were repatriated in coordinated actions supported by the governments of their home countries.[8] This organized repatriation from Syrian camps started in 2018 and is intended to involve all remaining nationals from the four countries mentioned above, however these operations are currently postponed or scaled down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. So far, organized repatriations have returned 10 citizens to North Macedonia, in August 2018 and April 2020; 110 citizens to Kosovo in April 2019; 25 citizens to BiH in December 2019; and five citizens to Albania, in October 2020. Kosovo’s 2019 repatriation of 110 individuals at once makes it one of the few countries in the world that has returned that many of its nationals from Syria in a single operation. These first repatriations have been mostly of women and young children.[9] Children—including many born there—as well as women, make up the majority of the 475 individuals who remain in the Western Balkan

contingent in Syria and Iraq.[10]

This article explores the experience of women from these Western Balkan countries with the highest number of travelers and returnees,[11] both during their stay in Syria and Iraq and after their return home, revealing their expectations and real-life experiences in ISIS-held territory and their sentiments toward the ‘caliphate’ after their return—something which might affect their reintegration. These findings contribute to better understanding the current level of sympathy these women hold for extremist ideologies, by comparing the motivation and expectations that fueled their decision to move to the ‘Islamic State’ some years ago with their feelings and aspirations after returning to their home countries.

Only women who were repatriated in organized operations after 2018 are included in this study, including one woman and two children from North Macedonia,[12] 32 women and 74 children from Kosovo, six women and 12 children from BiH, and one woman and four children from Albania.[13] We conducted research interviews with these women, as well as with some of the frontline practitioners who have provided them care and interventions since their return.[14] In interviews, women returnees were asked questions on issues like: the various motivations and vulnerabilities that drove them to depart for Syria and Iraq; the experience of interviewees under ISIS rule related to their family, lifestyle, and work; their views of what was positive and negative about ISIS; any disillusionment or doubts they felt; any traumatic experiences they had in ISIS territory; their perception of how women were treated (including slave ownership) and their role in marriages; feelings and doubts that may have arisen upon their return; and to what degree they feel any ‘caliphate nostalgia.’

The Wider Context: Comparable Findings from Recent Studies in Western Countries

Numerous publications have emerged in the recent years on various aspects of the foreign fighter phenomenon, as researchers aim to better understand the profiles and possible motivations of the estimated 5,600 individuals who have departed Western countries to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq.[15] According to Dawson (2021), the vast majority of Western foreign fighters have been young men from Muslim immigrant families with an average age of approximately 26 years. Still, women appear to account for between 10 and 20 percent of those who left the West for Syria and Iraq; they were generally much younger, on average around 21 years.[16]

Findings of recent studies of radicalization and the jihadist foreign fighter phenomenon assign a causal role to the “pursuit of greater purpose, meaning, identity, and belonging” in explaining, at least in part, why some individuals radicalize and resort to violence or become foreign fighters.[17] The biographies of Dutch foreign fighters were the focus of work by Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol in a 2014 study,[18] and of Bakker and Grol in a 2015 study,[19] leading them to the conclusion that individuals who departed for Syria and Iraq likely experienced “strong frustrations about their own societal position”[20], “a feeling of apathy and lack of meaningfulness in their lives,” or “the loss of a loved one” and “difficulties at school or work and trouble with authorities.”[21] In addition, the subjects of both studies were in their early twenties, came predominantly from Islamic immigrant families in the lower or lower-middle classes, and had attained modest levels of education. Before leaving for Syria—which researchers said “seemed to provide them with a sense of purpose and fulfill their need to belong”[22]—most of these individuals had become isolated from their past social networks. Instead, they developed bonds with new networks that helped reinforce their radical views, or they came under the influence of ‘charismatic persons’ and other ‘inspiring figures.’[23] Weggemans et al. (2014) noted an “increased interest in religion” in the period before subjects had departed,[24] which these authors tied to the ‘new beginning’ many associated with the establishment of a caliphate and the religious duty to “help out Muslims in need.”[25]

Similarly, Coolsaet’s (2018) study of foreign fighters from Belgium demonstrated that, for many marginalized immigrant youths, travel to Syria served as an escape from a life ‘without prospects,’ as well as ‘feelings of exclusion’ and the ‘absence of belonging’ they felt while living in Belgian society.[26] Vidino and Hughes (2015) have also found that “a search for belonging, meaning, and/or identity appears to be a crucial motivator for many Americans (and other Westerners) who embrace ISIS’s ideology.”[27] Other studies have explicitly explored the

motivation of women to undertake *hijrah*, and the roles designated to women by ISIS.[28] However, findings regarding the number of women who departed for ISIS-held territory from Western countries varies somewhat. The 2018 report by Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State*, compiled figures related to some 41,490 individuals from 80 countries who traveled to Syria and Iraq and were affiliated with ISIS, determining that 10–13% of them were women.[29] In 2021, however, Dawson found the rate of females to be even higher, up to 18 percent.[30]

Creating a typical profile of these women has turned out to be elusive. In fact, Cook and Vale (2018) contend that there simply is “no singular profile of female affiliates [of FTFs] in Syria and Iraq.”[31] They found that women who departed did so for very diverse reasons. In the jargon of radicalization research, these reasons were identified by Cook and Vale (2018) as either ‘push’ or ‘pull’ factors that had led women toward ISIS. They discovered that the most common push factors were “feelings of discrimination, persecution or those of not belonging to their society, seeking independence, and grievances related to foreign policy.” According to them, a rather vast range of pull factors came into play, from ideology and portrayals by ISIS of women’s empowerment within the ‘Islamic State,’ to “fulfillment of a perceived ‘obligation’ to make *hijrah* and live under strict Islamic jurisprudence and governance, supporting ISIS’S state-building project, seeking adventure, seeking a husband or traveling to join one already in theater, traveling with family (whether willingly or not), and even seeking free healthcare or education.”[32] Regarding the ‘role of ideology,’ women were found to be often as ‘ideologically motivated’ as males.[33] These findings resemble other research showing that women departees have been motivated by “adventure, alienation, dissatisfaction with their lives, searching for alternatives, romantic disappointments, adolescent rebellion, or other forms of discontent.”[34]

This brings us to our question: what do we know specifically about women from the Western Balkans who have become affiliated with ISIS? Our research reveals that most were motivated to depart for ISIS-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq for religious reasons; that they view their experiences there largely through the lens of a before-and-after experience, demarcated by the 2017 uptick in anti-ISIS military operations; and that their views of ISIS have shifted to varying degrees over time, with some now expressing outright disavowal of ISIS and its ideology, while others remain ambivalent and a handful continue to rationalize the group’s rhetoric and actions.

Profiles of Western Balkan Female Returnees

Just as it has been a significant challenge to profile foreign terrorist fighters in general, and their female counterparts in particular, it is exceedingly difficult to recognize a single profile in women from the Western Balkans who migrated to ISIS territory. Nonetheless, some characteristics identified by Jakupi and Kelmendi [35] in Kosovar women migrants can be observed in a high percentage of other Western Balkan women who traveled to the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq. These are: (i) they were young; (ii) lacked information about the conflict; (iii) married at a young age (in their twenties); (iv) began practicing religion shortly before their departure; and (v) had experienced a traumatic event (the loss of a loved one or other significant personal crisis) earlier in their life. Further, in accordance with the conclusion of Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol [36] that departees from Western countries largely appear to be marginalized individuals with limited economic and social prospects who are experiencing various frustrations in their lives, this research also identified a lack of prospects and the hope for a better life as important push factors in the decision of many women to travel from the Western Balkans.

The fact that most of the female subjects of this research married early, and were married before departing (see Table 1), was, however, a point of divergence from other studies. For example, Dawson’s recently published study, *A Comparative Analysis of the Data on Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Who Went and Why?*[37], indicates that a majority of women who migrated from the West to Syria and Iraq were single. In contrast, 33 of the 34 women from Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia who participated in our research had traveled to Syria and Iraq when already married, with the aim to perform traditional family-oriented roles and duties. And while all six of the women from BiH were unmarried when they departed, they had all joined Salafist

communities beforehand, had started to wear *niqab*, and each actively sought a husband within the community or online, hoping to marry under the provisions of *Sharia* law. Some left BiH newly married in unions that are not officially recognized, and without the knowledge or support of their parents. One unmarried Bosnian woman said that her desire to support the ‘Islamic State’ was so strong that she “couldn’t wait to move to Syria to get married to an ISIS fighter there.”[38]

Table 1. Age, Family Status, and Number of Children of Female Travelers at Moment of Departure [39]

Country	Age		Family status		Number of children	Children born in Syria
			married	unmarried		
Albania	30–39 y	1	1	-	2	2
BiH	20–29 y	2	-	6	1	10
	30–39 y	3				
	40–49 y	1				
Kosovo	20–29 y	19	31	1	32	33
	30–39 y	9				
	40–49 y	4				
North Macedonia	30–39 y	1	1	-	1	1

Despite concerns that some women from the region, especially those from traditionally patriarchal rural areas, may have been pressured to depart by their husbands or other male family members, our research established that such cases have been extremely rare (though this narrative is often advanced in court with the aim of obtaining a lower sentence); most women voluntarily joined their husbands, together with their children.[40] While initial departures from the Western Balkans to Syria and Iraq were dominated by men traveling to become fighters, usually with the intent of returning to their home countries one day, family departures began trending after the declaration of the ‘caliphate’ in June 2014 and interviews for this study revealed that when many families left—sometimes three generations, especially in Kosovo—they told relatives and friends that they had no intention of returning. However, not every woman who departed to Syria and Iraq was married, meaning they did not follow their husbands. In opposition to traditional norms, some wives refused to migrate, such as a woman from Pristina whose 8-year-old son was taken to Syria by his father, without her permission. [41] Still, some women have testified that they did leave voluntarily but were deceived by their husbands and led to believe that Turkey [42] or even Germany [43], and not Syria, would be their final destination, where they expected their husbands would find better-paying jobs.

Despite cases such as these, the influence of women as a driving force or strong support for the decision of many families to join the ‘caliphate’ should not be underestimated. Indeed, the criticism by Margolin and Winter [44], of the conventional wisdom that women are pulled into extremism because they are ‘more compassionate and loving and less interested in politics and nation-building than men’ as being ‘stereotype-laden, problematic, and dangerous’ is supported by our own research. One Kosovar woman, for example, accompanied her husband to Syria twice, fully aware of events on the ground as her husband had already traveled there before, and called the decision “one of the best... she has ever made.”[45] A Mitrovica-based imam attributes this unquestioning support by many wives for their husbands will largely to an atavistic mentality that “the wife should be where the husband is.”[46] This is reflecting a regional culture that still accedes to patriarchy and where to this day the position of women is highly unequal to that of men. In fact, Tudora, Banica, and Istrate [47] tested several dimensions of inequality—cultural stereotypes, reproductive health, unemployment, and longevity—to demonstrate that a number of related indicators of gender disparity are measurable in the Balkans today. The inequality faced by women in Western Balkan societies was also highlighted in a July 2018 European Parliament Briefing on “Gender equality in the EU accession process.” It referred to ‘unfinished business’ in the

region when it comes to ensuring equality between women and men, noting that “traditional gender roles are deep-rooted and social attitudes and lack of awareness of women’s rights are at the core of the problem.”[48]

Another way in which women who participated in our research departed from wider trends had to do with their rate of religious conversion. For instance, Dawson concludes that, conservatively, about 15 percent of FTFs are converts, and that women affiliated with ISIS are even more likely to be converts than men.[49] Cook and Vale found similarly that between 6 and 23 percent of women migrants from the EU were converts to Islam.[50] Yet, almost the opposite is true of FTFs and their families from the Western Balkans, among whom the rate of conversion is negligible.[51] Unlike Muslim communities in Western Europe, which are composed mostly of recent immigrants, Balkan Muslims have been indigenous for more than five centuries.[52] Hence, all the women subjects of this research are native to the countries they departed and are Muslim by birth.

Dawson’s research of 2021 also indicates a link between foreign fighting and lower socioeconomic status, lower levels of educational attainment, and higher levels of unemployment. Referencing a substantial number of studies with similar findings, he concludes that FTFs from Europe ‘come disproportionately from the lower socioeconomic ranks of society,’ and that their “education levels are lower and the levels of unemployment higher than what would appear to be the norm.”[53] This suggests that forms of social and economic marginalization have influenced the mobilization of foreign fighters, at least in Europe. However, in the Western Balkans, it does not appear that citizens who joined the conflicts in Syria and Iraq overwhelmingly share the same socioeconomic circumstances. The women under study here fall into at least two socioeconomic categories. On the one hand, a considerable percentage of the Kosovar women who participated came from an impoverished economic background (as did one Albanian and one North Macedonian woman), while on the other hand, every repatriated Bosnian woman came from an urban area and enjoyed an average economic status.

These Bosnian returnees were also well educated, with at least a high school degree (4), up to university (1), and even a master’s degree (1). The level of education of the 32 Kosovar women ranges more widely, from primary school (3) to university degree (6), with the highest number having received a high school education (23). The Albanian woman also completed high school, while the North Macedonian woman only completed primary school. All these women were unemployed at the time they departed but did not cite their financial situation as a prime reason for moving to ISIS territory, even though a better and more luxurious life were among the incentives their husbands used to coax them to migrate. Therefore, our research cannot establish any direct link between levels of education or employment status and the desire of women from the Western Balkans to depart for Syria and Iraq.

Table 2. Education Level and Employment Status at the Time of Departure [54]

<i>Country</i>	<i>Level of education</i>			<i>Employed</i>	<i>Unemployed</i>
	<i>Primary school</i>	<i>High school</i>	<i>University degree</i>		
Albania	-	1	-	-	1
BiH	1	3	2	-	6
Kosovo	3	23	6	-	32
North Macedonia	1	-	-	-	1

All the women who took part in this study returned with children, some from multiple marriages, but each with fathers from Western Balkan countries.[55] Of those who remain married (see Table 3), their husbands are still in Syria or, in a handful of cases, are incarcerated in their home countries (three in Kosovo and one in BiH).[56]

Table 3. Marital Status at the Time of Return

<i>Country</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Widowed</i>
Albania	-	1
BiH	4	2
Kosovo	13	19
North Macedonia	-	1

In general, female interviewees were reluctant to discuss their marriages in Syria and Iraq or the circumstances in which they lost their husbands. What they did speak more openly about were their expectations about life in the ‘Islamic State’ and the reality they found there, which was far from what many imagined.

Expectations vs. Reality: Life in the ‘Islamic State’

Based on internal Islamic State documents, Margolin and Winter (2021) created a framework for understanding the complexities of women’s lives under ISIS rule, and described the gendered theological-legislative system of control that was imposed on women under its governance.[57] Here, the focus is on what this meant practically for women who arrived from Western Balkan countries, how they perceived the way they were governed, and the life they lived under ISIS administration.

The relative success of ISIS in mobilizing female supporters from around the globe has aroused the interest of a number of experts, as well as the general public. It has sparked a wealth of research exploring the treatment of women affiliated with the group and how they engaged with the ISIS proto-state.[58] This curiosity about the inner lives and motivations of women who have traveled to battle zones in Syria and Iraq is further stimulated by the widely known reputation of ISIS as one of the most violent terrorist organizations in the world, and one that has promoted itself not only through horrific acts of violence directed against its enemies and the West but also through the brutal abuse, degradation, and mistreatment of ‘out-group’ women, or those considered enemies of the Islamic State; from Christian, Druze, Yazidi, and Shia Muslim communities, as well as Sunni Muslim women deemed ‘apostates’ for not adhering to the group’s narrow interpretation of Islam.[59]

Despite a widespread assumption that ISIS wielded violence indiscriminately, it was systematic in targeting specific social groups with distinct forms of violence, including sexual violence. In a recent study, Revkin and Wood (2021) mapped the organization’s patterns of violence and showed how it had adopted ideologically motivated policies that authorized the weaponization of certain forms of sexual violence—including sexual slavery, forced and child marriage—defined who could be targeted, and regulated the conditions under which such violence could be perpetrated.[60] While some of the women affiliated with ISIS tolerated the group’s sexual slavery and gang rape, which required exclusive ownership and therefore exclusive sexual access, as unauthorized practices toward out-group Yazidi women, this does not mean that in-group Sunni Muslim women were protected from violence. They were undoubtedly exposed to forced and even child marriage, for example, such as in the case of a 14-year-old from the Western Balkans who returned to North Macedonia with a two-year-old child born in ISIS territory.

The high percentage of female travelers to ISIS territory from the Western Balkans, where some countries’ foreign traveler contingents included up to 35 percent women,[61] has been particularly hard to understand due to the still-vivid war trauma experienced by some of these women or their family members in the 1990s in their homeland. Their willingness to travel to, live in, and raise children in a war-torn environment, under the brutal totalitarian rule of ISIS and under gender restrictions unimaginable in modern society, has therefore been difficult to make sense of, even many years after their departure. The female subjects of our research were driven to depart for Syria and Iraq for largely religious reasons, as well as due to socioeconomic prospects and the lure of recruiters.[62] In interviews, many women highlighted religious motivations such as a woman’s traditional obligation to be with her husband. Moreover, even though Muslims constitute a significant part of

the population in their home countries,[63] some women cited the secular constitution and religious neutrality of their country's government, and headscarf bans in every country except BiH, as having moved them toward a more radical interpretation of Islam, often delivered to them by "organizations and countries with different interests." [64]

It is notable that many of these women lack a deep religious background, coming from only moderately religious families. Most of them began learning deeply about Islam shortly prior to departing, when their burgeoning commitment to religion was abused in some cases by recruiters, in an effort to lure them to Syria and Iraq. Given that radicalized actors have thus influenced their understanding of Islam, it is not surprising that some of these women emphasized feelings of having been discriminated against on religious grounds in the relatively liberal Western Balkans. For example, a woman from Kosovo expressed that her rights as a young Muslim woman are being disrespected as long as she is not allowed to attend a public high school while wearing *hijab*. [65] Similarly, another woman said she was drawn to travel to Syria 'to experience more [religious] freedom, to be allowed to be dressed as I wish [to wear *niqab*];'[66] and this sentiment was shared by many of the women who took part in this research, from all four countries. While the experience of discrimination alone does not turn someone into a supporter of violent extremism, Jakupi and Kelmendi [67] contend that it does fuel feelings of isolation within a larger community and a sense of distance from the culture or society in which one lives. This leaves an individual more vulnerable to extremist narratives, and to propaganda focused on developing a sense of belonging for recruits, with promises of rewards in both this life and the afterlife.

There are some variations in the ISIS propaganda that has been directed toward women in the Western Balkans, primarily in the way Albanian recruits have been targeted. While the group invested significant efforts to deploy gendered propaganda after its leaders produced a Manifesto [68] outlining the roles of women in ISIS, aiming to appeal to potential transnational recruits, there were nuances in how they approached women in certain cultures. For example, Ingram (2021) examined the gendered propaganda of ISIS directed toward English-speaking women in its magazines, *Dabiq* (2014–2016) and *Rumiyah* (2016–2017), and found that articles specifically targeting women relied on five female representations—three in-group archetypes, 'supporters,' 'mother/sister/wife,' and 'fighter'; and two out-group archetypes, 'victim,' and 'corruptor'—that were instrumentalized to motivate female readers "to develop their own identity in line with in-group archetypes...and denounce traits characteristic of out-group archetypes." [69] This links shame with empowerment by offering women the opportunity to redeem themselves by rejecting out-group archetypes and fulfilling the key roles of supporter or wife within ISIS.

But these gendered appeals to identity were not echoed in propaganda targeting women in the Western Balkans. Instead, it seems that ISIS is well aware of the cultural specificities in the region and the potential influence husbands and partners have on women. Therefore, it targeted its online propaganda primarily to men, relying on them to recruit women. In fact, in its research on the influence of ISIS propaganda, the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies could not find any propaganda videos targeting Albanian-speaking women, in contrast to several propaganda videos targeting Albanian-speaking men. For Jakupi and Kelmendi, this was proof that ISIS has put little effort into creating special recruitment materials tailored to Western Balkan women, focusing instead on how to equip already-radicalized men to use their relationships with susceptible women to become key recruiters.[70]

This propaganda has sometimes been instrumentalized within families, and an important influencing factor on many women who departed for Syria and Iraq was the propaganda promoted by their own partners or husbands. One imam noted that some women were seduced 'by the big houses and the propaganda about practicing life under Islamic law,' and were told that if they cooked and cared for their jihadist husbands, they would "receive a reward from Allah." [71] Notably, a majority of the women interviewed by us maintain a strong conviction that their decision to travel was the right one, and that their motives were valid, even as they now acknowledge the high level of disillusionment they experienced with life in the 'caliphate' and with its evolution, before its downfall.

Life with ISIS: Between Regret and the Myth of the Caliphate

Margolin and Winter (2021) have shown how the Islamic State implemented an elaborate gendered system of control in Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2017, a system that sought to penetrate almost every aspect of society, “regulating social relationships, extracting resources from local communities, and justifying the appropriation of material wealth and property for its own gain.” They describe this system as a product of efforts “to balance ideology and pragmatism,” predicated on the idea that “both individual and communal life should be governed in totality by what the Islamic State considered to be ‘Islam.’”[72]

When women from the Western Balkans encountered this system, some were quickly disappointed that life under ISIS rule fell short of their expectations. Yet for others, it took time to recognize and reject the more nightmarish parts of their ‘caliphate fantasy,’ and a handful remain ambivalent about their experience to this day. Indeed, these women who spent from three to over six years in Syria and Iraq, and tended to view the domestic roles they had played there in glorified terms—“not as limiting but rather as spiritually righteous.”[73] Interviews with these returnees revealed that they all served in supportive roles and did not actively engage in combat; but several women mentioned that they had been taught by their husbands to use weapons, but only for their own protection.

The stories told by Western Balkan women about life in ISIS territory are very similar, and yet can be divided into two extremely distinct phases, separated by the 2017 intensification of coalition operations against ISIS. Married women who departed in the early years to Syria and Iraq expressed satisfaction with their living conditions and the services provided to them. None were gainfully employed, reflecting the findings of Margolin and Winter (2021) that the vast majority of in-group women living under ISIS rule were not working outside their homes. However, as their research revealed, women were often beneficiaries of ‘state’ support and were granted resources or other forms of material assistance, sometimes through aid provided to husbands and fathers, who were instructed to list family members on military expense and salary forms. The women who participated in our research said they were satisfied with this support, and that almost all their basic needs were fulfilled to enable a normal life for their families (including free accommodation, an adequate monthly allowance, and access to food and other services). “When we arrived, we were receiving food and 50 USD per person for each family member, plus 30 USD for each child in monthly allowances,” one woman explained, but she noted that ‘such payments soon stopped.’[74] In those first years, another woman added, “all the children were born in the hospital with appropriate care to mothers and newborns.”[75] These were conditions women who arrived later could only dream about.

The women we interviewed lived in groups, mainly with other women who spoke the same language, and interacted very little with people of other nationalities, even from other Western Balkan countries. According to one Bosnian woman, it was not only language but also their level of education, as well as cultural differences, that separated them from Albanian-speaking women.[76] “It was easier for us to live in small communities where we know each other and can speak our language. We were helping each other with children and spending our free time together. ... we liked going shopping at local markets, where we could buy on sale the world’s most famous brands of clothes.”[77] Friendships were reportedly even harder to establish with Arab women, who interviewees said sometimes mistreated and oppressed them.

There were also women who arrived in these early years unmarried, or who were soon widowed. They reported a more negative experience, reflecting their treatment and living conditions in a *maqarr* (a house for widowed or unmarried women)[78]—conditions which they described as “horrific, often cramped and dirty, without enough food.”[79] Such conditions forced them to marry or re-marry as quickly as possible, to protect themselves and their children from a lack of care and in order to access basic needs. “It was not love but a strong wish to leave this crazy house that forced me to re-marry soon after I was widowed,” said one woman.[80]

The second phase—after 2017—was characterized by incessant war and a sharp decrease in living conditions as services delivered formerly by ‘state institutions,’ were no longer provided. At the same time, unremitting aerial bombardments forced people to move constantly in search of protection from military operations. Women returnees saw this as the time at which the ‘Islamic State’ lost its credibility as a state, where the values of

‘pure Islam’ and equality for all Muslims were promoted. Instead, they said, it became highly corrupt, and citizens were routinely mistreated, especially those of foreign or non-Arab origin. One woman explained that “greediness and the ignorance of our emirs disrupted the whole state system and its organizational structure. We didn’t know who was responsible for what, or where to ask for help and support for our basic needs. We were forced to constantly change our residence; after 30...I stopped counting. It was not important to me anymore.... Nothing was important...just how my kids and I would survive.”[81] A Kosovar woman recalled that “there was nothing left to eat. We lived on just one date per day and ate grass out of desperation.”[82]

These conditions provoked deep disappointment in Western Balkan women regarding the basic principles of the ‘Islamic State’. After all, it was these principles that had attracted many of them. Some women blamed the collapse of the ‘state’ on corrupt government employees who had abandoned the tenets of Islam for their own benefit. However, other repatriated women did not want to discuss the executions or other atrocities committed by ISIS at all.[83] They place blame on the West for disrupting their ‘normal lives’ and causing harm and suffering to people through military assaults. Some also protested against the treatment of ISIS and the ‘caliphate’ in Western media, expressing, for example, frustration at how ISIS has been presented, with one woman claiming that “only biased and distorted images and fake news about ISIS activities” are published in the news.[84]

Despite the fact that all the women returnees interviewed by us testified to grim conditions in Syria and Iraq, sharing a high level of disappointment with life in the post-2017 phase, it is important to emphasize that some of them still have positive feelings about the idea of a caliphate or a ‘pure Islamic State’ and life under the strict rules of *Sharia* law. Some women we spoke to do not regret having migrated, explaining for instance that “even though the Islamic State does not exist anymore and there was a lot of injustice there, I do not regret that I moved there, because I also experienced some nice things.”[85] Another woman held positive feelings about how ISIS had implemented *Sharia* in the territory under its control, describing the required behavior of women and the brutal punishments for disrespecting strict religious rules as ‘fully acceptable’, adding that “all the women that have been punished deserved it. I pray for myself to avoid such temptations.”[86]

In some interviews, it was clear that Margolin and Winter (2021) were right to warn that some women in the ISIS in-group actively aided in the abuse of women in the out-group. These women were systematically targeted and dehumanized, enslaved by the Islamic State, and even lost their lives. Women in the in-group—including some of the subjects of our study—turned a blind eye to slavery and sexual abuse. This may have been due, as Margolin and Winter suggest, to their own precarious situations under ISIS rule.[87] Among the women interviewed for our research project, there were some who showed support for the enslavement of Yazidi women, while some others were neutral on this issue. As a rationale, these women fell back on ISIS rhetoric, saying that such treatment is acceptable for ‘unbelievers’. While these women also claimed that foreign fighters from the Western Balkans did not hold Yazidi sex slaves, they acknowledged that this was primarily due to a lack of financial means to buy and guard them. “Our men had no money for that. Slaves and the luxurious life were designated to rich Arab men.”[88]

Findings like these bring us to the question: Do these women pose any threat to their countries of residence once they return from the conflict zone? Some women have undeniably remained committed to the ISIS cause even after leaving ISIS-controlled territory, such as a woman from Kosovo who described her involvement with ISIS as a ‘great opportunity’ compared to the life she led at home.[89] Notably, one of her highly educated compatriots also exhibited a willingness to continue to support ISIS after her return.[90] Similar sentiment was found among women from other Western Balkan countries as well; they still place primary blame on the West and coalition forces for the harm and negative experiences they suffered in Syria and Iraq.

This continued adherence to ISIS narratives even after returning home could indicate that these women are on one of the pathways described by Reed, de Roy van Zuijdewijn, and Bakker (2015) that may be cause for concern. Still, as they note, it is important to distinguish in such cases between deradicalization and disengagement and to understand that ‘disengagement does not necessarily mean that people leave behind their radical ideas’ but also that, “[s]ometimes people stay within these movements or scenes for a long time, even after they have

become disillusioned.”[91]

In fact, several studies exploring the potential threat of returnees and their propensity to engage in violence have “shown that the risk of direct action (e.g., a terrorist attack) carried out by returning foreign fighters is historically quite low.”[92] Hegghammer and Nesser (2015) found, for example, that the ‘blowback rate’ of attacks by Western returnees in the ISIS era appears to be just 1 in 360, adding that domestic-based plots which do not involve returnees are a greater threat.[93] Even among returnees who pose a threat, there appears to be a small time window within which they are likely to act. In their 2020 study, Malet and Hayes introduced new data on ‘Lags in Attack Times of Extremist Returnees’ (LATER), based on research involving 230 returnees to Western countries. Their findings indicate that a majority of attempted attacks among this population occur within one year, and most frequently within just four months after return, underscoring the importance of targeting reintegration efforts “within the critical six months after return, after which the risk of attack diminishes considerably.”[94]

There are on the other hand women who returned quite disillusioned with the ‘Islamic State’, including from a religious perspective. They criticize its implementation of Islamic law, highlighting the unequal treatment of Arab and non-Arab foreign fighters and their families, and point at high corruption at all levels—which they view as a clear distortion of Islam. According to one woman, “they treated us as numbers who came here to die for their “cause”, which was strongly opposed to Islamic rules and values.”[95] However, many women returnees agreed that if the conflict intensification had not impacted negatively on their lives, they would not have regretted continuing to live in Syria.[96] Some saw their living and social conditions improve immediately upon arriving in Syria, where they received a home to live in and enjoyed what one woman described as a ‘happy life.’[97] Yet, their horrific experiences in the second phase, since 2017, and later in Syrian camps, led nearly all the women interviewed for our project to express gratitude for being repatriated.

Life after Return and Prospects for the Future

The women we interviewed were all satisfied with how their repatriation had been handled, as well as with the services and care provided to them after returning home. Their main fear was that they would be prosecuted and separated from their children, although most did not have to face such an outcome. They were also anxious about the fate of their husbands, especially those who were imprisoned in Syrian or Iraqi jails. “I only wish to visit him”[98] said one woman, who is concerned about the harsh conditions in which her husband is serving his prison sentence in Syria.

Still, perhaps the most pressing challenge for these women is how to rebuild their lives, resocialize into their communities, gain economic independence, and secure a future for themselves and their children. Not all of them are ready to readapt to the habits and behaviors in their home society. No matter what their feelings about life in the ‘caliphate’ were, the freedom to wear *niqab* without being condemned in public is still very important for many of these women, who continue to cover their face after their return even if this is not customary in their community or in their family. While this can hamper their reintegration and widen their separation from their families or community, many of these women are determined to maintain this practice. One remarked, “I expect people to accept me as I am and accept that I wear *niqab*.”[99] The same sentiment was shared by a Kosovar woman who is the only member of her family who wears *niqab*, which she does not want to take off even at home. “Religion still plays a big role in my life,” she explained.[100] Meanwhile, her father who was happy his daughter has returned, worries that he is not “able to really reach her”, noting that “she is still very closed...it is strange for me that she prays so much and practices her beliefs so strictly.”[101]

Another woman from Kosovo—who moved to Syria to join her fiancée at the age of 14, remained in Syria for three years, experienced desperate living conditions, lost her first husband, and gave birth in horrific circumstances in a Syrian camp—expressed that she could ‘hardly reintegrate’ back into Kosovar society, where she expected her prospects to be poor, largely due to the stigmatization and discrimination she anticipates from the rest of society. “For example, I cannot walk freely in my dress [*niqab*] as in Arab countries.... They [the Kosovan government] even want to ban it by law.”[102] This woman did not wear *niqab* before she traveled to

Syria, and even though she considers her decision to move there a mistake, she cannot see a future in Kosovo, saying she “would like to move somewhere else...in some other Arab country...where you can practice your faith without being condemned in public.” [103]

Beyond the degree to which they can reintegrate into families and societies, the future of women returnees and the success of their reintegration will depend significantly on their legal status (i.e., whether they are prosecuted and jailed) and their economic prospects. Gaining economic independence can be a factor in leading people away from extremist networks and narratives, but for these women, achieving this is a challenge for several reasons. For one, many suffer from serious psychological issues, including PTSD, which makes them incapable of holding employment, at least in the short term. Further, limited employment opportunities in their home countries make it difficult to find a job, especially for those stigmatized as returnees from ISIS territory. Even in the case of a vacancy, one woman expressed her apprehension that “no one will hire a woman with *niqab*.” [104] Another woman highlighted the impossibility of married women working without their husband’s permission, which is not feasible to get from husbands who have not returned or are imprisoned abroad.

There are some male returnees imprisoned in the Western Balkans as well, after returning and facing prosecution under domestic laws that prohibit foreign fighting. However, women returnees to the region have not faced jail time and only a few have been prosecuted. The prosecution of returnees has become an increasingly sensitive issue in many countries, in some cases—and certainly in the Western Balkans—because laws have been developed in response to the foreign fighting phenomenon not before traveling to the conflict zone became more widespread. Indeed, early returnees who traveled to ISIS territory in 2013 or early 2014 “could return virtually without any fear of being prosecuted.” [105] However, this has changed as countries around the world have confronted the prospect of FTF returnees; and in the Western Balkans, significant numbers of returnees have forced governments to quickly adapt legislation.

Still, as Reed, de Roy van Zuijdewijn, and Bakker (2015) have noted, it is not a criminal offense in many countries “to join a fighting party as long as this party is not in direct conflict with [that] specific country. Therefore, countries either criminalize the act of joining a designated terrorist organization or charge foreign fighters for planning or executing a terrorist offense while in Syria/Iraq.” [106] Some governments have thus “turned to existing legislation in innovative ways” to prosecute FTFs, including laws addressing organized crime, antidemocratic acts, and immigration. [107] Others have broadened their criminal codes to capture a greater range of ‘terrorist activity,’ both domestically and abroad, usually by expanding the scope of what constitutes a terrorist offense to include not only direct acts of terrorism but also acts that provide support to terrorist groups, such as propagandizing, fundraising, and recruiting. This aligns with UN Resolution 2178 (2014), which called on member states to criminalize the conduct of FTFs by making it illegal to travel (or attempt to travel), or fundraise for or organize travel, in order to “travel to a State other than their State...for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or providing or receiving terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict.” [108]

While some EU countries already had laws that criminalized their citizens traveling abroad to join terrorist groups and participate in terrorist movements, other countries had to amend and expand their criminal codes to render these actions illegal. For example, Belgium has developed and reformed its criminal justice response to FTFs since 2015, making it a crime to travel with the intent of joining a terrorist group abroad, provide or receive terrorist training, or fund a terrorist organization. [109] This has also been the case in many Western Balkans states. In BiH, for instance, where legislation already criminalized conduct related to the illegal creation of military forces, including training or equipping such a force, amendments were adopted in 2014 to make it illegal to establish or join *foreign* paramilitary or parapolice units. As such, half of returned FTFs have faced prosecution under new foreign fighting statutes, and the other half under terrorism statutes that predated the foreign fighting phenomenon. [110]

Nonetheless, BiH has sentenced returned FTFs to fewer than two years in prison on average, and security analyst Adrian Shtuni has emphasized that sentences imposed in EU countries for individuals found guilty of joining foreign terrorist groups are twice as long as those imposed in Western Balkans countries, arguing

that courts in the region need to rethink their approach. Shtuni also notes that as of early 2020, the average sentence for these offenses had *decreased* in Kosovo, from an already relatively mild average of three and a half years.[111] According to Besa Kabashi, the challenges of prosecution are even greater when it comes to women returnees, “as it is hard to prove the position of a woman in a relationship’ and ‘it is hard to know for sure if her participation in a foreign conflict was voluntary or not, and in what capacity.”[112] This view seems to be dominant among governments in the Western Balkans, where only Kosovo has pursued prosecution against any of the women who have returned from ISIS territory.

There has been no such differentiation between men and women returnees in EU Member States, at least in recent years; women have been treated as individuals with full agency, and therefore as potential perpetrators and not just victims. In Germany, for example, the radicalization of girls and women initially received little attention, meaning that women avoided prosecution upon return from Syria and Iraq. However, the state has since recognized that women may in fact have been perpetrators in Syria or Iraq and has begun to prosecute some women returnees. In the Western Balkans, perceptions of the threat women may pose is still likely influenced by entrenched social biases that underestimate the agency of women. In fact, in BiH, women returnees have even been exempted from testifying in trials before Bosnian courts against accused FTFs after being declared incapable witnesses due to the effects of the trauma they suffered in the conflict zone.[113]

Kosovo stands apart in the region, having prosecuted and sentenced all of the women who participated in our research. They were each charged with participating in a terrorist organization and, after pleading guilty, received an average of two to three years in suspended sentences.[114] Many of these women do not understand why they should be charged for membership in a terrorist organization when they were “only at home and did not do anything...had no bad intentions and only followed our men.” This argument emerged regularly in interviews with returnees. While a majority of them feel that moving to Syria ‘was a mistake’ they still believe the decision was ‘just’, interpreting it as an obligation derived from Islamic scriptures.[115]

Conclusion

The findings of our study provide an overview of a small and diverse sample of Western Balkan women returnees, allowing us to obtain a glimpse of their lives in the ‘Islamic State’ and the challenges of reintegration in their home countries. Though this sample cannot be considered representative, consisting only of those repatriated after 2018 by their respective governments, it is large and diverse enough to provide interesting insights into their feelings before, during, and after their stay in Syria and Iraq. An analysis of the results reveals that female returnees can be divided into three groups: 1) those who expressed strong opinions against ISIS; 2) those who expressed disappointment with ISIS but remain supportive of a caliphate and of a ‘pure Islamic State’; and 3) those who remain highly committed to ISIS. This indicates that a careful evaluation and risk assessment of women returnees is essential to determine whether they pose any threat and to make sure they receive the most appropriate support to facilitate their resocialization and reintegration.

Importantly, our study also found that ideological indoctrination by ISIS initially boosted the commitment of these women to the idea of a Muslim caliphate and a ‘pure Islamic state’ ruled by ISIS. However, over time many became disillusioned and their commitment waned. In most cases, this was due to negative experiences inside ISIS, and changes over the years in their living conditions, the deficient provision of services, and the treatment of non-Arab citizens. As a result of these factors, many women began to deradicalize prior to returning home. The level of disillusionment and self-deradicalization realized by these women *before* their return can be used to explore their willingness and ability to support deradicalization programs or to serve as counter-narrators against ISIS propaganda *after* their return.

Interestingly, the disappointment some of these women feel about the ‘Islamic State’ has not diminished their commitment to ISIS or to the militant jihadist ideology espoused by the group. This may further complicate their reintegration process and must therefore be carefully assessed and managed. Ultimately, however, any potential threat posed by returning women to their home countries must be countered through deradicalization programs that address the vulnerabilities, influences, and motivations that drove them toward an extremist

ideology in the first place, as well as the traumas they experienced while living under the rule of ISIS.

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Notes

[1] Two-thirds of those who traveled were at the time of departure male adults, while the remaining one-third was composed of minors (18%) and women (15%). A. Shtuni, "Returning Western Balkan Foreign Fighters: A Long-Term Challenge," (January 9, 2020). URL: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/returning-western-balkans-foreign-fighters-long-term-challenge-24762>, accessed 14 March 2020.

[2] H. J. Ingram, C. Whiteside, and C. Winter, *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 164; DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197501436.003.0008

[3] For more data on the Foreign Fighters' recruitment among general and Muslim population in the EU and in Western Balkan countries see: V. Azinović, "Regional Report: Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans" (June 2018). URL: https://www.britishcouncil.ba/sites/default/files/erf_report_western_balkans_2018.pdf, accessed 14 March 2020.

[4] K. Bytyqi and S. Mullins, "Returnee Foreign Fighters from Syria and Iraq: The Kosovan Experience," *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 12, Issue 7, (August 2019). URL: <https://ctc.usma.edu/returnee-foreign-fighters-syria-iraq-kosovan-experience/>. Among them there were 47 women and 92 children. See: V. Kelmendi, "Not Just Victims: Women in Terrorism from the Western Balkans" (February 2019). URL: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Not%20Just%20Victims-%20Women%20in%20Terrorism%20from%20the%20Western%20Balkans.pdf>, accessed 14 March 2020.

[5] Among them, 63 were women and 57 men. See: V. Kelmendi, 2019.

[6] E. Rosand, H. Ellis and S. Weine, "Repatriating ISIS Family Members: A North Macedonia Model?" (September 14, 2020). URL: <https://www.justsecurity.org/72420/repatriating-isis-family-members-a-north-macedonian-model/>. Among them there were 14 women. No data are available for children. See: V. Kelmendi, 2019.

[7] Among them there were 13 women and 31 children. See: G. Erabara, "Albanian Children to be Returned from Syrian Refugee Camps," *Balkan Insight* (October 26, 2020); URL: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/26/albanian-children-to-be-returned-from-syrian-refugee-camps/>, accessed 16 March 2020.

[8] At least 260 individuals have been reported as having been killed. A. Shtuni, 2020.

[9] Of the 110 repatriated Kosovan citizens there were only four men, as well as only seven from BiH. So far, the number of men is only higher in the case of North Macedonia, where the ratio of men to women is 7:1. Albania repatriated four children and the mother of one of these.

[10] A. Shtuni, 2020.

- [11] Statistics show that the highest number of women from the region of Western Balkans who have joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq in relation to the Muslim population is from Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia. On a per-capita level, the highest number of women who have joined the conflict is from Kosovo, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina. See: R. Jakupi and V. Kelmendi, "Women in Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned from Kosovo," Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (January 2017). URL: http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/women-in-ve-eng_594236.pdf, accessed 10 March 2020.
- [12] One of whom, a 14-year-old girl is a mother of a two-year-old baby born in Syria.
- [13] Nine of 74 children from Kosovo as well as one of 12 from BiH returned as orphans.
- [14] These interviews have been conducted over a period of four months, from September to December 2020.
- [15] R. Coolsaet and T. Renard, *Returnees: Who Are They, Why Are They (Not) Coming Back, and How Should We Deal with Them? Assessing Policies on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands*. Brussels: Egmont Royal Institute for International Affairs (2018). URL: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/returnees-assessing-policies-on-returning-foreign-terrorist-fighters-in-belgium-germany-and-the-netherlands/>, accessed 2 July 2021.
- [16] L. L. Dawson, "A Comparative Analysis of the Data on Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Who Went and Why?" The Hague: ICCT (February 2021), p. 2; see also: J. Cook and G. Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State." London: ICSR (2018), p. 3. URL: <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>, accessed 2 July 2021.
- [17] L. L. Dawson and A. Amarasingam, "Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2017, 40:3, 191–210, p. 192, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2016.1274216.
- [18] D. Weggemans, E. Bakker and P. Grol, "Who Are They and Why Do They Go? The Radicalization and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 8, Issue 4 (2014).
- [19] E. Bakker and P. Grol, "Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands," *ICCT Policy Brief* (July 2015). URL: <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2015/07/ICCT-Bakker-Grol-Motives-and-Considerations-of-Potential-Foreign-Fighters-from-the-Netherlands-July2015.pdf>, accessed 2 July 2021.
- [20] Weggemans et al., 2014, p. 107.
- [21] Weggemans et al., 2014, p. 108.
- [22] Weggemans et al., 2014, p. 108.
- [23] Weggemans et al., 2014, p. 108.
- [24] Weggemans et al., 2014, p. 108.
- [25] Bakker and Grol, 2015, p. 14.
- [26] R. Coolsaet and T. Renard, 2018, p. 17.
- [27] L. Vidino and S. Hughes, "ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa," Program on Extremism, The George Washington University (December 2015), p. 16. URL: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/downloads/ISIS%20in%20America%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf>, accessed 4 July 2021.
- [28] See: C. Hoyle, A. Bradford and R. F. Frenett, "Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS," London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2015); L. Khalil, "Behind the Veil: Women in Jihad after the Caliphate," Lowy Institute (2019). URL: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/behind-veil-women-jihad-aftercaliphate>; H. Rafiq and N. Malik, "Caliphettes: Women and the Appeal of Islamic State," London: Quilliam Foundation, 2015.
- [29] J. Cook and G. Vale, 2018, p. 3.
- [30] L. L. Dawson, 2021, p. 2.
- [31] J. Cook and G. Vale, 2018, p. 25.
- [32] J. Cook and G. Vale, 2018, p. 26.
- [33] A. Peresin and A. Cervone, "The Western Muhajirat of ISIS," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 7 (2015); M. Bloom and C. Winter, "The Women of ISIL," *Politico* (12 July, 2015). URL: <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-women-of-isil-female-suicide-bomber-terrorism/>, accessed 1 July 2021.
- [34] A. Peresin, "Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 9, Issue 3 (2015), p. 25. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26297379.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A968ec0326271948cbfeb524d027ed091>, accessed 1 July 2021.
- [35] R. Jakupi and V. Kelmendi, 2017.

- [36] Weggemans et al., 2014.
- [37] L. L. Dawson, 2021, p. 2.
- [38] Interview with returned woman from Syria and Iraq, 20 October 2020.
- [39] Data provided by official sources on condition of anonymity.
- [40] Only one woman testified in court that she did not want to travel, but her husband had told her that she would have been expelled from the Islamic community if she refused to do so. M. Taušan, “Kasupović: Ispovijesti povratnica iz Sirije” (December 2, 2020). URL: <https://detektor.ba/2020/12/02/kasupovic-ispovijesti-povratnica-iz-sirije/>, accessed 4 December, 2020.
- [41] “President Jahjaga praises the successful operation of the security mechanisms and welcomes the return home of the citizen of the Republic of Kosovo.” URL: <https://president-ksgov.net/en/news/president-jahjaga-praises-the-successful-operation-of-the-security-mechanisms-and-welcomes-the-return-home-of-the-citizen-of-the-republic-of-kosovo>, accessed 14 December 2020.
- [42] One woman testified how, misled by her husband that she would get a better life, she left for Turkey with three children and ended up in Syria where she was forced, against her will, to stay for four years. See: “Gratë kosovare të kthyera nga Siria rrëfejnë për torturat e përjetuara atje” (24 February, 2020). URL: <https://www.periskopi.com/grate-kosovare-te-kthyera-nga-siria-rrefejne-per-torturat-e-perjetuara-atje/>, accessed 14 December 2020.
- [43] Another woman, 27-year-old and pregnant at the time of departure, stated that her husband had told her they were going to Germany for a better life. See: “Femrat e kthyera u martuan nga 2–3 herë në Siri, por çfarë po thonë ato para gjykatës,” (24 April 2019); URL: <https://lajm.co/femrat-e-kthyera-u-martuan-nga-2-3-herë-ne-siri-por-çfare-po-thone-ato-para-gjykatës/>, accessed 14 December 2020.
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- [45] R. Jakupi and V. Kelmendi, 2017, p. 13.
- [46] R. Jakupi and V. Kelmendi, 2017, p. 16.
- [47] D. Tudora, A. Banica, and M. Istrate, “Evaluation of Gender Disparities from the Balkan Countries,” December 2015, *Procedia Economics and Finance* 20: 654–664 DOI: 10.1016/S2212-5671(15)00120-3. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276859521_Evaluation_of_Gender_Disparities_from_the_Balkan_Countries/link/588308dc4585150dde405bfd/download, accessed 5 July 2021.
- [48] V. Lilyanova, “Women in the Western Balkans. Gender equality in the EU accession process,” *European Parliament Briefing* (July 2018). URL: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/625139/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)625139_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/625139/EPRS_BRI(2018)625139_EN.pdf), accessed 6 July 2021.
- [49] L. L. Dawson, 2021, p. 2.
- [50] J. Cook and G. Vale, 2018, p. 25.
- [51] Data provided by official sources on condition of anonymity.
- [52] K. Öktem, “The ‘Forgotten’ Muslims of Southeastern Europe,” (17 January 2012). URL: <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/forgotten-muslims-southeastern-europe>, accessed 8 July 2021.
- [53] L. L. Dawson, 2021, p. 19.
- [54] Data provided by official sources on condition of anonymity.
- [55] Data provided by official sources on condition of anonymity.
- [56] Data provided by official sources on condition of anonymity.
- [57] D. Margolin and C. Winter, 2021.
- [58] See note 28.
- [59] D. Margolin and C. Winter, 2021, p. 33.
- [60] M. R. Revkin and E. J. Wood, “The Islamic State’s Pattern of Sexual Violence: Ideology and Institutions, Policies and Practices,” *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6 (2), 2021, DOI: 10.1093/jogss/ogaa038, pp. 12–13.
- [61] It is estimated that in Kosovo and BiH the rate of women has been more than 35 percent. V. Azinović, M. Jusić, “The new lure of the Syrian war—the foreign fighters’ Bosnian contingent,” Atlantic Initiative, Sarajevo (2016), p. 38. URL: <http://atlanticinitiative.org/project-activities-nato-debates/497-the-new-lure-of-the-syrian-war-the-foreign-fighters-bosnian->

[contingent,-atlantic-initiative,-sarajevo-2016.html](#), accessed 1 August, 2016.

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