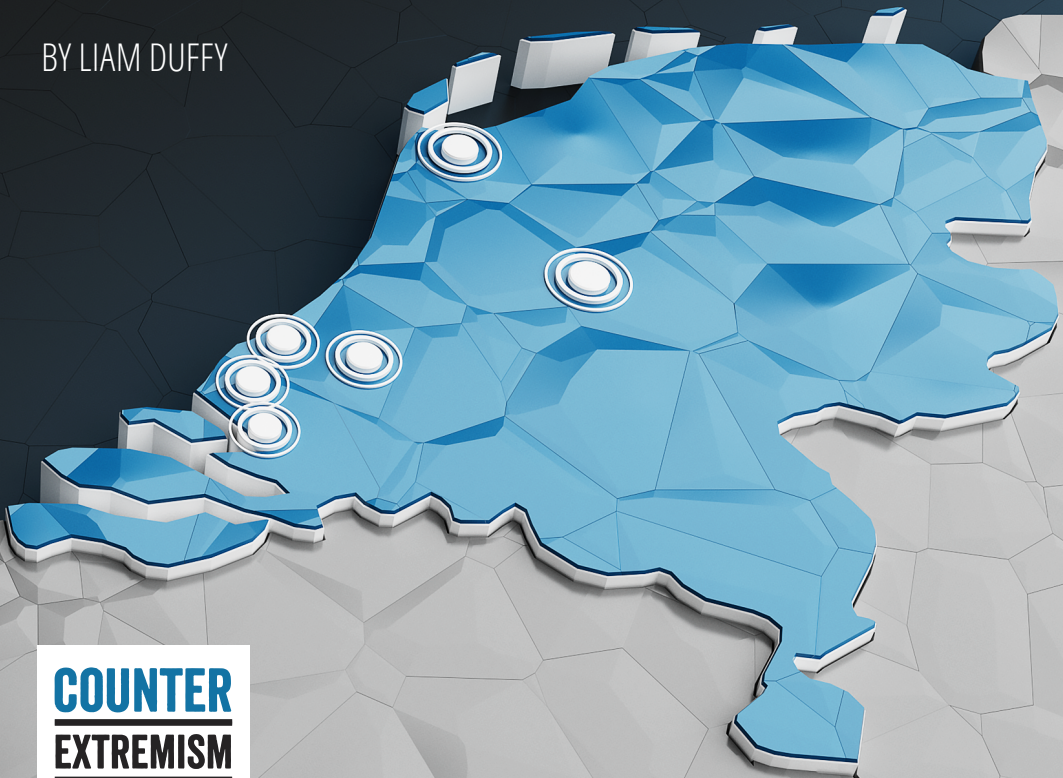


# DUTCH FOREIGN FIGHTERS:

APRIL  
2022

Before, During and After  
the IS “Caliphate”

BY LIAM DUFFY



**COUNTER  
EXTREMISM  
PROJECT**



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# **ABOUT THE COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT**

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The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) is a not-for-profit, nonpartisan, international policy organization formed to combat the growing threat from extremist ideologies. Led by a renowned group of former world leaders and diplomats it combats extremism by pressuring financial and material support networks, countering the narrative of extremists and their online recruitment, and advocating for smart laws, policies and regulations.

[www.counterextremism.com](http://www.counterextremism.com)

## **About the author**

Liam Duffy is a UK based Strategic Advisor for the Counter Extremism Project.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to CEP's Debbi Gordon for help with the research for this paper, and to the Amsterdam-based NGO, Yazidi Legal Network (YLN) for the guidance, advice and assistance with this research, as well as for their practical efforts to secure justice and accountability for the crimes committed by IS against the Yazidi people.



# INTRODUCTION

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*“I didn’t want to go to Syria at all. He forced me.”*

Looking back to when Dutchwoman Laura Angela Hansen showed up in Iraqi Kurdish territory in 2016, her story (*by now*) sounds familiar, not least for the female jihadists of the Islamic State (IS) group. According to Hansen, she had luckily escaped the horrors of the “Caliphate”, a place she described as “hell”. A place, she claims, she never meant – nor wanted – to travel to.

According to Hansen’s version of events she had departed the Netherlands under the impression that she was travelling to Turkey to help refugees, before being taken against her will to Islamic State territory in Iraq and Syria by her husband, Ibrahim Ismail.

Since the Islamic State’s last stand at the battle of Baghouz in Syria and the collapse of its self-declared “Caliphate”, such pleas of ignorance and innocence have become commonplace. In a bid for leniency, many have downplayed their own agency in their decision to travel thousands of miles to join the jihadist group then scything through Iraq and Syria. Extremists from the likes of Malmö, Manchester or Munich have claimed manipulation, trickery or grooming as responsible for their journey into jihadism.

When it comes to the women of the Islamic State, these victimhood narratives have often found a receptive domestic audience, at times amplified by media attention and a polarised public debate. Able to play on existing and misleading tropes of the vulnerable, naïve adolescent, brainwashed or groomed over the internet, IS overseas recruits have often sought to portray themselves as more sinned against than in sin.

In the spring of 2021, through the Counter Extremism Project (CEP) I published research entitled “Western Foreign Fighters and the Yazidi

Genocide” in the hopes of demonstrating how these parochial domestic discussions and the fabulist claims of returning or captured IS recruits whitewash the many thousands of local victims of the group’s crimes – none more so than Iraq’s Yazidi minority, who suffered genocide and sexual enslavement at the hands of the jihadist group.

As the research aimed to demonstrate, Western IS recruits were often directly involved in crimes against local civilians, whether in the course of the occupation of territory or direct perpetrators of sexual crimes, torture and indoctrination committed against Yazidi women and children. According to CEP research, of a network of 67 Yazidi women surveyed, over half had contact with Western recruits during their time in IS captivity, despite Westerners comprising a minority within the jihadist ranks.<sup>1</sup>

The research also collected survivor testimony from a network of Yazidi women, some of whom emphasised the role of Western women in their torture, rape and abuse. Despite difficulties in linking individuals to crimes, the testimony of surviving Yazidi women is at stark odds with the accounts provided by those jihadists now returned to their home countries or stranded in Syria and Iraq.

Despite the well documented crimes committed by IS, in certain cases we have witnessed a ‘celebritisation’ of – *particularly female* – IS recruits. In the case of Laura Hansen, the Dutch woman who claimed to have been tricked into travelling to Syria, we have perhaps the most obvious case of this phenomenon. In the Netherlands, a play was commissioned about her experiences (among other media products and appearances) sparking furious reaction from a number of activists. The Free Yezidi Foundation, a non-profit established to assist Yazidis in need, tweeted:

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1 Liam Duffy, “Western Foreign Fighters and the Yazidi Genocide” *Counter Extremism Project*, 16 March 2021 <https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/Western%20Foreign%20Fighters%20and%20the%20Yazidi%20Genocide%20Report%2016%20March%202021.pdf>

*When Dutch citizens joined the Nazis, they did not have plays or glorification about them after WWII. Why are #Netherlands theater and media outlets giving platform to someone convicted as accomplice for the preparation of terrorist actions with #ISIS #Daesh ?<sup>2</sup>*

There is no publicly available evidence linking Hansen specifically to the crimes against Yazidis (although the extent to which those who joined are complicit in the genocide is up for debate), but her version of events is strikingly similar to many of the other Europeans, North Americans and Australians of IS. As author and journalist Brenda Stoter Boscolo put it to Kurdistan24, the Western media seems “fascinated” with how Europeans joined the Islamic State, which sometimes leads to uncritical reporting of their stories and in turn, frustration among Yazidis and other IS victims.<sup>3</sup>

However, the narratives deployed by Western IS recruits often reveal little about their real trajectories to joining the Islamic State, as they are less an insight into radicalisation than they are claims of innocence and pleas for leniency. It is therefore crucial for these claims to be thoroughly interrogated, and for a more accurate picture of the radicalisation and recruitment of thousands of Europeans into IS to be built. The public has long been fascinated with the criminal or “killer next door” story, but in the case of the Westerners who joined IS, taking and repeating their claims at face value risks diminishing the suffering of local civilians in Iraq and Syria and preventing accountability for those crimes committed.

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2 Free Yezidi Foundation, Twitter thread, 15 Oct 2020 [https://twitter.com/Free\\_Yezidi/status/1316850300234412032?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1316850300234412032%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_c10&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.kurdistan24.net%2Fen%2Fstory%2F23362-Yezidi-group-infuriated-by-Dutch-play-allegedly-glorifying-ISIS-convict](https://twitter.com/Free_Yezidi/status/1316850300234412032?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1316850300234412032%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_c10&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.kurdistan24.net%2Fen%2Fstory%2F23362-Yezidi-group-infuriated-by-Dutch-play-allegedly-glorifying-ISIS-convict)

3 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, “Yezidi group infuriated by Dutch play allegedly glorifying ISIS convict,” *Kurdistan24*, 21 Oct 2020 <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/23362-Yezidi-group-infuriated-by-Dutch-play-allegedly-glorifying-ISIS-convict>

With the kind help of the YLN this short paper aims to provide a snapshot of the journeys into jihadism and the time spent with the Islamic State of the three hundred strong Dutch foreign fighter contingent. It is essential that a more realistic and complete picture of the radicalisation and activities of Westerners who joined IS is constructed.

All of the information presented in this paper is available open-source and compiled from various reporting and social media sites. It simply aims to compile what is known and has been reported, often thanks to the diligence of journalists and activists, in order to begin building that more complete picture, particularly for an English-speaking audience less exposed to the Dutch foreign fighter contingent.

As with the previous CEP paper on “Western foreign fighters and the Yazidi genocide”, the intention is not to build a case against any individuals, but to encourage a more realistic debate about the actions and potential crimes of Western jihadis, crimes for which so far, there has been little in the way of justice and accountability.

## ORIGINS OF THE DUTCH IS EXODUS

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The tendency of IS recruits to downplay their own agency in their paths into global jihadism did not begin with the fall of Baghouz and the subsequent capture of thousands of local and foreign fighters and their families. In fact, the popular and media framing, policy responses and prevailing narratives on radicalisation in many Western countries has been flawed, allowing stranded and captured jihadists to play back many of the existing tropes for domestic consumption.

Just as Western states scrambled to understand the earliest foreign fighter flows to Iraq and Syria, either to link up with the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS (as they were then known), the official responses tended to cast radicalisation as something that happened to teenagers alone in their bedrooms, groomed by nefarious and mysterious online recruiters.

In a similar vein, media coverage made a habit of downplaying the agency of IS recruits, especially the women. Women were cast as “ISIS brides”, “lured” to Syria against their will or better instincts; while others failed to conceive of how women could voluntarily join such a nakedly patriarchal organisation. As one Foreign Policy article put it: “*Over-simplified victimization narratives are so entrenched that evidence of women’s political agency in wartime reads as either false consciousness (‘ISIS lures women with kittens, Nutella’) or as a monstrous upending of femininity and the natural order.*”<sup>4</sup>

Contrary to the notions of the unique power of the slick online propaganda of IS, jihadist foreign fighter recruitment from Western countries

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4 Kanisha D. Bond et al, “The West Needs to Take the Politics of Women in ISIS Seriously,” *Foreign Policy*, 4 March 2019 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/04/the-west-needs-to-take-the-politics-of-women-in-isis-seriously/>

did not begin with the group. To understand the recruitment waves of 2013-15 in particular, it is necessary to chart the growth and trajectory of various strands of Islamist activism in Europe and the West over the course of decades.

\*

Like many other European countries, the Netherlands saw hundreds of its citizens travel to Iraq and Syria to join jihadist groups, in most cases the Islamic State. And like other European countries, contrary to the apparent shock inflicted by this phenomenon, the foreign fighter flows were anything but new, fitting into a pattern which saw Dutch citizens travel to conflict zones from Bosnia and Somalia to Afghanistan in the preceding two to three decades (of course, while the phenomenon itself was not, the scale of IS recruitment *was* unprecedented).<sup>5</sup>

*A salient feature of armed conflict in the Muslim world since 1980 is the involvement of so-called foreign fighters, that is, unpaid combatants with no apparent link to the conflict other than religious affinity with the Muslim side. Since 1980 between 10,000 and 30,000 such fighters have inserted themselves into conflicts from Bosnia in the West to the Philippines in the East.*

*– Thomas Hegghammer<sup>6</sup>*

The earliest waves of jihadist foreign fighters travelling to the conflict zone in Syria in 2012 were often known Islamist activists, many (even most) linked to the *Sharia4Holland* network (connected to *Sharia4Bel-*

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5 Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol, "Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands," *ICCT Policy Brief*, July 2015 <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2015/07/ICCT-Bakker-Grol-Motives-and-Considerations-of-Potential-Foreign-Fighters-from-the-Netherlands-July2015.pdf>

6 Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Winter 2010/11), pp. 53-94 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40981252>

gium, which was itself inspired by the notorious *al-Muhajiroun* network in the United Kingdom).<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the Dutch Intelligence Services, the AIVD, is emphatic that group dynamics, physical settings and real world social networks, often comprising known radical activists, were key in the radicalisation of Dutch extremists and subsequent travel to the conflict zone in Syria:

*“It is clear that the dividing line between radicalism and jihadism is blurred. These movements have created an environment in which people of like mind can meet each other and in which radical ideas have been able to develop into jihadist views. Group dynamics have led to rapid radicalisation of many individuals and actual attempts to participate in the jihad in Syria.”*<sup>8</sup>

As the conflict in Syria intensified in the coming years, more and more individuals from the Netherlands would travel to Syria and Iraq, most often to join the Islamic State. Again, research conducted by Edwin Bakker and Roel de Bont demonstrated just how decisive physical networks were:

*“Most of those who decided to travel to Syria or Iraq already know someone inside territory controlled by ISIS: family, friends from their old neighborhood, friends with whom they played soccer together, former classmates, etc. Often, the would-be jihadists are persuaded to come by those that are already there. Concrete examples of this form of peer recruitment are the departures of relatively large groups of friends from the Dutch cities of Delft and The Hague...”*<sup>9</sup>

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7 “Annual Report 2012,” AIVD. P.22  
<https://english.aivd.nl/publications/annual-report/2013/07/15/annual-report-2012>

8 *Ibid* p.22

9 Edwin Bakker and Roel de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Volume 27, 2016 - Issue 5: Jihadist Insurgent Movements <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592318.2016.1209806>



In interviews conducted with Dutch jihadists, Weggemans, Bakker and Grol concluded that:

*“it did not emerge that the internet played a decisive role in the radicalisation of our research subjects and their decision to leave for Syria. Although some of them visited radical websites, this was not regarded by our interviewees as a very important reason for their radicalisation.”*<sup>10</sup>

Even in the later foreign fighter flows, many of the travellers appear to be connected to the radical activist networks formed around the Hague and the *Sharia4Holland* group.<sup>11</sup> As explained by Reinier Bergema and Sander Koudijs, just over 70% of Dutch jihadist travellers came from one of the four Randstad conurbations (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht), with the Delft-The Hague-Zoetermeer city triangle as a hotspot, supplying over 50 identified IS recruits in one sample.<sup>12</sup> Bergema and Koudijs point to the decisiveness of radical activism over a long period of time in the region, including groups such as “*Behind Bars*, *Straat Dawah* and *Stichting Intisaar*”.<sup>13</sup>

This geographical clustering and the significance of on-the-ground activism in certain locales correlates strongly with terror convictions, recruitment and foreign fighter travel in other European contexts, such as

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10 Daan Weggemans, Edwin Bakker and Peter 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. P.107 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/278300434\\_Who\\_are\\_they\\_and\\_why\\_do\\_they\\_go\\_The\\_Radicalization\\_and\\_Preparatory\\_Processes\\_of\\_Dutch\\_Jihadist\\_Foreign\\_Fighters](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/278300434_Who_are_they_and_why_do_they_go_The_Radicalization_and_Preparatory_Processes_of_Dutch_Jihadist_Foreign_Fighters) p.107

11 Marion van San, “Belgian and Dutch Young Men and Women Who Joined ISIS: Ethnographic Research among the Families They Left Behind,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Volume 41, 2018 - Issue 1 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1266824>

12 Reinier Bergema and Sander Koudijs, “Nederlandse jihadisten in Syrië en Irak: een analyse,” *Internationale Spectator*. 10 – 2015 <https://spectator.clingendael.org/pub/2015/10/nederlandse-jihadisten-in-syrie-en-irak/>

13 *Ibid*

those surrounding the al-Muhajiroun network in the United Kingdom (which spawned radical offshoots in Belgium and the Netherlands), or the relentless activism and recruitment of the likes of Olivier Corel and the Clain brothers in Toulouse and the surrounding area.

Nor do many of those who joined fit the bill of the young and vulnerable or impressionable teenager: the average age of Bakker and de Bont's sample of Dutch and Belgian jihadists was 23.5, while the average age of women travellers was just over 20.<sup>14</sup> This means most individuals were well into their adult years, with spikes well below and well above these averages. It is crucial to bear in mind research findings like this when evaluating portrayals of IS recruitment waves as vulnerable naïfs radicalised online, either in media coverage or in the words of now captured or stranded recruits.

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<sup>14</sup> Bakker and de Bont, "Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters..." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592318.2016.1209806>

## ACTIVITIES AND ROLES IN THE CALIPHATE

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In addition to the picture of naïve adolescents, it has not been uncommon for Western IS members to claim they only served the organisation in a supporting and/or non-violent capacity. Many have claimed to only have been cooks or engineers, and deny ever witnessing any of the almost countless public executions or violent punishments meted out by Islamic State authorities on local civilians or hostages. In the case of the Dutch contingent, according to the AIVD, the majority of male Dutch recruits actively chose to be fighters with IS.<sup>15</sup>

An insight into how Dutch recruits saw themselves with IS was gleaned when Sky News retrieved a USB containing the organisation's "employee files", containing information relating to some 1,700 jihadists. The list included 8 Dutch jihadists, all of whom opted for combatant roles as fighters, with one registering for martyrdom operations – to conduct a suicide bombing.<sup>16</sup>

Even for those recruits who chose or assigned to non-combatant roles, it is difficult to neatly delineate the violent and combatant roles from the supporting roles, given the Islamic State's military expansion and its totalitarian grip over civilians in the territory it occupied:

"For instance, a Dutch boy told his parents that he was a cook, and a Belgian jihadist is assumed to be in charge of the religious police (al-Hisbah) in Raqqa. Such supporting activities are nonetheless often difficult to see separately from the violent jihad. Violence seems to be inherent to certain

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<sup>15</sup> "Leven bij ISIS, de mythe ontrafeld," AIVD, 12 Jan 2016 <https://www.aivd.nl/documenten/publicaties/2016/01/12/aivd-publicatie-leven-bij-isis-de-mythe-ontrafeld>

<sup>16</sup> "Eight Dutch names in leaked ISIS data," *NL Times*, 27 May 2016 <https://nltimes.nl/2016/05/27/eight-dutch-names-leaked-isis-data>

supporting jobs. For instance, this is the case with al-Hisbah agents, who 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 almost all men receive a rifle (usually a Kalashnikov) and are expected to be armed.”<sup>17</sup>

There have also been various instances of Dutch recruits involved in violence against civilians and hostages or prisoners, either reported in the media or posted on social media (as with a number of foreign fighters – often on their own accounts).

A selection of snapshot case studies of Dutch fighters who joined the Islamic State can be found below. These case studies were not chosen to be typical of the Dutch experience in IS, but because for some of these individuals there is the most information – or speculation – about their time in the “Caliphate”.

### **Oussama Achraf Akhlafa**

In 2019, a Dutch court convicted 24-year-old IS recruit Oussama Achraf Akhlafa of war crimes, sentencing him to 7.5 years imprisonment after he posted pictures to Facebook of himself smiling next to a crucified body, as well as photos of other deceased victims of IS. According to the court, Akhlafa “*violated the personal dignity of the deceased, thereby breaching the Geneva Convention.*” The case was the first instance of a Dutch IS recruit on trial for war crimes and at the time of writing remains one of the only convictions of this type anywhere in the world.<sup>18</sup>

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17 Bakker and de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters...” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592318.2016.1209806>

18 “Dutch court convicts Islamic State militant of war crimes,” *Reuters*, 23 July 2019 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-netherlands-syria-warcrimes-idUSKCN1UI1FU>

## Reda Nidalha

At the same time as Akhlafa's conviction, a second defendant, Reda Nidalha, then 24, was sentenced to four and a half years in prison for membership of a terrorist organisation. Nidalha was seen partying and drinking shortly before his departure for Syria to join the Islamic State. However, Nidalha came into contact with extremists after he was sent from his home in Leiden to Belgium by his father.

His father had intended to cut Nidalha off from criminal associations and drugs gangs, only for him to come into contact with extremist networks such as *Shariah4Belgium* (an offshoot of UK-based *al-Muhajiroun* and linked to their Dutch equivalent, *Sharia4Holland*). After what appears to be a relatively brief period of radicalisation and behavioural change, Nidalha travelled to Syria in June 2014 (the same month as the group's "Caliphate" declaration), posting pictures of himself posing in combat attire and holding weapons.<sup>19</sup> As one Associated Press headline put it: "*For one Dutchman, life morphed from discos to jihad.*"<sup>20</sup>

Reda Nidalha and Oussama Achraf Akhlafa appear to have fled IS territory in late 2016, leading to time in captivity with *Free Syrian Army* (FSA) rebels in the North, before being arrested by Turkish authorities and subsequently returning to the Netherlands to stand trial.

During his time in FSA detention, Nidalha even appeared in a BBC report from inside a "re-education camp" established by the Syrian rebels, referring to himself by his jihadist *kunya* as Abu Sumail al-Hollandi.<sup>21</sup>

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19 Brenda Stoter, "The making of an Islamic State terrorist," *Al-Monitor*, 30 March 2016 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/03/western-youth-join-islamic-state-syria.html>

20 Mike Corder, "For one Dutchman, life morphed from discos to jihad," AP, 21 May 2015 <https://apnews.com/article/3ae0452ff3a4afcb119e2335422bda8>

21 "Inside IS defector camp - BBC News," *BBC News YouTube*, 12 Oct 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zr8rsa-UkQQ>

If Nidalha was able to escape the group as claimed, some of his compatriots were not as fortunate: according to the Syrian activist group, *Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently* (RBSS), in February 2016, IS executed eight Dutch jihadists after accusing them of attempted desertion.<sup>22</sup>

## Thijs Belmonte

One of the fighters featured in the aforementioned Islamic State “employee files” recovered by Sky News was Thijs Belmonte, a Dutch-Italian convert with distinctive red hair who left Rotterdam for (then) ISIS in 2013. Belmonte was spotted by analyst Pieter Van Ostaeeyen in the crowd of a public execution video conducted in Syria in late 2014.<sup>23</sup> Belmonte can also be found in both official and unofficial IS propaganda wearing combat uniforms and posing with weaponry on social media. Belmonte also caused a stir in the Netherlands by ritually burning his Dutch passport in a Facebook post, proclaiming his sole allegiance to the IS “Caliphate”.

Belmonte, one of the high numbers of recruits from Delft, is also believed to have recruited other Dutch IS members, such as, Basheer T., permitted to join the group based on Belmonte’s recommendation.<sup>24</sup>

Belmonte’s pregnant girlfriend, Hafida H., joined him in Syria shortly after his migration to IS territory. While Belmonte is believed killed in battle, Hafida H. found herself stranded in Syria, protesting that the Dutch public has nothing to fear from her and other would-be returnees. Adding complexity to the picture, however, is the testimony of a captured Belgian

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22 “Isis kills eight Dutch members for ‘desertion,’” *The Guardian*, 29 Feb 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/29/isis-kills-eight-dutch-members-for-desertion>

23 Pieter Van Ostaeeyen, Twitter post, 18 Dec 2014 [https://twitter.com/p\\_vanostaeyen/status/545703303842365440?s=20](https://twitter.com/p_vanostaeyen/status/545703303842365440?s=20)

24 “Eight Dutch names in leaked ISIS data,” *NL Times* <https://nltimes.nl/2016/05/27/eight-dutch-names-leaked-isis-data>

fighter, who claimed Hafida had been trained or directed to conduct an attack against her home country.<sup>25</sup>

## Yago Riedijk

In the Anglosphere, perhaps the best known Dutch jihadist at the time of writing is Yago Riedijk, on account of his marriage to British recruit and press favourite, Shamima Begum – who left her teenage life and studies in East London for the “Caliphate” in early 2015. Riedijk, then 23, married Begum at age 15, a decision he defended in interviews conducted from Kurdish detention in Northern Syria.<sup>26</sup>

Riedijk left Arnhem for Syria in October 2014, after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s declaration of the Islamic State’s new “Caliphate”, *after* the choreographed executions of Western hostages and *after* the heavily publicised campaign of genocide and sexual enslavement waged against Iraq’s minority Yazidi population. Upon arrival, Riedijk states he was imprisoned and interrogated by IS on suspicion of espionage, although the length of time given differs depending on which interview: he tells Sky News he was imprisoned for four months, but to Dutch newspaper Volksrant, he claims he was imprisoned for seven months.<sup>27</sup>

In an interview with the BBC’s Quentin Somerville, Riedijk claims he “*basically got brainwashed... on the internet*”.<sup>28</sup> As explored earlier in the

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25 Daniël van Dam, Silvan Schoonhoven, “IS’er: Delftse Hafida wil na terugkomst aanslag plegen,” *De Telegraaf*, 1 Feb 2018 <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/1613505/is-er-delftse-hafida-wil-na-terugkomst-aanslag-plegen>

26 Poppy Noor, “Shamima Begum: Dutch husband wants to take teenager to Netherlands,” *The Guardian*, 3 March 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/mar/03/shamima-begum-dutch-husband-wants-to-take-teenager-to-netherlands>

27 “Yago Riedijk over zijn jaren bij IS: het mooie plaatje klopte niet,” *NOS*, 3 March 2019 <https://nos.nl/artikel/2274373-yago-riedijk-over-zijn-jaren-bij-is-het-mooie-plaatje-klopte-niet>

28 “IS bride ‘should live in Holland’ - husband - BBC News,” *BBC News YouTube*, 4 March



paper, online-only radicalisation does not seem to have been the norm for Dutch foreign fighters, but if Riedijk was consuming large amounts of IS propaganda, his claim not to have known about the violence the group inflicted on civilians in the region seems unlikely, given they were the largest documenters and publicists of their own brutality.

While with IS, Riedijk claims to have taken up non-combatant roles, as a welder, a medic, and occasionally assigned guard duties. He does admit, however, participating in one battle, the pivotal (and extremely costly) fight over Kobane on the Syrian-Turkish border but was wounded, he claims before he was able to fight.<sup>29</sup>

Riedijk's claims are also somewhat contradicted by information which came to light when he was convicted in absentia for membership of a terrorist organisation. Prosecutors said police recovered a photo of Riedijk posing with a Kalashnikov rifle, and that he had sent a photo home of himself in military uniform claiming to be a soldier for Islamic State.<sup>30</sup>

Riedijk also admits to having attended an execution, a public stoning of a woman accused of fornication, although his story – as told to the BBC – appears conflicting and confused:

*"I actually never witnessed a beheading... I've actually witnessed a stoning once."*

*"And I've watched, I've seen people who have been executed but not the execution itself."*

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2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TruIUymV16U>

29 Quentin Sommerville, "Shamima Begum: What was life like for the IS couple in Syria?" *BBC News*, 3 March 2019 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47435039>

30 David Brown, John Simpson, "Shamima Begum's Dutch husband is convicted terrorist," *The Times*, 15 February 2019 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dutch-husband-is-convicted-terrorist-xbx2msnck>

*"Actually, she wasn't stoned to death," he corrected. "She stood up and she ran away."*

*"And, after that, they said to the guys who were throwing stones: 'Stop throwing stones.'"*

*"It's not allowed to throw the stones after she gets up and runs away. So we stopped throwing stones at her and she escaped. After that they left her alone."<sup>31</sup>*

In the same interview, Riedijk also appears to confirm a claim made by his IS wife, Shamima Begum, in a separate interview: that she had seen a human head in a bin. According to Riedijk, this was atop a pile of desecrated and mutilated corpses in military uniform, the executed prisoners of IS.

Riedijk claims not to have been exposed to the Islamic State's sexual enslavement of Yazidi women and girls, nor the forced indoctrination of Yazidi boys: *"I heard about one Dutch guy. He had a slave. That's about as close as I ever got to a slave. I heard she was about 40 years old."*<sup>32</sup>

In September 2018, a Dutch police operation made seven arrests foiling a significant terror plot, in the mould of the 2015 Paris attacks. In February 2019, The Times and other sections of the British press reported that police believed Riedijk was in contact with the rolled up terror cell plotting the major attack on Dutch soil.<sup>33</sup>

It should be noted that Riedijk was present with IS until the very end,

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31        Sommerville, "Shamima Begum: What was life like for the IS couple in Syria?" <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47435039>

32        *Ibid*

33        Brown, Simpson, "Shamima Begum's Dutch husband is convicted terrorist" <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dutch-husband-is-convicted-terrorist-xbx2msnck>

captured around Baghouz, where the jihadist group made the last stand for their territorial “Caliphate”, encircled by Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and under heavy American air bombardment.

## Mohamed Amine Boutahar

Mohamed Amine Boutahar, known by his Islamic State kunya, Abu Ubaida al-Maghribi, was a Dutch citizen of Moroccan descent believed to have been executed by IS in 2014.

Boutahar was once thought to have been a prison chief in Aleppo, but it is apparent he held a role even more senior, and may well have been the overall security chief for IS in Aleppo and the surrounding area.<sup>34</sup> In this regard, Boutahar is suspected of involvement in the imprisonment and interrogation of suspected spies attempting to infiltrate IS. Additionally, he is suspected of being responsible for Western hostages, including James Foley, the American journalist decapitated on film by British jihadist, Muhammad Emwazi – *Jihadi John* to the international press.<sup>35</sup>

According to research conducted by French journalist Matthieu Suc, Boutahar enjoyed a number of other Western jihadist subordinates, including a number linked to devastating attacks conducted in Europe, such as Mehdi Nemouche, the gunman behind the 2014 Brussels Jewish Museum attack (the first IS foreign fighter attack in Europe).<sup>36</sup> Despite his

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34 Guy Van Vlieden, “Abu Ubaida al-Maghribi, the Dutch prisoner of James Foley & co — His true identity revealed — His death detailed — His French successor named,” *emmejihad*, 1 Dec 2017 <https://emmejihad.wordpress.com/2017/01/12/abu-ubaida-al-maghribi-the-dutch-imprisoner-of-james-foley-co-his-true-identity-revealed-his-death-detailed-his-french-successor-named/>

35 Frank Renout, “Zoon van Marokkaanse consul in Den Bosch leidde voor IS martelingen,” *de Gelderlander*, 26 Nov 2018 <https://www.gelderlander.nl/buitenland/zoon-van-marokkaanse-consul-in-den-bosch-leidde-voor-is-martelingen~a0a5fdab/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fen.yabiladi.com%2Farticles%2Fdetails%2F71415%2Fstory-moroccan-consul-worked-isis.html>

36 “The story of the son of a Moroccan consul who worked for ISIS’ intelligence ser-

role identifying espionage in IS ranks, Boutahar was himself accused of espionage and executed by the group.

## **Israfil Yilmaz**

Born in Brunei in 1987 to Turkish parents, Salih Yahya Gazali "Israfil" Yilmaz was moved to the Netherlands by his parents while still young. Yilmaz completed military service in Turkey before a brief spell in the Royal Netherlands Army in which he tried, and failed, to join a special forces unit.

Yilmaz is thought to have travelled to the conflict zone in Syria in late 2012 or early 2013, initially linking up with smaller jihadist factions, such as Jund al-Aqsa. Thanks to his military experience, Yilmaz was tasked with training (often English-speaking) new recruits. Yilmaz admitted to training British fighters as young as 16 years old,<sup>37</sup> as well as Abu Sulayman al-Britani, a British jihadist and suicide bomber who drove a truck bomb through the gates of a prison in Aleppo in late 2014.

Later joining ISIS, Yilmaz became one of the most high-profile Western recruits to the group, largely thanks to his prolific activity on various social media platforms.

Yilmaz was particularly active on Tumblr, especially after his accounts on other platforms were taken down. Engaging in Q&A sessions with users from around the world, Yilmaz posted both the mundanities of daily life under the Islamic State, including kitten and family photos, as well as openly

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vices," *Yabiladi*, 26 Nov 2018 <https://en.yabiladi.com/articles/details/71415/story-moroccan-consul-worked-isis.html>

37 Jason Farrell, "Syria Fighter Admits Training British Teens," *Sky News*, 7 July 2014 <https://news.sky.com/story/syria-fighter-admits-training-british-teens-10397763>

discussing IS ideology and violence. Yilmaz defended the November 2015 Paris terror attacks, the executions of homosexuals and the enslavement of Yazidi women, although he claimed not to own a *sabaya* (the IS term for a slave) himself. Yilmaz dismissed the idea of posing a threat to the Netherlands, claiming the country was a “closed chapter” in his life, and that he came to Syria “to die.”<sup>38</sup> Asked by the New York Times why he joined IS, Yilmaz responded:

*Ask yourself which other group is implementing the Shariah as complete as possible? Ask yourself which group is fully taking care of the affairs of the people as complete as possible? No other group but the Islamic State, so me joining the Islamic State was just a matter of time, for they are able to govern the people and implement the Shariah on a large scale — protecting the Muslims, their wealth, health and religion.*<sup>39</sup>

Yilmaz also received high numbers of marriage proposals from female IS sympathisers around the world, eventually resulting in a 16-year-old Dutch teen travelling to Syria to wed the jihadist.<sup>40</sup>

Multiple reports of Yilmaz’ death circulated between 2016 and 2017, as he was thought to have been killed in coalition airstrikes. However, multiple sources within IS later claimed that Yilmaz had been executed by the group after ideological differences saw the former Dutch soldier leave the organisation to live as a civilian in the “Caliphate”.<sup>41</sup>

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38 Samuel Osborne, “ISIS fighter from Holland answers Tumblr questions,” *The Independent*, 21 Nov 2015 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/dutch-isis-fighter-answers-questions-on-tumblr-a6743551.html>

39 Robert Mackey, “A Dutch ISIS Fighter Takes Questions on Tumblr,” *New York Times*, 20 November 2015 <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/21/world/middleeast/a-dutch-isis-fighter-is-taking-questions-on-tumblr.html>

40 “‘Is she a victim or a suspect?’ The tale of a Dutch ‘princess’ who fell in love with jihadi ‘Robin Hood,’” *National Post*, 24 Jan 2015 <https://nationalpost.com/news/is-she-a-victim-or-a-suspect-the-tale-of-the-dutch-princess-who-fell-in-love-with-her-jihadi-robin-hood>

41 Bjorn Stritzel, Twitter post, 9 July 2018. <https://twitter.com/bjoernstritzel/status/1016381055849455616?s=20>

## Ângela Barreto

Ângela Barreto, of Portuguese descent, abandoned her life in Utrecht for the Islamic State's recently declared "Caliphate" in August 2014 – the same month the group unleashed its genocidal campaign against Iraq's Yazidis. In Syria, she married Portuguese IS member, Fábio Poças, with whom she had two children.

Poças was a promising footballer and part of a network of Portuguese extremists who met in London. Highly active on social media, Poças described himself on his Facebook page as a "*mujahid/foot soldier/sniper*" of "*Dawlah Islamiah fi Iraq wa Shaam*" (ISIS – as they were known at the time, prior to the "Caliphate" declaration).<sup>42</sup> Poças has also been linked to one of the Islamic State's most gruesome crimes, with various sources reporting he was suspected of involvement in the filming of the burning alive of downed Jordanian Royal Air Force pilot, Lt Muath al-Kasasbeh, in January 2015 – something Poças previously denied.<sup>43</sup>

After Poças' death, Barreto married another member of the Portuguese jihadist contingent, Nero Saraiva, in 2018. After Poças' death, Saraiva allegedly held a senior role within IS, with Portuguese authorities deeming that he participated directly "*in planning, and execution, of all actions perpetrated by ISIL, namely the ones directed against western targets, including hostage taking, kidnaps and eventually other actions against targets or interests outside Syria.*"<sup>44</sup>

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42 Nuno Tiago Pinto, "Inside the Foreign Fighter Pipeline to Syria: A Case Study of a Portuguese Islamic State Network," *CTC Sentinel*, August 2020, Volume 13, Issue 8 <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/inside-the-foreign-fighter-pipeline-to-syria-a-case-study-of-a-portuguese-islamic-state-network/>

43 Dipesh Gadhur, Tom Harper, "Jihadi brides are widows now and they want to come home," *The Times*, 28 Oct 2018 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/jihadi-brides-are-widows-now-and-they-want-to-come-home-prjqbq7fr>

44 Nuno Tiago Pinto, "Inside the Foreign Fighter Pipeline to Syria: A Case Study of a Portuguese Islamic State Network," *CTC Sentinel* <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/inside-the-foreign-fighter-pipeline-to-syria-a-case-study-of-a-portuguese-islamic-state-network/#reference199>

This assessment appears to be at least partially supported by Saraiva's own social media activity. In one tweet he wrote: "*Message to America. The Islamic State is making a new one movie. Thanks for the actors.*" Forty days after this tweet was posted, IS shocked the world with the choreographed execution of American journalist, James Foley, in a propaganda video titled '*Message to America*', indicating that Saraiva had intimate knowledge of the group's plans for their Western hostages.<sup>45</sup>

Both Ângela Barreto and Nero Saraiva were wounded in coalition bombing at Islamic State's last stand at Baghouz. In a separate incident, Barreto's family tent was hit, injuring one of her daughters. Later taken into Kurdish-led SDF custody and transferred to al-Hol camp, Barreto's eldest daughter died of injuries sustained at Baghouz.<sup>46</sup>

It should be noted that the Islamic State's female foreign recruits indeed seemed to enjoy some autonomy over whom they would marry in the group's territory. In addition to her marriage to two active and influential members of IS, it was reported that during her time in the "Caliphate", Dutch security services suspected Barreto of aiding the recruitment of three teenage Dutch girls, aged between 15 and 16, to join IS in February 2015.

At the start of 2021, Ângela Barreto returned to the Netherlands. Since then, she has claimed that it was impossible to leave IS territory, hence remaining with the group until the very end of its territorial existence. She also described herself as a "*stupid gosling*", when she left for Syria, and that she was "*not stable*".<sup>47</sup> The Public Prosecution Service does not share this

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45 Hugo Franco e Raquel Moleiro, "Estado Islâmico: um tweet que causou suspeita," *Expresso*, 1 Nov 2014 <https://expresso.pt/sociedade/estado-islamico-um-tweet-que-causou-suspeita=f896165>

46 Nuno Tiago Pinto, "Inside the Foreign Fighter Pipeline to Syria: A Case Study of a Portuguese Islamic State Network," CTC Sentinel <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/inside-the-foreign-fighter-pipeline-to-syria-a-case-study-of-a-portuguese-islamic-state-network/>

47 Cyril Rosman, "Syriëganger Angela B. in rechtszaal: 'Ik was een dom gansje toen ik vertrok,'" AD, 6 April 2021 <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/syrieganger-angela-b-in-rechtszaal-ik-was-een-dom-gansje-toen-ik-vertrok-ab1de957/>



view, asserting that Barreto sent a text message home to the Netherlands as the last strip of Islamic State territory was under siege stating that she was ok and that she was fighting “*for her faith*”. The prosecution also alleges that Barreto appears in a number of photos and videos alongside weaponry, even offering to sell a hand grenade in one online marketplace for IS members.<sup>48</sup>

## THE YAZIDI GENOCIDE

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On July 6, 2021, the Netherlands Parliament voted to recognise the Islamic State's campaign against the Yazidis as a genocide. As with the contingents hailing from other Western nations, it is highly unlikely that Dutch recruits were not involved in the campaign of genocide, sexual enslavement and child indoctrination waged against Iraq's Yazidi minority. At the very least, many joined the organisation fully in the knowledge of the treatment of Yazidis, again, largely thanks to the group's own propaganda, which proudly proclaimed the restoration of slavery.

Indeed, in the CEP paper, "Western Foreign Fighters and the Yazidi Genocide", published in March 2021, two of the small sample of 67 Yazidi survivors surveyed believed they had come into contact with IS members from the Netherlands during their time in captivity.

One of the most notable connections made between a Dutch IS recruit and crimes against Yazidis comes from allegations made by Yazidi survivor, Layla Taloo. Taloo has accused Basil Hassan, a high-profile Lebanese-Danish jihadist of enslaving her along with Hassan's Dutch wife, named in the press as 24-year-old O. and revealed elsewhere as Ojone Igala.

The following is an excerpt of a report in the Dutch media relating to Taloo's allegations:

*"I asked for a man who wouldn't hurt me anymore. But he forced me to sleep with him, he thought that was his right as a husband." And, says Layla in a telephone interview with this site: his Dutch wife knew about it. "She knew I had been forced to marry. She knew I was Jezidi and of my past."*

*The two women did not live in the same apartment in Raqqa, the Syrian capital of the caliphate. The Dutchwoman did visit Layla and her children twice. “Not to help me, but to see who I was. She was unkind to me, she was jealous that her husband was with me too. She argued with him about that.”*

*Layla also has to cook for the Dutch O., who is now 24 years old. “She was pregnant with Basil. I had to cook and then he took the food to her. I felt like a slave to both of them. And that’s how she saw me too.”*

*The women are all lying when they say they didn’t know about anything.*

*I felt like a slave to both of them. And that’s how she saw me.<sup>49</sup>*

In another interview, Taloo was similarly emphatic that O. and other Western women were aware of and participated in sexualised crimes against Yazidis:

*It was also Western women who dressed and dressed us up for the slave markets. Of course they knew what their husbands were doing. They knew and they worked against us. Also by checking us so that we could not flee. I think it is very important to tell that.<sup>50</sup>*

Ojone Igala, better known as Umm Baraa in IS milieus, was captured by Kurdish forces and arrived in al-Hol camp in Northern Syria in 2019. However, Igala, added to a Dutch government terror sanctions list, has

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49 Naz Taha, Cyril Rosman, “Nederlandse IS-vrouw wist van misbruik in Syrië en profiteerde ervan,” *AD*, 5 March 2020 <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/nederlandse-is-vrouw-wist-van-misbruik-in-syrie-en-profiteerde-ervan~af3423a0/>

50 “Jezidivrou linkt Nederlandse aan Gruweldaden IS Tegen Haar Volk,” *Het Parool*, 5 March 2020 <https://www.parool.nl/nieuws/jezidivrou-linkt-nederlandse-aan-gruweldaden-is-tegen-haar-volk~ba0d12a3/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Ft.co%2F>

since gone missing from the camp.<sup>51</sup> A number of other IS-affiliated Dutch women have also gone missing from detention camps in Syria.<sup>52</sup> Danish terrorism expert, Magnus Ranstorp, highlighted her status within the organisation, particularly based on her Danish husband's seniority:

*Everyone who has been close to Basil Hassan is dangerous because he was so operational and had his fingers in so much. And if you sit in the al-Hol camp with the contacts that his wife must have, then it is clear that she can get help to get out.*<sup>53</sup>

Prior to her disappearance, Igala had praised husband Hassan from detention in al-Hol and suggested she knew little of his activities within IS:

*Life with Basil was good. He was a good man with a lot of patience. He left home early in the morning and came home late. He never talked about what he was doing...*<sup>54</sup>

Igala's whereabouts are unknown at the time of writing and husband, Basil Hassan's death remains unconfirmed.

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51 Puk Damsgård, Malthe Sommerand, Michael S. Lund, "DR AFSLØRER: Den danske IS-terrorist Basil Hassans hustru og barn forsvundet fra fangelejr i Syrien," DR, 14 April 2021 <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/udland/dr-afsloerer-den-danske-terrorist-basil-hassans-hustru-og-barn-forsvundet-fra>

52 Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, "From bad to worse: The fate of European foreign fighters and families detained in Syria, one year after the Turkish offensive," *Egmont Institute Policy Brief*, No 130 October 2020 [http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2020/10/SPB130\\_final.pdf?type=pdf](http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2020/10/SPB130_final.pdf?type=pdf)

53 Puk Damsgård, Malthe Sommerand, Michael S. Lund, "DR AFSLØRER: Den danske IS-terrorist Basil Hassans hustru og barn forsvundet fra fangelejr i Syrien," <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/udland/dr-afsloerer-den-danske-terrorist-basil-hassans-hustru-og-barn-forsvundet-fra>

54 Mette Mayli Albæk, "Basil Hassans hustru lægger sag an mod Holland for at komme hjem," DR, 11 Nov 2019 <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/udland/basil-hassans-hustru-laegger-sag-mod-holland-komme-hjem>

One of the most high-profile Dutch recruits in Syria was Israfil Yilmaz, who was prolific on social media, often engaging directly in Q&A sessions about life with Islamic State. In one blog post, archived by MEMRI and highlighted by the Washington Post, Yilmaz justified the enslavement of Yazidi women:

*People [who] think that having a concubine for sexual pleasure only have a very simple mindset about this matter. And yes [Yilmaz's wife] agrees (maybe she doubts I'll ever own one hahaha). The biggest and best thing of having concubines is introducing them to Islam in an Islamic environment – showing them and teaching them the religion. Many of the concubines/slaves of the Companions of the Prophet (PBUH) became Muslim and some even [became] big commanders and leaders in Islamic history and this is if you ask me the true essence of having slaves/concubines.<sup>55</sup>*

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<sup>55</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, “The Islamic State’s Horrifying Practice of Sex Slavery, Explained,” The Washington Post, 20 August 2015 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/08/20/the-islamic-states-horrifying-practice-of-sex-slavery-explained/>

## DENIAL

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As alluded to at the beginning of this paper, many Islamic State returnees, and those now stranded in Northern Syria have sought to downplay their involvement in the worst excesses of the jihadist group, claimed ignorance of the group's pornographic brutality, or minimised their own agency by making appeals to brainwashing, grooming and manipulation.

In this regard, Yazidi groups have been sharply critical of both the version of events and the reception of Dutch returnee, Laura Hansen (also mentioned at the top of this paper). Hansen, who alleges she was tricked into travelling to Syria, arrived back in Amsterdam in July 2016 after leaving for Syria with her partner and children in September 2015.

In November 2017, Hansen was convicted and sentenced to two years imprisonment under terrorism legislation for joining IS.<sup>56</sup> However, because Hansen had already been detained and part of her sentence was suspended, she served no additional time in prison after conviction.

Hansen's story has been the subject of a book, podcast and theatre production (of which a TV adaptation is in production). The YLN have been sharply critical of this 'celebritisation' of a jihadist returnee, with co-founder Hope Rikkelman telling the media: *"If you look at the travellers, where they've all been in Syria and Iraq, it's statistically almost impossible that none of them have come into contact with victims such as Yazidis, child soldiers or slaves."*<sup>57</sup>

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56 "Dutch woman convicted of terrorism for joining IS," *Times of Israel*, 13 Nov 2017 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/dutch-woman-convicted-of-terrorism-for-joining-is/>

57 Tjitske Lingsma, "Zo gezellig was het niet bij IS," *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 24 March 2021 <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/zo-gezellig-was-het-niet-bij-is>

There may indeed be some truth to Hansen's version of events, but in the words of YLN, it presents a "*romanticised version*" which leaves many questions unanswered. What's more, similar stories have been presented to the Western media by large numbers of IS recruits, particularly women. More recently, in October 2021, a number of IS women found themselves before Dutch courts, claiming to have known nothing of their husband or relatives' activities while in the "Caliphate". One woman, Sadaf S., told the courts she had never supported IS, despite remaining with the group for seven years and until the organisation's territorial demise.<sup>58</sup>

Social media chat messages sent by Hansen demonstrate that she was in fact willing to travel to IS territory, explaining that she wished to live "*under the laws of Islam*". According to YLN, there is further reason for doubt given that, like many other Dutch recruits, Hansen associated with a number of extremists while in the Netherlands and prior to making *hijra* to the Islamic State.<sup>59</sup>

It should be noted, of course, that there is no explicit evidence connecting Hansen to any crimes committed while in IS territory. However, as explored earlier in the paper, non-combatant roles cannot easily be disentangled from the violence and oppression meted out by IS (at the very least, recruits were given housing which presumably belonged to local civilians prior to the group's conquest). What's more, as noted by YLN, Hansen likely possesses information on crimes committed by other Dutch recruits, but "*deftly stays away from it*."<sup>60</sup>

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58 Cyril Rosman, Twitter thread. 14 Oct 2021. <https://twitter.com/cyrilrosman/status/1448551719353438210?s=20>

59 Tjitske Lingsma, "Zo gezellig was het niet bij IS," *De Groene Amsterdammer* <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/zo-gezellig-was-het-niet-bij-is>

60 *Ibid*



## CONCLUSION

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This paper has sought to provide a snapshot into some of the roles and activities in the “Caliphate” of Dutch recruits to the Islamic State. For those on whom information is readily available, the truth is certainly more complex than the existing tropes and caricatures imply.

While recruits like Laura Hansen should not be accused of, or forced to pay for, the crimes of anyone but themselves, their reception in certain quarters leaves a bitter taste in the mouths of the countless victims of IS.

In what is not just a problem for the Netherlands, the willingness to amplify IS recruits’ simplistic narratives, the hunger for the “jihadi next door” story, or even the understandable desire to simply move on from the nightmarish “Caliphate” episode has only helped to inadvertently whitewash the jihadist group’s very many victims.

Too often, we fall back into easy explanations such as the unique and hypnotic power of IS propaganda, or its supposed army of online groomers. These tropes, difficult to dislodge in the Western imagination, have been easily exploited by now stranded or captured jihadists, able to cynically play back our own expectations of their journeys into jihad.

The realities of the Dutch recruitment wave are more complex and mirrored elsewhere in Europe. Departures to Syria were heavily geographically concentrated, often involving individuals who knew each other in the Netherlands prior to making *hijra* to the Islamic State. Very often, if not in most cases outright, these recruits were connected to radical activist networks such as *Sharia4Holland* or the rebellious jihadi subculture of the *Hofstadgroep*, from which the murderer of Theo Van Gogh emerged.

Dutch citizens did not leave in their hundreds because they were manipulated online, but in most cases because they wished to live under *Sharia* as implemented by the jihadists of IS. Dutch citizens were not simply cooks or welders, but many served in combatant roles. Some were connected to Islamic State's worst abuses and excesses, while others helped to facilitate the recruitment of yet more Dutch and European extremists.

Failing to confront these realities has blunted and softened the cry for justice and accountability, insulted the victims of IS and leaves European societies vulnerable to future waves of jihadist recruitment through our failure to understand and confront the last wave.

In any case, that so many would now claim manipulation, ignorance or never having been involved in violence arguably demonstrates a near total lack of personal responsibility for their personal decisions which led directly and indirectly to the suffering of so many. These claims are also, as pointed out by Yazidi organisations, if not statistically impossible, then at the very least highly unlikely.

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A stylized, low-poly map of Europe and Africa is rendered in shades of gray against a dark background. The map is composed of many flat, triangular and quadrilateral facets, giving it a geometric, crystalline appearance. The lighting creates shadows that emphasize the three-dimensional quality of the facets.

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