

TURKISH SUPPORT FOR ISIS MEMBERS

The smuggling of ISIS
women from Al-Hol camp



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Turkish support for ISIS

From 2014 until now, the Turkish state has been supporting jihadist groups operating in Syria in various ways, from providing them with weapons or medical care to helping them enter or leave Syrian territory. This support has become explicit again with the evidence of the assistance provided by the Turkish secret services to ISIS women to get them out of the camps where they are under SDF custody.

On 17 July 2020, the Turkish state news agency Anadolu Ajensi publicised the “rescue” of Natalia Barkal, a Moldovan woman, and her four children by the Turkish intelligence service, MIT¹. The woman, an ISIS member, had been in the Al-Hol camp since 2019, when she was captured by the SDF after the Baghouz campaign, which ended jihadist rule in northern and eastern Syria.

Turkish state support for jihadi forces is not new. In 2015 the Turkish newspaper *Cumhuriyet*² published evidence that the Turkish secret services had supplied arms to Islamist groups in Syria the previous year, hidden inside a truck carrying humanitarian aid, which arrived at the border escorted by the Turkish army. Also in 2014, the opposition parties of the Turkish parliament reported that Turkey treated fighters of Islamist forces in both public and private hospitals, including Major Abu Muhammad, who was treated in Hatay, a Turkish city, after he was wounded in Idlib³.



Truck carrying weapons for the islamists. Source: Sözcü (29/05/2015)

In an interview with Anne Speckhard, published in March 2019, Abu Mansour al Maghrebi, an ISIS emir who admitted to being the Islamic state’s ambassador to Turkey, also confirmed that Turkey has facilitated the entry and exit to Syria of jihadist fighters, who crossed through its territory without any impediment. In addition to this, trade agreements were established on the basis of which ISIS sold Syrian oil to Turkey, this being one of the sources of funding that allowed its rapid advancement⁴.



Opening of Turkish institutions in the occupied region of Afrin. Source: Rojava Information Centre

Recently, during the Turkish occupation of Afrin, Serê Kaniyê and Girê Spî, it has also been proven that the Turkish state is using jihadist gangs, which are grouped under the umbrella of the Syrian National Army, to carry out its imperialist project in the North and East of Syria. In these areas, the Islamists did not come just to fight, but have established themselves there with the support of the Turkish State. Since these regions were occupied, hundreds of thousands of people have been forcibly displaced from their homes. Arrests, kidnappings and murders routinely taking place, and violence is targeting specially women. Also, the wearing of the veil has been made compulsory, and the Kurdish language has been banned from schools and institutions, with Turkish introduced as a compulsory subject.

1 <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkey-rescues-5-moldovans-from-ypg-pkk-in-nsyria/1913604>

2 https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/video/video/291121/iste_MiT_TIR_larina_baskin_ani.html

3 <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/chp-lawmakers-accuse-turkish-government-of-protecting-isil-and-al-nusra-militants-67750>

4 <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/the-isis-ambassador-to-turkey/>



Furthermore, Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of ISIS from 2014, was in the village of Barisha, in the Idlib province, at the moment of his death during a raid of the US forces in October 2019. His location was in an area controlled by Turkish-backed groups and only 6km from the Turkish border, which makes it seem unlikely that Turkey did not know of his location previously or that Baghdadi was not there with Turkish consent.

On the other hand, it has also been proved that the Turkish State has so far hired thousands of mercenaries from the Islamic State to fight in Libya, in support of the National Accord Government (NAG). According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the number of jihadists sent would amount to several thousand, including some previously held in prisons in areas controlled by pro-Turkish groups⁵.

Smuggling women out of Al-Hol camp

In recent months, the Turkish state's support for Islamists has also been seen in the assistance provided to female members of ISIS to escape from the camps where they are in the custody of the SDF. One example is the case of Natalia Barkal, which is important because this support has been made public openly by the Turkish media, receiving no response from the rest of countries, even the risk it poses for the region and the world.



Women in Al-Hol camp. Source: Hawarnews, (31/07/2020)

This illegal and active supporting dangerously classified IS members to escape, which is internationally prohibited, is also against every international agreement and violates the established procedures for the repatriation of ISIS members with foreign citizenship established by the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria.



Natalia Barkal and her family on arrival in Moldova, received by the president and Turkish representatives. Source: Anadolu Ajensi (17/07/2020)

According to published reports, Barkal arrived with her husband in Syria from Moldova in 2013, with the aim of living in Manbij, which was taken over by ISIS forces in January 2014. In 2017 her husband was killed in military clashes, and in January 2019 she was captured and taken to the camp where she remained until MIT helped her escape.

In an interview, Jazima Muhammad, another ISIS woman in Al-Hol who knew Barkal, said that she remarried an ISIS fighter she met in Baghouz and remained in contact with the organization until its last stronghold fell after the joint operation between the SDF and the International Coalition in the Der-Ez-Zor region⁶.

5 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/175607/>

6 https://npasyria.com/en/blog.php?id_blog=2999&sub_blog=15&name_blog=ISIS%20bride%20to%20North%20Press:%20Turkey%20smuggled%20ISIS%20wife%20out%20of%20Syria%E2%80%99s%20Hawl%20Camp



As for Barkal's activities after she was captured, according to statements by the camp's security forces, she was in the high security area of the camp as she was one of the most wanted prisoners and is believed to have been part of and played a leading role in the "Hisba" structure, which was responsible for the reorganization of ISIS and is credited with at least 30 murders of ISIS members in the last 12 months in the camp.

In a statement, the Autonomous Administration said that this is not the first time that Turkey has removed people linked to the terrorist organization from the camps⁷. During the war in November 2019, the Turkish airplanes bombed the Ayn Issa camp, allowing 859 foreign ISIS prisoners to escape. Also, the attacks during the invasion and the occupation itself gave strenght to ISIS members in the prisons in Hasekê, and escape attempts and riots have been happening quite often since then, with the threat it represents to society.

In this case, the security forces have known for some time that a group from the Turkish Intelligence Service is smuggling ISIS women out of the camps where they are staying and charging their families money for it. Behind these facts there exists not only an economic rationale for these individuals, but also a political and strategic rationale for Turkey. Large number of the ISIS members who were not captured by the SDF now live in Turkey or in the occupied areas of Afrin, Serê Kaniyê, Girê Spî or Idlib, places where some of these women are probably taken to join their families again.

After the case of Natalia Barkal, other women linked to the Islamic state were caught by the internal security forces of Al-Hol camp while trying to escape. The women stated that the smuggling was organized by the Turkish secret service, and when found they were hiding in water tanks belonging to international humanitarian aid organisations as the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) or UNICEF⁸.



Elif Sancar and Fatma Ridvan. Source: ANF (30/07/2020)

Elif Sancar, a Turkish citizen and ISIS member, and Fatma Ridvan, a Chechen woman who tried to escape, said that they were escaping because 'Turkey wants them' and that the Turkish secret service MIT organizes and finances the "liberation" of the jihadists through the notorious "Foundation for Humanitarian Aid" (IHH)⁹.

Threats and responsibilities

The Autonomous Administration and the International Coalition have been calling for months for the repatriation of the foreign militants of ISIS and their families, captured during the joint operations of the SDF and the Coalition, and for the establishment of an international court where they can be tried, with no response until now. In the case of Barkal, despite the willingness of the self-administration to transfer the custody of the foreign citizens to their respective countries, there was no request from the government of Moldova, despite the fact that according to the Turkish state's announcement the 'rescue' operation took place jointly with the government of Moldova, which at the same time thanked President Erdogan for his effort.

The terror and consequences of the rapid advance of the Islamic state are well known everywhere.

7 <https://www.facebook.com/smensyria/posts/1368963116626955>

8 https://npasyria.com/en/blog.php?id_blog=3030&sub_blog=15&name_blog=UNICEF%20driver%20attempts%20to%20smuggle%20ISIS%20families%20from%20Syria%E2%80%99s%20Haw1%20camp

9 <https://anfenglishmobile.com/features/turkish-coalition-helps-isis-members-to-escape-45611>



In the North and East of Syria, people remember every day the thousands of lives that were given in the fight against it, not only to liberate the territories that the caliphate occupied in Syria, but also to put an end to the global threat posed by Islamist fascist terrorism, especially to women's freedom.

There are multiple reasons for the support provided by the Turkish state to the Islamic state. On the one hand, the alliance with jihadist groups is useful for their imperialist interests, both inside and outside Syria, in order to put an end to the Kurdish presence and to fulfil the dreams of re-establishing the Ottoman Empire. These aims are becoming increasingly evident with the policies of the Erdogan government also in Iraq, Libya, Cyprus or more recently in Azerbaijan, where recent clashes with Armenia threaten again a people who were already victims of genocide at the hands of the Ottoman Empire during the first half of the 20th century.

On the other hand, in addition to the neo-Ottoman ideology, the nationalism of Erdogan and his party, the AKP, is totally linked to the Islamist ideology in its most conservative version. He has linked his political project totally with Islam, as seen in the recent conversion of the Hagia Sofia into a mosque, in Istanbul, or with other fascist policies carried out both inside and outside the Turkish state.

The Turkish state's complicity with Islamist terrorism is a threat to the whole world and faced with this, other states and international organisations can no longer remain silent. On Syrian territory the people continue to suffer attacks and the consequences of Turkish fascism which, through its jihadist gangs, is showing its most brutal side against women and the inhabitants of the occupied areas of northern Syria.

The members of the International Coalition, the United Nations and NATO, must stand against the practices of the Turkish State, a member of each, and hold it accountable for its actions, which threaten the achievements made in the fight against Islamist terrorism by the coalition itself and the security of the region and the entire world. The USA and Russia have a particular responsibility for this, due to their presence in the North and East of Syria. To remain silent means supporting the AKP policy of supporting jihadism and the major threat that it entails – this cannot be acceptable.

In addition, regarding foreign members of ISIS who are on Syrian territory under SDF custody, the United Nations and the countries of which they are nationals have to take responsibility for them and begin the repatriation process. Also, an international court should be established, to judge every ISIS member according to their crimes.





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