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# The Return: Life After ISIS

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## Abstract

This is a film review of *The Return: Life After ISIS* (2021), directed by Alba Sotorra Clua.





## Author Notes

John Lyden is Professor of Religious Studies and the Blizek Professor of Religion and Film at University of Nebraska-Omaha. He was been the Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film since 2011. He is the author of Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservativism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars (Wipf and Stock 2018).

**The Return: Life After ISIS (2021), dir. Alba Sotorra Clua**

This documentary follows several women who have lived in a refugee camp in Syria for years. They come from the United States, the UK, the Netherlands, and Germany. But none of them can return to their countries of origin, because they have been deprived of citizenship by those countries, because they joined ISIS.

It does not matter that they regret their actions, or that they committed no terrorist acts or crimes of any kind while part of ISIS. It does not matter that they are mothers with small children, living in a place with too little food and without adequate sanitation. It does not matter that they could with reason be viewed as victims of human trafficking—because they are viewed as terrorists, and as such as unforgivable and irredeemable.

Much of the film is spent with Sevinaz Evdike, a Kurdish Syrian woman who works with the group. She gets them to tell their stories, and to write letters to themselves two years prior, putting into words what they wish they had known. She is also conflicted about helping them, as ISIS fighters killed so many Syrians, and she cannot forget that. But as her father says to her, it is

their duty as Kurds and as Muslims to care for the fallen, and these women are also victims of ISIS.

The women recount how they were misled by online propaganda videos to believe that they were joining a noble cause, fighting the forces of President Bashar Al-Assad who was killing his own people in Syria. There is no doubt about the Syrian President did make brutal war on his own people, or that those people needed help, but ISIS capitalized on the situation to gain power and terrorize Syrians in turn. The women who were recruited were locked up, beaten, forced into marriages or sold as sex slaves, and sometimes killed. There was no contact with the outside world, no music, no internet, no videogames or television. While the women thought they would help the war effort, they were instead used as breeders and human shields.

It is true that some of the women tweeted support for terrorist acts before their recruitment. Many of them were disaffected teenagers, unable to accurately assess the consequences of their actions. Shamina Begum left the UK at age 15; now 21, she longs to return to her family and ask their forgiveness. She and the other women are willing to stand trial in their home countries and to serve time in prison. But they are not allowed this. Instead, Shamina has lived for years in the refugee camp, and all three of her children have died. Some of the women have husbands who are still alive and imprisoned elsewhere, who also regret their actions and feel that ISIS betrayed them with false information. When the United States defeats a country in a war, the opposing forces are allowed to return home and resume their lives, but as the Islamic State has no country, they are not given this choice—and because of their association with a terrorist organization, they do not get the rights that prisoners of war would normally receive. Lawyers have worked for their repatriation, but unsuccessfully so far. Popular opinion is also against them: Shamima's face is put

on targets at shooting ranges, and she is viewed as a monster, even though she was herself a prisoner of terrorists.

There are some women in the camp who remain fanatically devoted to ISIS, and who terrorize those who speak out. This has made it difficult for those who are repentant to make their views clear in the media, as there will be consequences. One family's tent is set afire in the camp, killing the woman as well as her children inside. But the women we meet in this film just want to go home, to go to school, to raise their families, to have a chance for life. They care for each other as fellow mothers. They are ready to speak out against what happened, to show that ISIS does not represent Islam—and yet they may never be given this opportunity.

This film gives a human face to these victims of ISIS who are so often viewed as terrorists themselves, evil and incapable of redemption. Islamophobia tends to view most Muslims in this way, but it is especially tragic when people are deprived of all rights and humanity because they have been declared guilty of war crimes without an indictment or trial. People can be misled; people can make some very poor decisions, and some very big mistakes. But people can learn and change. Unless we accept that possibility, we will shortchange their humanity as well as our own, making forgiveness as impossible as repentance. Every religion preaches forgiveness of the repentant; one wishes that this teaching would be followed more often, especially when its rejection results in so much avoidable suffering.