



General Intelligence and  
Security Service  
*Ministry of the Interior and  
Kingdom Relations*

# Life with ISIS: the Myth Unravalled



# Introduction

In addition to confidential reports and analyses for official use, from time to time the AIVD issues public documents about its areas of interest. This publication, *Life with ISIS: the Myth Unravelled*, is part of an ongoing series dating back to 2001 that is devoted to jihadist terrorism. Its subject is the departure of large numbers of people with a Dutch background to the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq to join the terror group Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

# Proclamation of the “caliphate”

On 29 June 2014, ISIS announced that it had established a “caliphate”. This proclamation was accompanied by a wave of propaganda in which ISIS called upon all the world’s Muslims to swear allegiance to the self-styled “caliph”, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and to settle in the territory under its control. Whilst other militant groups in the region were fighting to overthrow the Syrian regime, ISIS went a step further with the establishment of its so-called “Islamic State”. From now on its struggle would concentrate upon building and expanding that self-proclaimed entity.

The myth of the ISIS caliphate has brought the group considerable propaganda success. More and more jihadists from all over the world, including supporters from the Netherlands, are choosing to join this movement rather than more established rivals like Al-Qaeda (AQ) and its affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN). As set out in the AIVD publication *The Transformation of Jihadism in the Netherlands* (2014), the relatively large number of jihadists travelling to Syria since 2012 is explained to a great extent by the region’s ideological importance and Syria’s convenient location with respect to Europe. Thanks to a specific “caliphate narrative”, which includes framing its direct appeal for men, women and children to come to Syria as a religious duty, ISIS has succeeded in attracting the great majority of this stream of travellers to its own territory and organisation.

Since the proclamation of the caliphate, ISIS supporters from all over the world have settled in Syria and Iraq. They regard its territory as the ultimate “Islamic state”, where they can live peaceably according to the strict precepts of a fundamentalist interpretation of their religion. Moreover, according to ISIS, life there is good. In the idyllic world of its propaganda, every new arrival is given a home, there is plenty of good food, rubbish is collected regularly and medical care is excellent. ISIS also likes to give the impression that it is serving the Syrian and Iraqi people, and that any violence it uses in doing so is purely defensive.

In reality, however, violence is intrinsic to ISIS. It is preached, glorified and used on a daily basis. Everyone who has travelled since 2014 to the area under the group’s control will have seen the propaganda images of atrocities against “non-believers”. Scenes of bloody executions and young children in military training camps, along with euphoric video compilations of terrorist attacks claimed by ISIS, circulate daily amongst jihadist circles and are easy to find on the internet. Most of those who leave have been told beforehand by their contacts in Syria that they will be trained for and sent into combat. In swearing allegiance to ISIS, they are signing up for a life dominated by excessive violence and an all-encompassing ideology of hatred – an ideology in which everyone not part of the group is an infidel and hence inferior, making them a legitimate target for its deadly wrath.

In the past eighteen months, intelligence-based research has given the AIVD a good picture of what life is really like under ISIS. Such a closer look at day-to-day life allows us to compare the propaganda idyll with the true situation and to determine just how great a role violence plays on a day-to-day basis. The picture to emerge from this sober analysis is one of hardship and mutual mistrust under a regime with totalitarian tendencies. The myths ISIS continues to disseminate through its propaganda can now be unravelled.

## ISIS

The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, also known as ISIL, IS or Daesh), is a terrorist group currently active in Syria and Iraq. Its leader is the Iraqi Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. A number of jihadist groups in other regions of the world have declared their allegiance to ISIS over the past year, so that affiliates claiming to act on its behalf are now operating in several parts of Africa and Asia.

The group's predecessors, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) began committing acts of terrorism in Iraq in the years after the fall of Saddam Hussein. They expanded their activities into Syria following the outbreak of the civil war there, first using the name ISIS in 2013. A few months later there was a marked split between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN), which had by now become the Syrian arm of Al-Qaeda (AQ), at which point ISIS stopped following the line set down by the AQ leadership in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In turn, AQ has formally distanced itself from ISIS.

## Jihadism and the caliphate

Jihadists embrace an extreme form of fundamentalist Islam. Violence, especially fighting and dying for the faith, is an important part of their ideology. For fundamentalists, the *khilafa* or "caliphate" is a key concept. Drawing upon the sayings of the prophet Muhammad, they link the restoration of this form of pan-Islamic government to stories about an apocalyptic "final struggle" – a conflict of huge significance to all jihadists – in Syria and the rest of the Middle East.

By renaming itself "Islamic State", ISIS is attempting to persuade friend and foe alike that it has formed the "one true caliphate". Although AQ and other jihadist groups agree that this will one day come, they reject ISIS' claim to have established it. According to AQ, the caliphate can only be proclaimed once certain ideological preconditions have been met – and with the approval of its favoured religious scholars. In its view, the time is not yet ripe for that step.

## Defending the caliphate

The myth of the caliphate presents it as a place for all Muslims arriving from the West, not just the traditional jihadist fighter. Consequently, more and more people are travelling to Syria with the idea that they can settle peaceably in ISIS-held territory. They include families with children, and others hoping to start a family once there. According to ISIS, these individuals also have a role to play. After all, the new "state" needs doctors, car mechanics and rubbish collectors to build its civil society.

Nonetheless, ISIS still has to forcibly defend and extend the area it controls. Certainly since the international coalition began launching air strikes in the summer of 2014, the group has sought to deploy as many new arrivals as possible on the battlefield. And its idea of "defence" includes attacking, killing, raping or enslaving Syrians and Iraqis who do not share its beliefs, or who resist it in any way.

In its view, moreover, it is not only in the Middle East that the caliphate must be defended with violence. In September 2014 the group called upon all supporters unable to come to Syria or Iraq to carry out attacks in member countries of the international coalition. Over the next few months the authorities foiled several

planned attacks in Europe. In France, Denmark and elsewhere attacks took place that were purportedly inspired by ISIS.

On 13 November 2015 Europe experienced its first large-scale terrorist attack clearly directed by ISIS from Syria. Members of a jihadist terror cell opened fire on diners and concertgoers in Paris, and several of them detonated suicide vests. In all, 130 people were killed and hundreds more wounded. At least some of the perpetrators were European citizens who had travelled to Syria to join ISIS, then returned. The group claimed that France was a legitimate target because of its participation in the coalition air strikes.

The Paris attacks show more than ever before that ISIS needs to portray the West as inherently hostile to its “ideal” caliphate in order to maintain the effectiveness of its recruitment propaganda. Especially at a time of military setbacks on the ground in Syria and Iraq, claiming the credit for attacks in the enemy heartland is a good way to distract attention and to impress its grass-roots support base. Its earlier videos of the brutal executions of Western hostages served much the same purpose.

## Daily life under ISIS

Anyone travelling to the so-called Islamic State is knowingly opting to join a terrorist group which regards all outsiders as “infidels” and uses excessive violence on a daily basis. Once there, they are required to give their lives – often literally – to maintain the “state”. Thanks to internet propaganda and their contacts with ISIS members already in Syria, most know in advance what is going to be expected of them.

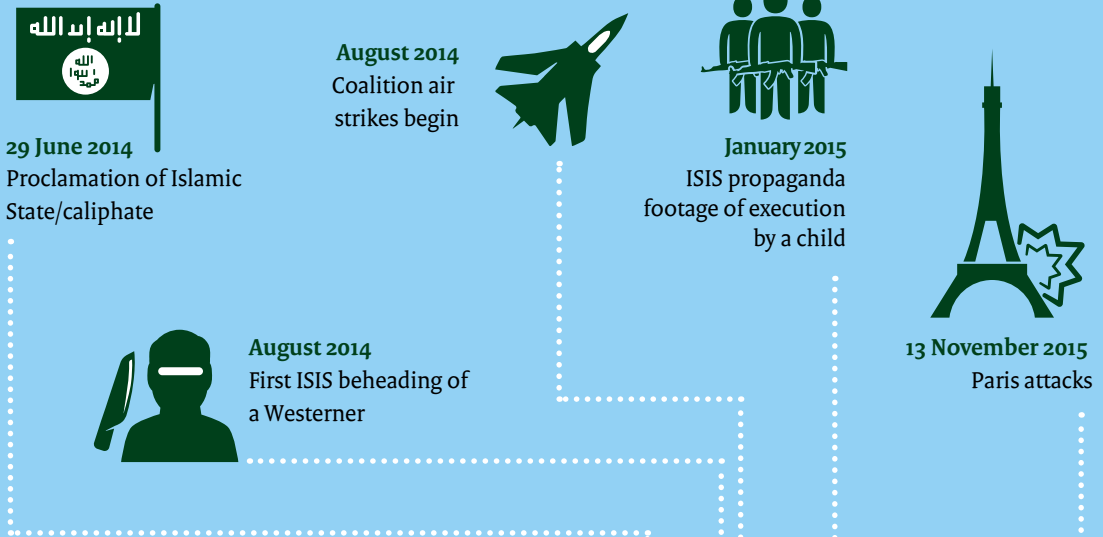
The great majority of those who make the journey therefore think they have a realistic picture of the life awaiting them. For many, however, the true situation comes as a shock. What dismays Western jihadists, in particular, is everyday life in a war zone. It is hard living in constant fear of bombing raids. The poor food, substandard housing and inadequate medical services are also a tough challenge for many foreign jihadists and their families.

As well as idealistic newcomers, plenty of ordinary Syrians and Iraqis still live in ISIS-controlled areas. Some have joined the group, although often under duress. Others are suffering under its yoke on a daily basis, with the threat of execution, assault, enslavement, rape and extortion never far away.

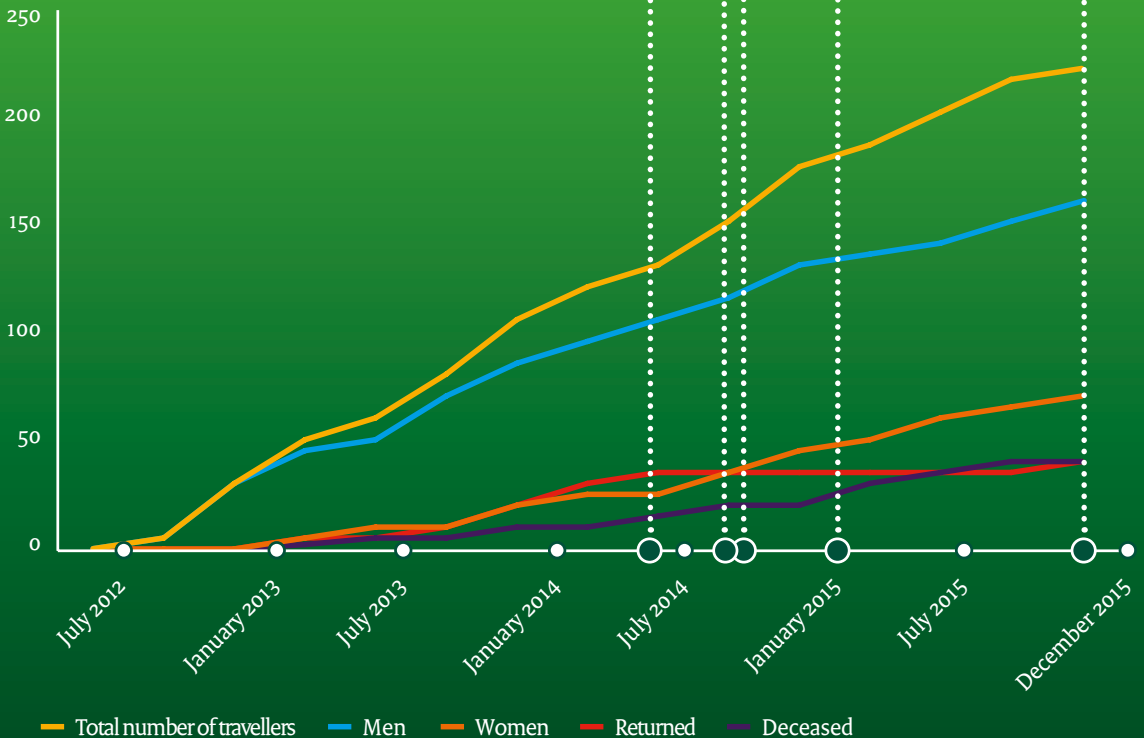
### The journey

Almost all jihadists who decide to go to Syria or Iraq already know someone living in ISIS territory. The group actively encourages those who have made the journey to persuade relatives, friends and acquaintances to follow in their footsteps. Because it fears infiltration by spies, it now requires all new recruits to nominate somebody already in the area it controls as their guarantor. Minors receive help from ISIS members already in Syria or Iraq in planning their journeys, usually without their parents’ knowledge. Most people wishing to travel to ISIS-controlled territory attempt first to reach Turkey by road or air, then cross the Turkish-Syrian border illegally. In general, those who are intercepted along the way keep on trying

# Jihadist travellers in the Netherlands



Number of travellers to Syria and Iraq



until they succeed. If the authorities in their country of origin confiscate their passport, they travel on another form of ID or, if they are dual nationals, their other passport. Individuals without any form of travel document, and those who have previously been stopped and deported by the Turkish authorities, sometimes pay people smugglers to help them cross eastern Europe and enter Turkey undetected. Once they reach Syria, all newcomers have to hand over their travel documents to ISIS. This is to prevent them from leaving without permission. The passports themselves may be used by other ISIS members to travel to Europe under a false identity.

## Men under ISIS

As soon as they arrive in ISIS territory, men are separated from any women and children accompanying them. All then undergo the same induction procedure. They first swear allegiance to “caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, which makes them members of ISIS and obligated to follow its orders. Before he can proceed any further into ISIS territory, the new recruit is then subjected to extensive interrogation to check that he is not a spy. He is also instructed in ISIS ideology. Once finally admitted to ISIS, he goes straight into military training. This is a physically demanding course lasting several weeks, and includes instruction in the use of firearms.

In theory, the new member is allowed to choose his own role within the group. But ISIS also screens recruits for useful skills, such as technical qualifications, ICT experience, proficiency in languages or a medical background. Some members may be assigned a particular task on the basis of their background. Others are selected specifically to be trained to return to Europe to commit acts of terrorism there.

In practice, most newcomers from abroad are given a choice between support work, front-line combat duty and carrying out a suicide attack. In general, Dutch recruits opt for life as a fighter. One non-military alternative is membership of the “Hisba”, the religious police responsible for stopping and fining or arresting people on the street for breaking the strict rules imposed by ISIS. A lot of men also play an active part in recruitment activities and the dissemination of propaganda.

Whatever work he does, however, any man who has sworn allegiance to the “caliph” can be called up for military duty at any time. In other words: when the call comes, everyone has to fight. ISIS pays its male members a small salary, which is just enough to cover their basic needs. Fighters receive more than those who decide to take non-military work.

The life of an ISIS fighter consists mainly of sentry duty, manning checkpoints or guarding key facilities. At any moment, however, his commander or emir can order him to a battlefield somewhere in Syria or Iraq. Some men receive additional training – in making explosives, for example, or as snipers. If the group captures a village or stretch of ground, it is not unusual for members to carry out executions, torture or rapes – either on ISIS orders or of their own accord.

# Men, women and children under ISIS



## Men

- swear allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi
- military training
- active and support roles
- commit atrocities

## Children

- witness bombings and atrocities
- regular education and jihad lessons
- girls wear veils in public from age 9
- boys go to training camps from age 9

## Women

- bear many children
- recruit new women
- weapons training, but limited actual use
- carry out (corporal) punishment

## Women under ISIS

Women travelling to the caliphate do not undergo the same strict procedure as the men. Like most other jihadist groups, ISIS views male and female roles as very different. Nevertheless, women are expected to work actively for the group. First and foremost, their task is to have as many children as possible as quickly as possible. They are expected to raise their sons as ISIS fighters, while daughters are expected to marry fighters and to follow in their mother's footsteps in having a large family for the very same purpose.

A second crucial part of life for a woman in ISIS-controlled territory is recruiting other women – often relatives or friends – to come and join her in the caliphate. As an extension of this, producing propaganda is a core task for many. Some also work as teachers or medics, and others perform logistical tasks for ISIS. What all these women have in common is that they make an active contribution to keep the terrorist organisation running.

Many foreign women coming to ISIS-held territory are keen to fight, but for the time being they are not allowed to. However, they may well receive firearms training shortly after arrival. The group does permit women to bear arms in public. Some also wear suicide belts, which they can detonate if attacked. In the last decade, when ISIS was still known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), it regularly used women to carry out suicide bombings. But there are no recent known examples of this being authorised by the organisation in Syria or Iraq.

The most active role a woman can play at the present time is as a member of the Al-Khansaa brigade, the all-female religious police force formed to deal with other women accused of “unislamic” behaviour. Because they are also expected to admonish the local population, however, those wishing to join this force are required to speak Arabic. If a woman is arrested by the brigade and convicted, it is another woman who



metes out her punishment. Western women are known to have flogged women found guilty of breaching the strict ISIS moral code.

## Children under ISIS

Since the proclamation of the caliphate, more and more families with children have been travelling to the area ISIS controls. Their parents regard these youngsters as the ISIS fighters of the future, and seem to be convinced that it is a good idea to move the whole family to a war zone. Moreover, a lot of women travelling to the region become pregnant once they are in Syria or Iraq. This means that there is an increasing number of children born in ISIS-held territory to at least one Dutch parent, although they are not officially registered anywhere. It is estimated that there are approximately seventy children with a Dutch connection in jihadist-controlled areas in Syria and Iraq, mostly by ISIS. About a third was born there, the others were brought there by one or both parents. The actual number of children born in Syria or Iraq is probably higher, because verification of these numbers is practically impossible.

Life for children under ISIS is hard and traumatic. Those from the Netherlands and other Western countries find it particularly difficult to adapt to their new surroundings. Obviously, the daily air strikes by the Syrian regime, the international coalition and Russia are a highly stressful experience for them.

For these youngsters, death and destruction become a part of everyday life. Many have had to learn that their father or another member of the family has died in battle. They also run a real risk of being killed or injured themselves. ISIS members regularly take young children to watch public executions or corporal punishments. In some cases parents have photographed their own offspring with the remains of prisoners executed by the group.

Children are indoctrinated with ISIS ideology on a daily basis. They attend school from about the age of six. As well as regular subjects like English, Arabic and maths, they are taught the group's own particular interpretation of jihad and how this "holy war" should be fought. Specific gender-based roles are instilled from an early age.

In school, young girls learn how best to support their future husband in the armed struggle. They have to be fully veiled in public from about the age of nine, or sometimes even earlier. Boys – the fighters of the future – can be sent to special military training camps at that age. There they learn how to use firearms and other weapons, and practise carrying out executions. Outside school, some children of jihadists carry guns on the street.

Children are playing an increasingly prominent role in ISIS propaganda. Several videos released in the first half of 2015 show boys aged as young as ten or twelve executing prisoners by shooting or beheading them. Their use in this way is part of a strategy to gain attention through shocking images. Since this form of propaganda has been widely reported in mainstream media in the West, we can only assume that parents travelling to join ISIS have a realistic picture of the future awaiting their children.

## Housing

ISIS mythology has it that a comfortable house awaits every new arrival, with free gas and electricity. In truth, most of the available homes have been abandoned by local people fleeing the conflict and are usually in a poor state. Families are regularly forced to move out of their accommodation to make way for more senior members of ISIS and often several families with young children have to share a house. Generally, homes in ISIS territory only have electricity for a couple of hours a day.

Unmarried women and widows, and any children they have, are required to live in a “women’s house”. Conditions in these facilities are particularly bad. They are cramped, dirty and crawling with vermin, and often there is not enough to eat. Residents are only to leave the house once a week. Many single women and widows marry (or remarry) a fighter as quickly as possible, simply in order to avoid ending up in one of these houses.

## Medical facilities

ISIS propaganda videos extol the virtues of the healthcare provided to people living in its caliphate. And everyone does indeed have access to doctors and hospitals, as long as they can pay for their treatment.



But the quality of care is abominable, as hospitals are unhygienic and acutely lacking in medicines, equipment and qualified medical staff.

Under ISIS rules, women can only be treated by female doctors and nurses, but they are in particularly short supply. Every birth in the caliphate puts the life of both mother and child at risk. Especially if there are complications, the medical staff lack the knowledge and resources needed to guarantee a successful outcome.

## A totalitarian regime

In the past year ISIS has done everything it can to keep the myth of a successful state alive. But the apparatus of government the terror group built up over the course of 2015 is already starting to crumble in face of increasing problems, such as military setbacks and internal strife. Its response has been to repress its own people even more, and any opposition or dissent is crushed with violence. A culture of fear is emerging within the organisation's own ranks, imbuing ISIS' regime more and more with totalitarian traits.

### Effects of air strikes

More than a year after the international coalition began its air strikes, ISIS still holds considerable swathes of territory. It seems unlikely that the group will be beaten decisively on the battlefield any time soon.

But the strikes are having an impact upon everyday life under ISIS. Several high-profile military defeats along the Turkish-Syrian border in 2015 have made it more difficult for people, equipment and goods to reach some parts of ISIS territory. This has had serious consequences. People in Raqqa, the unofficial capital of the caliphate, have seen food prices double within a year. The group has also been unable to maintain its fighters' relatively high salaries, causing further dissatisfaction and unrest among members.

As a result of these developments, internal paranoia is on the increase. ISIS is afraid that residents of its caliphate will try to flee en masse to escape the air strikes and the worsening military and economic situation. For a group with the religious duty to settle in its territory at the heart of its ideology, such an exodus would cause huge loss of face. In response, it is making it more and more difficult for members and their families to leave Syria or Iraq. Even a brief visit to Turkey requires its permission.

Because some members with authorisation to leave ISIS-controlled territory only temporarily – for medical reasons, say – have been taking the opportunity to escape for good, that permission has become harder to obtain. Women who experience complications during childbirth are no longer allowed to travel to hospitals elsewhere. Since December 2014, people in some areas have been required to carry an identity card issued by the religious police at all times. Without this document, they cannot travel by bus or pass border posts.

Fear of infiltration by hostile governments and rival groups is also growing. Because of the danger of targeted air strikes against important facilities or individuals, ISIS attempts to prevent external parties from gathering potentially useful information. It is very worried about its enemies deliberately channelling damaging intelligence to the outside world, or that local people might unintentionally betray sensitive information about its locations.

## The security apparatus

The ISIS leadership's growing mistrust of its own membership is also fuelling the group's internal culture of fear. Concerns about what it calls the "internal security" of its territory, not least as a result of the air strikes, are enhancing the role of its security apparatus in Syria and Iraq. Security staff investigates supposed spies and deserters by gathering information and by interrogating and torturing suspects. If a sharia court finds sufficient "evidence" against them, the accused are sentenced to death.

In support of this work, ISIS security officials try to find out as much as possible about the people living in the areas controlled by the group. It also seeks to control all communications between members and civilians within its territory and people outside the caliphate.



The use of wireless and mobile internet was banned in Raqqa in July 2015. Since then online access has been available only in ISIS-approved internet cafés, with usage – who visits what sites – carefully monitored. In some areas, even the dissemination of information outside ISIS territory requires permission from a military leader or emir. Anyone failing to obtain this permission is summoned before a sharia court.

In their search of people who openly criticise the caliphate, ISIS security officials also rely upon information from members of the public. Any individual expressing dissent is at risk of denunciation by an informer. This makes it extremely dangerous to confide in other people, for instance when planning to leave the caliphate.

## Short and long-term effects

It has become increasingly clear in recent months that the ISIS regime is descending into totalitarianism. Negative reports about the disappointments of life in the caliphate are suppressed with all its might. Foreign newcomers especially are put under pressure to present a positive image to the group's potential new recruits: their family and friends at home.

Complaints about expensive food, bad housing, inadequate medical facilities and the activities of the security apparatus only rarely filter through to jihadist circles in the Netherlands, simply because the current climate of fear makes it far too dangerous to criticise the caliphate openly from within. In any case, supporters may well dismiss such stories as Western propaganda. The continuing absence of such negative signals in the Netherlands is one reason why, month after month, people still try to travel to ISIS territory.

In the longer term, the question is to what extent its growing internal culture of fear will undermine ISIS. There are already signs that some of its fighters are unhappy and may even want to flee the caliphate. More high-profile defeats in the near future are only likely to increase the pressure within.

## Can the caliphate survive?

The proclamation of the caliphate in 2014 has provided ISIS with a strong propaganda story, which it continues to tell. Unlike rival jihadist groups, it holds an ideologically significant territory that it claims needs to be developed and defended against hostile outsiders. That myth continues to draw in jihadists from all over the world, in part because the totalitarian ISIS regime prevents negative stories about life there reaching potential recruits.

At present, it is unclear what the future holds for those jihadists who now realise that life under ISIS is not what they expected. Meanwhile ISIS is using all available means to force them to stay. Of those who do manage to leave Syria, some will probably try to settle – at least temporarily – in Turkey, or they might join other jihadist groups, like Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian arm of Al-Qaeda. Those who still have their passports could attempt to travel on to alternative centres of ISIS or AQ activity, such as Libya, Yemen, Somalia or Afghanistan.

As for those who decide to return to the Netherlands or another Western country, quite apart from the very real prospect of prosecution there are the difficulties associated with readapting to normal everyday life. As battle-hardened fighters ready to commit acts of violence, but without a caliphate to fight for, it is quite possible that some could be prepared to carry the struggle back to their homeland. For returning children in particular, traumatised by their experiences and exposed to a doctrine that glorifies violence, it will be extremely hard to begin living a normal life.

## The ISIS threat

Over the next few years it will become clearer whether the caliphate – as a myth and a reality – can survive, and what that means for Dutch national security.

ISIS remains highly dependent upon its image as a “strong” group attracting a steady stream of new recruits. It needs to threaten and attack the West in order to keep impressing its members, old and new. Especially when facing setbacks on the ground, “success stories” elsewhere are vital to maintain that momentum. With the events in Paris on 13 November 2015 still fresh in our memories, that is more evident than ever.

ISIS supporters not with the group in Syria or Iraq continue to pose a huge threat. They could take up its call to attack the West. As well as returnees, they include individuals whose plans to travel there have been frustrated by the authorities or blocked by family and friends. Because they have been unable to do their “duty” by joining ISIS in its caliphate, they are particularly receptive to its propaganda urging them to proceed with “Plan B”: an attack closer to home.

There is every indication that Dutch jihadists will continue to try to travel out to ISIS-occupied territory. It is also highly likely that ISIS will attempt more acts of terrorism in Europe. It is extremely important for the group to maintain its myth, by all means at its disposal. This makes the threat it poses a complex matter, one inextricably bound up with fate of the so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq.

## Conclusion

The so-called caliphate is not at all what ISIS claims. The territory it occupies is no promised land, no ideal society in the making. ISIS behaves like a totalitarian regime towards its own members. Anyone travelling to the area it controls is knowingly choosing to join a group responsible for acts of terrorism, including attacks in Europe. In practice that means that every one of them, male or female, armed or not, is playing an active part in ISIS’ struggle.





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