

## Talking to Ex-Islamic State Fighters Inside Iraqi Prisons: An Arab Woman's Perspective on Radicalization and Deradicalization

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**Abstract :** This research aims to untangle the complexity of conducting face-to-face interviews with 80 ex-Islamic State fighters, encompassing three groups: local Iraqis, Arabs from the Middle East, and international fighters from around the globe. Each interview lasted approximately two hours and was conducted in both Arabic and English, focusing on the motivations behind joining the Islamic State and the pathways and mechanisms facilitating their involvement. The phenomenon of individuals joining violent Islamist extremist and jihadist organizations is multifaceted, drawing substantial attention within terrorism and security studies. Organizations such as the Islamic State, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Al-Qaeda pose formidable threats to international peace and stability, employing various terrorist tactics for radicalization and recruitment. However, significant gaps remain in current studies, including a lack of firsthand accounts, an inadequate understanding of original narratives (religious and linguistic) due to abstraction and misinterpretation of motivations, and a lack of Arab women's perspectives from the region. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the cultural, religious, and historical complexities that shape the narratives of ex-ISIS fighters. The paper will showcase three distinct cases: one French prisoner, one Moroccan fighter, and a local Iraqi, illustrating the diverse motivations and experiences that contribute to joining and leaving extremist groups. The findings provide valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics of radicalization, emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive approaches in counter-terrorism strategies and deradicalization programs. Importantly, this research has practical implications for counter-narrative policies and early-stage prevention of radicalization. By understanding the narratives used by ex-fighters, policymakers can develop targeted counter-narratives that disrupt recruitment efforts. Additionally, insights into the mechanisms of radicalization can inform early intervention programs, helping to identify and support at-risk individuals before they become entrenched in extremist ideologies. Ultimately, this research enhances our understanding of the individual experiences of ex-ISIS fighters and calls for a reevaluation of the narratives surrounding women's roles in extremism and recovery.

**Keywords :** Arab women in extremism, counter-narrative policy, ex-ISIS fighters in Iraq, radicalization

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