



# ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate

By Anne Speckhard, Ahmet S Yayla

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**ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate** By Anne Speckhard, Ahmet S Yayla

The authors hadn't intended to put themselves in danger but that's what happened as they interviewed an unprecedented thirty-two battle-hardened defectors about the gritty details of life inside ISIS. With unparalleled breadth, depth and access, ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate offers a compelling view of ISIS from men, women and teens now in hiding, having escaped the most brutal terrorist group in recent history. They were fighters and commanders, wives of fighters-living and dead, female enforcers, and Cubs of the Caliphate, including a child who volunteered and almost got sent as a suicide bomber at age thirteen. They discuss motivations for joining and defecting, and delve into news-making topics: coercing children to become suicide bombers; brides of ISIS and the brutal female morality police; Yazidi and Sunni sex slaves held in massive compounds where fighters use them at will; privilege bestowed on foreign fighters; prisoners kept for the sole purpose of beheading by new inductees. The defectors shared a startling array of photos and videos from personal cell phones and many are included in the digital version of this book. An unexpected subplot unfolded when Dr. Yayla found himself tailed by ISIS, and Dr. Speckhard barely missed two suicide attacks. But the authors are not deterred. As counter-terrorism experts with specialties in research psychology and law enforcement, they see ISIS as more than a terrorist group. ISIS is a brand that falsely sells dignity and purpose, justice and the restoration of glory-to vulnerable recruits-masterfully recruiting some 30,000 members online. It's the biggest influx of foreign fighters to a terrorist haven in history. Using the defectors own words, the authors intend to break the ISIS brand. They have videotaped these interviews to edit them into short clips, memes and tweets for an online counter-offensive. Speckhard and Yayla state that disillusioned ISIS defectors are the most influential tool for countering ISIS propaganda. The persuasive voices of these defectors and the resulting videos will soon invade ISIS chat rooms where their propaganda thrives. With over one thousand active investigations in the U.S. across all 50 states, discrediting ISIS ideology is essential to stopping it.

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## ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate By Anne Speckhard, Ahmet S Yayla Bibliography

- Rank: #415913 in Books
- Published on: 2016-07-01
- Original language: English
- Dimensions: 9.02" h x 1.00" w x 5.98" l, 1.54 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 372 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Some stories deserve to be told. And some truth is more terrifying than any fiction. This book is both."

--**Abigail Rodriguez**, Documentary filmmaker and VP of Development, Outrun the Sun Productions

"A key component of defeating ISIS is telling the world what ISIS is really like--from the inside. By having ISIS defectors tell their stories, Anne Speckhard and Ahmet Yayla are doing a great service with their new book." --**Peter Bergen**, author of *United States of Jihad*, Vice President at New America, and CNN's national security analyst.

Anne Speckhard, the American psychologist and Ahmet Yayla, the Turkish police officer, are a unique research team; by collecting authentic defector voices they have exposed, like nobody before them, the moral depravity of the Daesh 'Caliphate'. The damning evidence against the so-called 'Islamic State' is here for all to see --I cannot think of a stronger counter-narrative." --**Prof. Em. Alex P. Schmid**, Editor-in Chief, *Perspectives on Terrorism*

"Effective counterterrorism requires us to encourage disengagement and defections from a terrorist network. This important book offers a wealth of examples of how this applies to ISIS, and should inform our strategy for defeating them. Kudos to Dr. Yayla and Dr. Speckhard for this important research, and to the courageous people who have risked ISIS retribution by defecting and revealing the true nature of the horrors within."

--**Professor James Forest**, University of Massachusetts Lowell

"Great insights from courageous CVE work by Anne Speckhard, Ph.D. and Ahmet Yayla, Ph.D. on their *ISIS Defectors Interviews Project*. Their groundbreaking effort will open new doors to discredit the ISIS narrative through firsthand testimonials of those who were brave enough to expose the terrorist group for what it really is. I eagerly look forward to further application of their work." --**Michael A. Brown**, Research Fellow at RAND Corporation

"The so-called Islamic State presents an unprecedented global threat. Since my encounter with Anne Speckhard in Iraq interviewing terrorist suspects, she has produced many notable works. Her latest, with Ahmet S. Yayla, is essential reading for both scholars and practitioners!" --**Professor Rohan Gunaratna**, Author, *Inside al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* Columbia University Press

"In this fascinating book, Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla offer a rare glimpse into the way IS, today's greatest threat to world's security and stability, carries out its business. Through courageous and risk fraught interviews with IS defectors we learn first-hand how this barbaric organization exploits human frailties to impose its will on thousands and how it manages to force, indoctrinate or inspire Muslims worldwide to serve and fight for its cause. This work offers the most vivid portrayal to date of a phenomenon that menaces to change the course of history and spread violent extremism across the globe." --**Arie W. Kruglanski**, Distinguished University Professor, START Center, University of Maryland

"In a world searching for answers to explain the ISIS phenomena, Anne Speckhard is a treasure trove of information. The insights she has gleaned from interviewing hundreds of terrorists and now this new body of work-- thirty-two ISIS defectors/returnees reported upon here, collected with her research partner, Ahmet Yayla, --challenges some hard held assumptions about violent extremism and Islam. And puts us on the path

to understanding the real motivations behind so many people joining the Islamic State." --**Jeff Swicord**, Journalist, Voice of America Television

"In Their book, *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*, Anne Speckhard and Ahmet Yayla ask the key question: why do people join the group? As importantly, they ask it of the right people: men and women who fought for, or otherwise supported, the so-called Islamic State. These personal accounts of defectors provide invaluable insights for those working to counter the ISIS appeal, and add significantly to our understanding of how the organisation works and where it is most vulnerable. The book shows us that although ISIS is known for its cold-blooded ruthlessness, there are many of its members who are disgusted by its brutality and repelled by its hypocrisy." --**Richard Barrett**, Senior VP at the Soufan Group

"In Her latest book, Dr. Anne Speckhard, with her research partner, Dr. Ahmet Yayla, explores the intersection of psychology and terrorism via their in-depth interviews with ISIS defectors. This is fascinating stuff, in large part, because of Dr. Speckhard's expertise in psychology and her ability to elicit candor from her interview subjects. This book belongs on the shelf of anyone with an interest in the phenomena of ISIS and its legions of young recruits." --**Carol Rollie Flynn**, Former Senior CIA Executive

"Anne Speckhard and Ahmet Yayla's report of their daring and courageous interviews of ISIS defectors exposes important insights into the group's recruitment process that are crucial to countering violent extremism (CVE) work. More importantly, their book illuminates the reasons why these individuals left ISIS. This information not only has implications for interventions designed to prevent individuals from joining ISIS, but also has practical applications for discrediting ISIS by exposing their hypocrisies and failures. This book is a must-read for anyone interested in knowing more about why individuals join and leave terrorist groups, particularly those in the CVE field." --**Sara Zeiger**, Senior Research Analyst, Hedayah, The International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, Abu Dhabi

"The Self-proclaimed Islamic State has dramatically changed the political, economic, and security landscape of the Middle East. Of the many ways to better understand and then combat the group, learning directly from defectors has high value and can provide information and insights unavailable from any other source."

--**Howard J. Shatz**, Senior Economist, RAND Corporation, co-author of *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005-2010*

"Two Intrepid researchers set out to hunt down disenchanted ISIS cadres who dared to speak out and denounce the so-called Islamic State. An extremely timely read put together by action-based researchers in the thick of the battle in this enormous fight against evil!" --**Rita Cosby**, Emmy-Winning TV/Radio Host and Best Selling Author of *Quiet Hero: Secrets From My Father's Past*

"Dr. Anne Speckhard provides psychological insights like we have never seen before. The detailed accounts of real life case studies of violent extremists collected with her research partner, Dr. Ahmet Yayla, transform our understanding from the 'theoretical' to the 'empirical'. This brilliant work is definitely another milestone in the right direction towards an evidenced-based approach to preventing and countering violent extremism." --**Maqsoud Kruse**, Executive Director of Hedayah, The International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, Abu Dhabi

"Nothing Beats the inside view and now you have one--of ISIS. Brace yourselves." --**Mubin Shaikh**, Islamic Radicalization and Counterterrorism Expert, coauthor of *Undercover Jihadi: Inside the Toronto 18*

"Anne and I have known each other for many years and frequently exchanged views on a wide variety of terrorism-related topics. To date, there are some reports, articles and interviews with ISIS defectors, but none

to the extent of Dr. Speckhard and Dr. Yayla's research detailed in *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*. In the last year, Anne has travelled the world to identify, locate, gain access, understand and interview returned or defective terrorists, amongst others in Belgian cities such as Brussels and Antwerp. This book, ISIS Defectors, describes a large number of valuable cases, which provide unique insights--amongst others the ISIS defectors' call not to join them--to policy makers, prevention workers and operational members of the police, intelligence and security services, working in the domains of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism. This book is a must read!" --**Stephan Van Hauwe**, Head of Security and Operations, Antwerp World Diamond Centre

"Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla have given us one of the best--if not THE best--look into the twisted world of ISIS/Daesh, detailing the process of these interviewees' recruitment, fighting, torture and brutality, eventual disillusionment and attempts at defection. It should be critical material for everyone responsible for addressing the threats posed by this group and its advocates; and important educational material for use in fighting against their efforts to recruit more vulnerable individuals to their cause. The authors are to be commended for their work." --**Dr. Alistair D. Edgar**, Executive Director, Academic Council on the UN System, Associate Professor of Political Science, Wilfrid Laurier University

From the Author

**"When I am sitting alone, it comes to me, this picture of the person who was executed and I get frightened, I think inside me, there is terror."**

**-Bint Aisha, ISIS Defector**

### **Prologue -They Risked Their Lives to Speak**

They've been radicalized and battle hardened. They know what it feels like to decapitate a fellow human. They've seen women and children strap on vests and blow themselves up for the cause. And they've risked their lives to escape.

*ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate* breaks new ground, detailing the stories and reflections of dozens of men, women and even children who joined the ISIS jihad, but became so disgusted and disillusioned, they defected.

With unprecedented access, from September 2015 to May 2016, the ISIS Defectors Interview Project conducted in-depth interviews that include thirty Syrian ISIS defectors who successfully escaped ISIS and are currently hiding out in Turkey (fighters, wives of ISIS fighters, and even children who joined ISIS); two European returnees whose defections are unclear; six parents of Europeans who went to Syria to fight--some are still alive and inside ISIS and some are dead.

Each in-depth interview (some that took up to five hours) is a window into ISIS reality in full-living horror. From motivations to joining; the manipulation of children and their use as suicide bombers; the treatment of women; ISIS' sex trade; finances through seizures, taxation, oil sales and sex slaves; unexpected allegiances among political enemies; the killing of Sunni Muslims; mental health consequences and more, we have gathered stories, photos, and videos that are remarkably consistent and have never been seen before now.

ISIS is the most powerful, ruthless and well-funded terrorist group in recent history. Since its 2014 claim of establishing a "Caliphate", ISIS has unleashed an unprecedented and prolific social media recruiting drive that has attracted up to 30,000 foreign fighters from more than one hundred countries--at times drawing a flow of 1500 foreign fighters per month.

Both the CIA Director, John Brennan, and former Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) Director, LTG Mike Flynn, warned after the deadly 2015 Paris attacks that these brutal killings were a sign of things to come. FBI director, James Comey, has confirmed that there are over one thousand active ISIS investigations in the U.S., across all fifty states. Though it appears that ISIS did not directly command the San Bernardino, California terrorist killers, one of them had pledged her bayat (allegiance) to ISIS before carrying out their attack. We know that ISIS orchestrated the Paris and Brussels bombings, and inspired the Orlando dance club massacre, attacks that occurred during the time we were conducting our interviews.

While a political solution in the war-torn area of Syria and Iraq is a necessary precondition to the total defeat of ISIS, given the nature of the proxy war that ISIS represents, and the complex web of regional actors that profit from the actions of ISIS, that's not a likely outcome in the near future. Military actions can degrade the group and its ability to recruit and finance itself, but ISIS is so embedded in civilian areas that the collateral damage of military strikes will likely fuel more terrorism rather than curb it. And it will send terrorist cells underground.

Thus, discrediting the group's ideology is essential to stopping its online recruitment.

We believe that disillusioned ISIS defectors who tell their authentic stories about life inside the Islamic State are the most influential tool to counter ISIS' robust propaganda and prevent others from joining. ISIS produces thousands of slick recruiting videos, memes and tweets. For this reason, most of our interviews have been recorded on broadcast quality video with the interviewee's permission. We are packaging these into short video clips, memes, written and audio stories to feed onto the Internet and social media, to counter and compete head-on with ISIS's successful and (as of yet) unchallenged online campaign. Some of the photos and links to our video clips are included in this book. More can be found at the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism's website, ICSVE.org. (We warn you, some are very graphic.)

The defectors undertook a gravely dangerous journey to defect from ISIS and most have risked their lives to speak to us. All have willingly given us cautionary statements for Westerners and others who might be considering joining ISIS. We will use these statements, alongside their first-person accounts of life inside ISIS, to discredit the terrorist group from the inside.

For our part, this work did not come without its own dangers to us--from personal threats from ISIS inside southern Turkey where the bulk of these interviews took place to narrowly missing ISIS attacks in Belgium.

We are not journalists. We are academics and security experts, with additional expertise in psychology and law enforcement. We have published scientific papers and written books on terrorism primarily for scholarly consumption (many of which can be found on our website). This project and resulting book and videos, partly self-funded and partly funded by a donor who wishes to remain anonymous, are meant to be both useful to scholars as well as accessible to general readers.

*ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate* is a true life narrative of our journey, and the face-to-face meetings with those who have been inside the most brutal terrorist group in recent history. We have changed the names of all those who need to hide their identities, and withheld or changed identifying information to prevent ISIS from hunting them down for revenge. Though edited to avoid redundancy, we were struck by the remarkably consistent interview answers and information provided throughout the thirty-two defector interviews. As a trauma psychologist, I also saw clear posttraumatic reactions to recalling events they lived under ISIS.

Anne Speckhard, Ph.D.

Ahmet S. Yayla, Ph.D.

International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE)

From the Inside Flap

First Published 2016

By Advances Press, LLC

McLean, VA

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Editor -Susan K Barnett, impact-communications.com

Cover Design- Jessica Speckhard, SpeckhardSavc.com

Book Publicist - Susan K Barnett, impact-communications.com

Cover photo courtesy of Islamic State

Interior Photos courtesy of ISIS Defectors and Islamic State

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2016944462

ISBN 978-1-935866-71-8- ISIS Defectors - Hardcover

ISBN 978-1-935866-72-5- ISIS Defectors -e-pub

## **Users Review**

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#### **Christina Evert:**

The ability that you get from ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate could be the more deep you rooting the information that hide into the words the more you get considering reading it. It does not mean that this book is hard to comprehend but ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate giving you joy feeling of reading. The article author conveys their point in particular way that can be understood simply by anyone who read it because the author of this e-book is well-known enough. This kind of book also makes your own vocabulary increase well. So it is easy to understand then can go together with you, both in printed or e-book style are available. We suggest you for having this ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate instantly.

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**Fred Garza:**

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