

Alba Sotorra in Association with MetFilm
present



THE RETURN: LIFE AFTER ISIS

A feature documentary by Alba Sotorra Clua

90 min. | Spain, UK | 2021



World Sales
MetFilm Sales
Vesna Cudic - vesna@metfilm.co.uk
+44 20 8280 9117

Festivals
MetFilm Sales
Ella Pham - ella@metfilm.co.uk
+44 20 8280 9117

LOGLINE

Shamima Begum (UK) and Hoda Muthana (US) made it into worldwide headlines when they left their countries as teenagers to join ISIS. Now they want to return but their countries don't want them back.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

A unique access portrait of a group of Western women who devoted their young lives to ISIS, but who now want to be given the chance to start over back home in the West. Among them, probably the most famous British recruit Shamima Begum, who fled the country when she was 15, and Hoda Muthana from USA who allegedly incited her followers on Twitter to support the Islamic State. Universally reviled by the media, these women now tell their stories for the very first time.

LONG SYNOPSIS

THE RETURN: LIFE AFTER ISIS is a feature documentary that paints an intimate yet candid portrait of a group of Western women who devoted their young lives to ISIS, but who now want to be given the chance to rebuild their lives back at home. Generally reviled by a hostile media around the world, these women have granted unique access to director Alba Sotorra in an attempt to have their voices heard.

Shamima Begum (UK) and Hoda Muthana (US) made worldwide headlines when they left their countries as teenagers to join ISIS. Now, after the fall of ISIS, they are among hundreds of Western women and children being held in detention camps in northern Syria, unable to return home. None of their countries of origin want them back and in some cases, like Shamima's, they have been stripped of the citizenship — a ruling her lawyers are challenging.

While the world sees the women as a threat, Sevinaz, a local Kurdish woman who is among the team overseeing the camps, is more forgiving. She runs a writing workshop in the camp, which gives Shamima and Hoda the chance to share their stories. Over time, the women grow in confidence and open up about their personal journeys: why they were attracted to ISIS in the first place, the traumas they faced while living under the ISIS regime, and their fears and hopes for the future.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In October 2017 I was at the frontlines of the war against ISIS in Raqqa, at that time the capital of the Islamic State. The city was besieged by the US-led coalition and Kurdish forces. The sound of the bombs was hair-raising, I could feel them in my chest. A group of civilians fleeing the air-shelling arrived at our position. Among them there was a young mother holding her child, they were covered in dust. When I got closer, I realized that her son was dead. I hugged her. That was the first day I cried for our enemies.

I had been following the war against ISIS from the Kurdish front since 2015 for my latest film *COMMANDER ARIAN*, which followed the story of a women's commando who fought to drive ISIS from their territory. I saw only a small part of the horrors and crimes that ISIS committed, and I will never be able to erase them from my mind: dozens of bodies piled up in schools, hundreds of families screaming in pain, thousands and thousands of graves of young male and female Kurdish fighters in brand-new graveyards. For me, ISIS was the personification of evil, something to hate and destroy. But that day in Raqqa I saw the human face of ISIS for the first time. Then I felt the need to make this movie.

I started filming "The Return: Life after ISIS" in March 2019, when ISIS was militarily defeated by the US-led coalition and Kurdish forces in their last stronghold in Baghouz. The aftermath was devastating: thousands of women and children of more than 50 nationalities with nowhere to go. Internationally, a heated debate aroused over whether or not former ISIS militants should be allowed to return home. The overwhelmed Kurdish authorities improvised detention camps, waiting for international governments to decide the fate of their outcasted citizens. Thanks to the ties I forged with the Kurdish administration after years of filming at their frontlines, I was granted unprecedented access to one of the detention camps.

For two years I have been following the stories of the women who have made headlines around the world: the English Shamima Begum, who left London for Syria at the age of 15, the American Hoda Muthana, mentioned by Trump in a tweet about why she should not be allowed to return to the United States, the Canadian Kimberly Polman, the Dutch Nawal and Hafida and the German Ouidad. The stories of their struggle to return and the public debate they have sparked are intertwined with their emotional accounts of the horrors they lived through under ISIS. Their situation has been — and will be for the foreseeable future — very broadly debated on media all around the world, with special focus on the UK and the US.

The filming process was emotionally challenging: we were an all-female crew and half of us were young Kurdish women who had lost family and friends in the fight against ISIS. I myself have lost friends in the war. The first days were tense, but as time passed and we began to feel each other, the walls of fear and pain fell to make room for an honest dialogue that created a very special bond between the film crew and our protagonists. It was a cathartic process for all of us that challenged the views and preconceptions we had of each other. We were all women who shared hurts and we realized that blaming each other was foolish and would only lead to more pain. The only way out was to try to leave the hatred behind and start over, with compassion, forgiveness and understanding.

THE RETURN: LIFE AFTER ISIS takes a very intimate approach to this public debate, thanks to our unique access to women and their stories, challenging the viewer to look at this reality from a different perspective. We believe that the film has great potential to become an agent of change, to reframe conversations around this controversial topic and to foster dialogue, understanding and peace.

— Alba Sotorra

MAIN PROTAGONISTS

SHAMIMA BEGUM, 21, UK

Shamima Begum made worldwide headlines when, at the age of 15, she left the UK with two teenage friends to join ISIS. Four years later, having lost three children to disease and malnutrition, she surrendered to the coalition forces and is now held in a detention camp in Northern Syria. In 2019, the UK revoked her British nationality —on the grounds she could obtain Bengali nationality because of her parents' ascendance. Her family has started a legal battle against the Home Office to defend her right to enter the UK to appeal the deprivation of her nationality. They are currently expecting the Supreme Court's judgement.

HODA MUTHANA, 24, USA

Hoda Muthana was 20 when she left the US to join ISIS in November 2014. Her name reached worldwide headlines when her Twitter feed filled up with tweets advocating for terror attacks against civilians and encouraging people to travel to Syria to support ISIS. In January 2019, she surrendered to coalition forces with her son Adam, born inside the so-called Caliphate. They have since been denied entry to the US; the government claims she is not, and never has been, a US citizen. They are now held in a detention camp in Northern Syria trying to appeal these claims. In January 2021, the Court of Appeals ruled against her, upholding the district court's decision that denies her citizenship claim.

FILMMAKERS BIO

ALBA SOTORRA – Director and Producer

Alba Sotorra Clua is an independent filmmaker and producer, the founder of the Barcelona-based production company Alba Sotorra S.L.

Alba has worked in Syria, Afghanistan, Korea, Bosnia, Cuba, the US, Guatemala, England, Iran, Pakistan, Puerto Rico, and Qatar, and has lived long periods in the Middle East. Her films have premiered at such international festivals as HotDocs, Shanghai International Film Festival, Karlovy Vary, and Seminci. Her projects include the documentary feature film *Game Over* (2015), which received the VIII Gaudí Award from the Catalan Film Academy and *Comandante Arian* (2018), nominated for the Gaudí Awards for Best Documentary in 2019.

VESNA CUDIC – Producer

Vesna is a filmmaker and a sales agent, currently running MetFilm Sales, an international sales company, based in London's Ealing Studios and part of MetFilm group. Prior to joining MetFilm in 2017, Vesna headed Dogwoof's international sales arm since its inception in 2011, representing such films as *Blackfish*, *Weiner*, *Cartel Land*, and *Life Animated*. Since joining MetFilm, Vesna has built a strong sales slate, which includes Sundance 2021 competition title *Misha and The Wolves*, which she executive produced, Sundance 2020 Audience Award winner *The Reason I Jump*, Sundance and Berlinale 2019 entry *Shooting the Mafia*, and the Emmy-nominated *The Oslo Diaries*. She has executive produced MetFilm's Netflix hit *Last Breath*, and award-winning documentaries *The Changin' Times of Ike White* by Dan Vernon, Teresa Griffiths' *Capturing Lee Miller*, Shosh Shlam & Hilla Medalia's *Leftover Women*, and Giedre Zickyte's *The Jump*. As a filmmaker, Vesna trained at the NFTS and is the winner of RTS and multiple film festival awards.

SAM COLLYNS – Executive Producer

Sam is a multi-award winning Executive Producer and Director whose career has spanned 20 years at the BBC and a further ten in the independent sector. His recent credits include *Escape from ISIS*, winner of an International Emmy; *Shame of the Catholic Church*, winner of a BAFTA for best current affairs film; and *Secret Iraq*, winner of a Grierson award for best international documentary. His film *UN Sex Abuse Scandal* won an RFK award and was nominated for an Emmy.

Sam has made a broad range of current affairs investigations and contemporary history documentaries for all of the UK's main channels — as well as for international broadcasters such as PBS Frontline, ZDF/ARTE, Al Jazeera, and ABC Australia.

MICHAEL NOLLET – Editor

Michael has been shaping documentaries for 20 years. Most recently, his editing work won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Documentary Short for *The Nightcrawlers*, and he has been personally nominated for Best Editing (Television Awards, *No Fire Zone*) and nominated twice for Best Use of Footage at the Focal International Awards (*Building Jerusalem & Windscale: A Nuclear Disaster*). Michael started out assisting in the drama cutting rooms of Michael Winterbottom, Ridley Scott and Andrea Arnold and has also taught documentary editing in Moscow. He also works as consultant editor.

PRODUCTION COMPANIES BIO

ALBA SOTORRA CINEMA PRODUCTIONS

Alba Sotorra Cinema Productions is a production company based in Barcelona, specialized in the production of feature films for cinema, television and VOD platforms internationally. With a team exclusively formed by women, we tell stories with social and political commitment to present-time topics, that move us because of their genuine and risky essence.

We have produced 14 titles, among them, the documentary “Commander Arian” (2018) and the Kurdish-Spanish film “The end will be spectacular” (2020). We currently have 9 projects in development. We have generated international impact through the presence of our films at Class A film festivals, such as Hot Docs and Karlovy Vary, and other high-profile film festivals such as Rotterdam, Sheffield or Shanghai. We have experience in international co-productions, having co-produced with Germany, France, Qatar, China, Syria's Kurdistan, Iraq, and most recently with Afghanistan. We have a solid relationship with Spanish and EU film funds and TV broadcasters.

MET FILM

Based in London’s Ealing Studios, MetFilm comprises of MetFilm Sales, MetFilm Production and MetFilm School. MetFilm Sales and MetFilm Production operate both independently and interdependently, working hand in hand with filmmakers to provide them with a complete journey under one roof – from development and production to marketing and distribution. MetFilm Sales specializes in international sales of documentary features and series. Our slate includes Sundance 2021 competition title *Misha and The Wolves*, Sundance 2020 Audience Award Winner *The Reason I Jump*, Sundance & Berlinale 2019 title *Shooting the Mafia*, Emmy 2019 nominated *The Oslo Diaries*, and a streaming hit of 2019, *Last Breath*.

CREDITS

Directed by ALBA SOTORRA CLUA

Producers

Alba Sotorra Clua
Vesna Cudic
Carles Torras

Executive Producers

Alba Sotorra Clua
Vesna Cudic
Sam Collyns
Poppy Dixon (Sky)
Jack Oliver (Sky)
Jordi Ambros (TVC)

Editor

Michael Nollet
Xavi Carrasco

Screenwriters

Júlia Parés
Alba Sotorra Clua

DOP

Lara Vilanova
Gris Jordana
Núria Roldós

Music Composers

Mehmud Berazi
Josefina Rozenwasser

Direct sound

Coni Docolomansky
Denis Darwish
Nadja Darwish
Àlex Albors
Anna Rajadell

Sound Design

Jordi Ribas

With the support of

Film Komina Rojava
Creative Europe - MEDIA Programme of the European Union

Institut Català de les Empreses Culturals (ICEC) - Generalitat de Catalunya
Sky TV
TV3
Premis Laya