

Lt Yulia Mykytenko on losses on the battlefield and in the political arena. Page 10

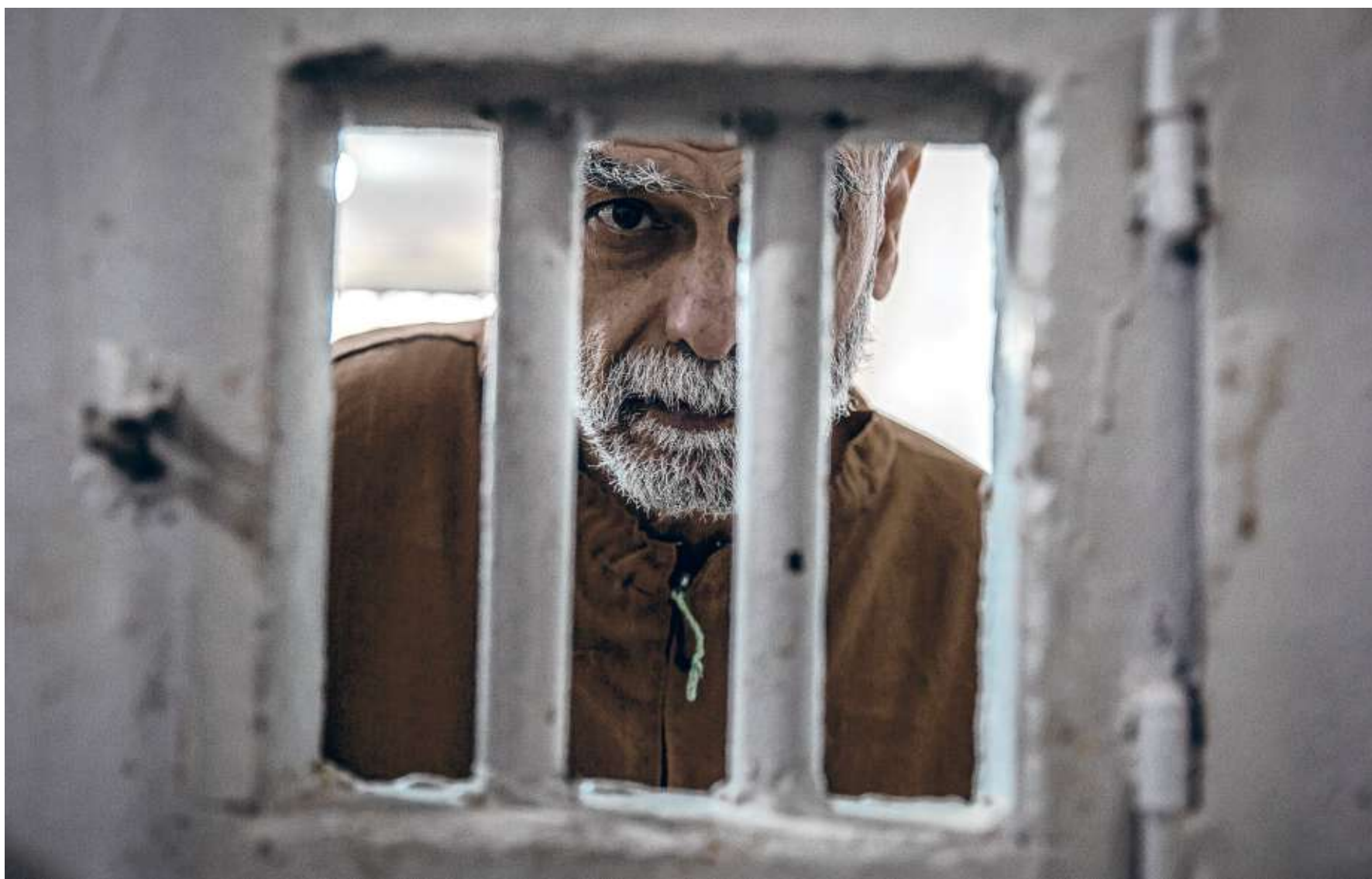
Sarah Moss on policing of the English language. Page 18

Why is Ireland ranked as the loneliest country in Europe? Page 14



THE IRISH TIMES WEEKEND

Saturday, March 1st, 2025



‘GUANTÁNAMO ON STEROIDS’

A rare look inside a detention centre for suspected Islamic State members in northeast Syria where some 4,500 people, of 46 different nationalities, are being held without charge or trial and have been mostly incommunicado for years

BY SALLY HAYDEN

'GUANTÁNAMO ON STEROIDS' INSIDE AN ISIS JAIL IN SYRIA

Panorama prison in the northern city of Hasaka is only one of many detention centres across the region where tens of thousands of people accused of affiliation with Islamic State are held without charge or trial

By Sally Hayden

The guards line the corridor, numbers emblazoned in black lettering on each grey cell door behind them. They wear balaclavas and have thick batons hanging from their hips. Five, six, 14, 24: the cell numbers climb. A heavy metal gate is unbolted, then a hatch, revealing a pungent smell and an unexpected view. It is a rare glimpse at the environment that thousands of men accused of affiliation with the so-called Islamic State, or Daesh, have been disappeared into in northeast Syria.

Panorama prison in the northern Syrian city of Hasaka is only one of many detention facilities across the region, where tens of thousands of people accused of affiliation with Islamic State, also known as Isis, have been held, following the collapse of their

so-called caliphate. The sites include “closed” camps, mostly for women and children, and so-called rehabilitation centres for boys authorities say are at risk of becoming the “next generation” of Islamic State.

Panorama prison contains the “most dangerous” fighters, an administrator tells me – the people who stuck with the group until its last stand in Baghouz in 2019. To enter, we pass a military vehicle with an anti-aircraft gun on it; anti-blast barricades; multiple gates; and barbed wire curled above barricades.

Prison administrators, who asked not to be identified for their own safety, say there are 4,500 detainees in the prison at the moment, of 46 different nationalities. They have been mostly incommunicado for years, without charge or trial.

“Northeast Syria is like Guantánamo on steroids. It’s a place of absolute lawlessness because there’s no legal framework justifying [imprisoning] these men, whatever they are alleged to have done,” says Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, the former UN special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, when I speak to her later.

Administrators claimed there were no minors in the prison, though a report by Ní Aoláin found there were 500 being held there in October 2023. Someone else who worked there recently told me he interacted with underage boys being held there.

I was not given a full tour of the prison complex, but I was told I could speak to two detainees through a

■ Detainees pictured in a cell in Panorama prison in Hasaka, Syria.

Cover photograph: Zakaria Mohammed Ismail, in his late 50s from Gaza, says he stays sane by thinking about his family.

Photographs: Sally Hayden

hatch in their cell door. There was a list of preconditions, including that I was forbidden to ask how they were being treated or who else was in the cell with them.

Looking through the first hatch, I make out about 14 people. The men are barefoot, dressed in short-sleeve brown T-shirts and matching trousers that expose their ankles. There appears to be one thin mattress per person, with one open toilet and shower at the back. Their hair is newly shorn. Plastic cups dot the ground, and there is what looks like a big bowl to hold food. One man is hunched over, eating from a tupperware container.

Someone steps forward to speak to me, his face half hidden, his British accent a shock. He introduces himself as Ibrahim, a 30-year-old from Leicester, and I later determine this to be





Ibrahim Ageed. News reports said the medical student was 20 or 21 when he travelled to Syria in June 2015, with his brother, Mohamed. They made the trip a fortnight after Islamic State released a propaganda video showing a British doctor urging Muslims with medical skills to join them.

As many as 22 British medics from Ageed's university in Khartoum travelled to Syria, the Times of London reported, with the BBC calling them the "single largest UK group known to have joined IS". It was a time when the Islamic State's atrocities were already widely known, such as the beheading of journalist James Foley and other western hostages the previous year.

Ageed says he wanted "to provide aid for the injured". There was a "strong media campaign" at the time that "had an affect on me". He be-

lieved "people were suffering", they "need help", they were "dying". When he got there, he says, he worked in a hospital overwhelmed by injuries from bombings and war. He says most prisoners realise "what they did" is "not the way they should have acted", but he would not take responsibility for everything Islamic State did.

"Isis had their reasons to do what they did. I'm responsible for my own actions only."

As Islamic State fell, he was arrested in 2019, attempting to escape to Turkey. Since then, he tells me, he has had no access to a lawyer, no contact with his relatives, and no communication with his embassy. Prison guards, administrators and his fellow prisoners looked on as we spoke.

Ageed's government may not have

I was forbidden to ask how they were being treated or who else was in the cell with them

communicated with him, but it is playing a role in his detention. Amnesty International said that the UK government provided more than £15 million (€18.09 million) in funding to expand Panorama prison, which was built in a project managed by the US-led international coalition. The Irish Times sent a detailed list of questions to the UK Foreign Office and received this statement in response: "Ensuring the safety of the UK is our top priority. All requests for UK consular assistance from Syria are considered on a case-by-case basis, taking into account all relevant circumstances, including, but not limited to, national security."

Another condition of the interviews was that I could not tell detainees details about the outside world. This included the news that Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which evolved from Islamic

State's Islamist rival Jabhat al-Nusra, had led a rebel coalition forcing the fall of the Assad regime. Panorama prison administrators believed learning this fact would give detainees morale, prompting them to riot. It also meant that other details, such as the destruction of Gaza over the past 17 months, were deemed unmentionable.

This is uncomfortable while talking to Zakaria Mohammed Ismail, a thin, grey-haired man in his late 50s from Gaza, who says he once ran a restaurant in northern Germany. He says he was on a trip between Turkey and Gaza when he met a Syrian who described "problems" and asked for assistance.

"I went in and then didn't leave. I didn't join [Islamic State] officially, I was just helping," he says. Ismail says

his family had followed him there: his son was later killed in a bombing and he says he has no contact with the rest now. He calls himself a prisoner of war. “I’ve spent enough time in prison and that has to be my punishment.” He is not willing to say whether he regretted it.

He says he would like to go back to Germany, or Gaza, or “any safe place”. To stay sane, “I think about my family and children, going home, having a normal life.”

In Iraq and Syria, Islamic State was largely defeated by a US-led coalition, though the group – and its ideology – continues to have a global presence, particularly in parts of Africa. While there have been various attacks across Europe in the past year, with similarities to the horrific ones that occurred when Islamic State was at its height, most have not been found to have direct links to the group and its offshoots.

Islamic State did claim responsibility for an attack in Solingen, Germany last August, during which three people were stabbed to death and eight injured. It also claimed responsibility for attacks elsewhere, including in Russia, Oman and Iran, while an Islamic State flag was found in the vehicle used to ram into partygoers in New Orleans on New Year’s Day this year.

In Syria, the group could be again gaining ground. One respected analyst calculated that Islamic State carried out almost 700 attacks there last year.

Yet Islamic State is still very much a European problem. As it expanded its territory amid the chaos of Syria’s war, foreign fighters – including those home-grown in western countries – flooded in, calling the journey making “hijrah”, meaning pilgrimage. About 30,000 foreign fighters were estimated to be in Syria by September 2015, coming from more than 100 countries, including about 5,000 from the European Union.

Now, many of those states are accused of not repatriating their citizens, keen to avoid the risk of further attacks or a domestic political backlash, instead leaving Syrians – who mostly did not choose for them to come in the first place – grappling with what to do next. Some, like the UK and Australia, have even stripped detainees of citizenship.

Critics accuse northeast Syria’s Kurdish-led de facto autonomous administration of using these detainees as an “insurance policy” to ensure international support while fending off opponents, particularly Turkey. That includes US troops stationed in Syria’s northeast, though new president Donald Trump is threatening to withdraw them.

But all officials to whom I spoke said they were adamant they would like to have these people off their hands. Without repatriation, they see the only option as the establishment of an international court where detainees could be put on trial, invoking images of Nuremberg, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda or the Special Court for Sierra Leone. This



would be good for victims and most notably end what has become a legal black hole, they say.

In the meantime, authorities in Syria say prisons are key to whether Islamic State resurges. Prisons have also been a focus of Islamic State’s own propaganda, with assassinated leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi emphasising the need to “tear down the walls” in his final recording back in 2019. The prison complex I visited was attacked in January 2022, with Islamic State fighters using a truck bombing to blast a hole in an outer wall, beginning a 10-day battle in which they managed to take control of sections for days. Hundreds of people were killed and an unknown number escaped.

■ **Top: guards stand outside the cells in Panorama prison. Above: Ibrahim Ageed from Leicester in England travelled to Syria to work under the so-called Islamic State in 2015, and has been locked up since 2019.**
Photographs: Sally Hayden

During a late-night meeting at a military base in the city of Raqqa, a city once the capital of Islamic State’s caliphate, Farhad Shami, the head of media for the Kurdish-led, US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), says Islamic State still has “very smart people” who are “trying to take advantage of what’s happening” in the northeast, where the SDF is fighting Turkish-backed forces, and in Damascus, with the fall of the regime.

He says the SDF continues to act against Islamic State. “Yesterday, the SDF dismantled a cell with seven members. Two blew themselves up. They were planning an attack on the prison,” he says.

In the days after my visit, an SDF of-

ficial says another attempt was foiled.

Without any legal process, it is difficult to say what is supposed to happen to the detainees, other than waiting for them to die. And, despite the eldest being in his 50s, according to administrators, death seems to be occurring at an alarming rate.

A tuberculosis outbreak has been ongoing in Panorama prison for years. Amnesty International said it was causing on average the deaths of one or two detainees every week there in 2023. The human rights organisation said authorities told its staff, in March 2024, that “nearly 600 male detainees” had died as a result of tuberculosis and other diseases since the facility was established.

When Ní Aoláin visited in 2023, “starvation was rife”, she observes, “and starvation, combined with TB, is a death sentence in a place where nobody has any legal process”.

During my visit, an administrator says “that’s correct” when I ask if many detainees had died from tuberculosis, and “no answer” when I request the exact figure. The cells I saw appeared far less crowded than photos documenting prison cells five years ago, though that could be for a number of reasons. The men did appear to be better fed. I received no official comment on where the dead were buried.

While administrators told me that when a foreigner dies, they inform the US-led coalition which should pass that information on to their country, Ní Aoláin suggests that “these men, they’re effectively disappeared. [Many of their families] have had no confirmation if their family member is alive or dead: that, under internation-



al law, is an enforced disappearance.”

In Raqqa, I met a 40-year-old Syrian woman who suspects her husband has been dead since 2022. He was a detained Islamic State member from Saudi Arabia whom she married 11 years ago. In his absence, she supports both their children alone through a desert-making business.

An international court “has to be here because we have the victims, the documents, and also we have the criminals”, says Shami.

“Of course we support this idea because there are many foreigners here in the prison, there is no solution for them,” agrees a prison administrator, who says they have gathered all the evidence needed to ensure convictions.

But Ní Aoláin says she doubts that for various reasons, calling the idea of an international court a “pink elephant” or “like the emperor’s new clothes”.

“Everybody knows there’s not going to be any trials. It’s a way to sort of implicitly justify detention, holding out something that is so unrealistic and unlikely politically, to make it look like there’s a rationale for justifying detention, when, in fact, as a legal matter, there’s no rationale . . . because they haven’t had any process.”

She says at a time when the US president, for example, is imposing sanctions on the International Criminal Court (ICC), appetite for more international courts is effectively non-existent. The ICC itself has said it does not have jurisdiction over many Islamic State leaders, with Ní Aoláin noting that Syria is not a party to the ICC so its involvement would require a UN Security Council resolution or referral.

Alongside that, “one of the problems for the international community



is you cannot run international crimes against people who’ve been tortured, the definition of which includes systematic starvation and untreated exposure to TB”, she says. This means a “catch 22” has been created, she says. “If you’ve held thousands of men [experiencing] torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment under international law, you may be stopped from trial.”

She accuses the international community of “playing a role in this by failing to address the totality of the detention situation properly”, including by declining to take back their own nationals. This is “particularly egregious when you have a coalition which in-

■ **Detainees in a cell in Panorama prison (top) and a guard outside the cells (above).**

Photographs: Sally Hayden

cludes many democratic states who are enabling the non-lawful confinement of people”, she says.

Ní Aoláin was referring to the Global Coalition against Daesh, with which SDF officials repeatedly say they work in tandem. It lists 87 members on its website, including Ireland. The coalition did not respond to a list of questions by the publication deadline. Neither did the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, including one asking what exactly Ireland’s “partnership” with the coalition entails.

Yet Ní Aoláin says Ireland led by example by bringing back Lisa Smith early on. Former Irish soldier Smith and her young child were repatriated in late 2019, after reportedly coming

into the custody of a Turkish-backed militia. Smith was put on trial in the Special Criminal Court in Dublin in 2022, found guilty of Islamic State membership, and given a 15-month prison sentence.

In a broader sense, Islamic State may have shocked and mobilised the West through its actions, but one of its legacies may be the legal black hole that critics say could fuel recruitment as well as putting the West – and its stated values – to shame.

“There was a global mobilisation about the harm and the threat of [Islamic State],” notes Ní Aoláin. “So states are quite willing to use kinetic force . . . but actually they’re not prepared to address either the conditions on the ground that produce the violence . . . nor is there a willingness to address the rights of victims.”

She says this “short-term thinking” is “a pretty predictable pattern in the way states have addressed the challenge of terrorism . . . And there’s nothing new in that. It’s just that it’s really repeated on a grand scale in north-east Syria.”

When I ask Ageed why he is speaking to me, he says he wanted to send a “live signal” to his family. He has two daughters and a wife now in Germany, and his parents, brother and sisters are in the UK, he says. “I’ve had no news for six years,” he adds.

He, too, wants to be part of a judicial process. “I don’t think it’s appropriate” for there to be none, he says. “It’s a never-ending tunnel.”

Though I had more questions, the conversation ended abruptly with a guard slamming the hatch shut again.

Jiwan Mirzo contributed to this report