

# **Woman Who Joined ISIS Now Wants to Come Back to the U.S.**

*The Wired Word for the Week of March 3, 2019*

## **In the News**

"I'm normally pretty forgiving. However, terrorism is a bridge burner."

Those are words of a resident of Hoover, Alabama, the city Hoda Muthana left in 2014, using funds her parents had provided for college tuition to instead fly to Syria. Following the instructions of an online contact, she then made her way to an area occupied by jihadists and joined ISIS. She was 19 at the time of her departure.

Now, however, Muthana wants to return to the United States, claiming she was a "naive, angry and arrogant" young woman when she left for Syria and that she now deeply regrets her decision. She said that if allowed to return, she is ready to take responsibility for her actions and expects to face jail time. The U.S. Constitution defines only a single crime: "Treason against the United States, shall consist only in levying War against them, or in adhering to their Enemies, giving them Aid and Comfort." (The Constitution also prohibits punishing the children or family of a treasonous person for his or her crimes.) The maximum penalty for treason is death, so there is the possibility (although not probability) that more than jail would be the punishment.

Muthana said that at the time she left to join ISIS, she thought she understood her Muslim beliefs and had stopped listening to her family. That was "a big mistake," she said, and she now feels "tremendous remorse."

Once Muthana was ensconced with ISIS, several tweets from her account and in her name were issued urging people to "spill American blood." She now claims that her phone and twitter account were taken from her and that the radical tweets were written by others.

In Syria, she was married three times to ISIS fighters. The first two were killed in fighting. She is divorced from the third. She has an 18-month-old son, fathered by her second husband. The child is with her now in a Kurdish-run refugee camp in northern Syria.

Quite apart from having to face the U.S. justice system were she to return to America, Muthana faces another hurdle in doing so. The government's position is that she is not a U.S. citizen since at the time of her birth in New Jersey, her father was a Yemeni diplomat, and birthright citizenship is not granted to children born to foreign diplomats who have diplomatic immunity; those children are considered citizens of their parents' home country.

The complication, however, comes because Muthana's father insists he lost his diplomatic job -- and thus his diplomatic immunity -- as the result of the Yemeni civil war in the mid-1990s. The question is exactly when he lost his diplomatic privileges -- and whether that happened before Hoda was born, on October 28, 1994, or after. TWW has been unable to find out when Muthana's father abdicated his diplomatic immunity and applied for permanent immigrant residency (i.e., for a green card). He is now suing the government to allow his daughter's return, but the outcome of the case is not yet known.

There's also the level of animosity that Muthana might face if she were permitted back in.

As George Winslow, the father of a soldier from Hoover killed in Iraq put it on Facebook: "[Lt Cpl] Ryan Winslow wanted to come back to Hoover, too, but thanks to terrorists like this traitor who

decided to join ISIS, he didn't get to. Let her rot in Syria or whatever place she winds up in; better yet, let her rot in Hell."

There are other considerations as well. Muthana is not unique as a "jihadi bride" currently seeking to return to the country she left. At the least, we know of British, Canadian and French jihadi brides who have recently sought to return to the countries they abandoned. Infiltrating prisons has long been a part of jihadi procedure. Prisons are seen as huge recruitment venues. Fighters would be sent to prison for the sole reason of recruiting others. Muthana's comments regarding prison have raised a red flag to some observers.

### **Applying the News Story**

Although there is currently a legal challenge to the refusal to allow Muthana to return to the United States, it cannot be predicted that the challenge will succeed. There is a strong possibility that she will never be able to return and will find that the consequences of her earlier choice to join ISIS are irreversible. Like Edward Snowden, who leaked highly classified information from the National Security Agency, she may become "a person without a country."

Some of us, without any ill intent at all, may have suffered irreversible consequences of an action. For example, has some driving error of ours led to the death of an innocent person, leaving us charged with vehicular manslaughter and riddled with guilt? Has some poorly thought-out choice we made led to someone being seriously injured and us feeling responsible? Has some misunderstanding or misinterpretation of what we were seeing caused us to blame an innocent person for something, resulting in trouble for that person which cannot be undone and us feeling personally ashamed?

Dealing with irreversible consequences of our actions is the subject of this lesson.

### **The Big Questions**

1. Do you think anyone gets through life without at some point wanting a do-over? How often is a true do-over possible?
2. How do you live with difficult consequences that are irreversible?
3. Does the Christian faith help or hinder your efforts to move on after suffering irreversible bad consequences? Explain your answer.
4. What does God's forgiveness through Christ of our sins mean in terms of consequences our sins have set in motion?
5. If one of your children made a terrible choice and engaged in behavior many people consider unforgivable, would you want him or her to be given another chance? Explain your reasoning.

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Matthew 27:3-5**

*When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. (For context, read 27:3-10.)*

Talk about setting irreversible consequences in motion! Here's Judas, after betraying Jesus, trying to undo the harm he has caused, but with no success. Apparently unable to face what he'd done, Judas committed suicide.

We don't know what Judas was thinking when he agreed to betray Jesus. Greed was perhaps involved, as he inquired of the priests what they would give him if he betrayed Jesus (Matthew 26:15). Luke 22:3 and John 13:27 both suggest that he was possessed by Satan. But some later commentators have wondered if Judas, believing Jesus to be the promised Messiah, was trying force Jesus' hand to lead the crowds against Roman rule. If that's true, it's possible that Judas' motive wasn't to hurt Jesus, but to set in motion a messianic revolt.

Whatever Judas was thinking, after Jesus' arrest, it became abundantly clear that his action was going to cost Jesus his life, and Judas scrambled to undo the consequences, but to no avail.

**Questions:** When has something you set in motion accomplished the opposite of what you intended? Did you have a moment like Judas' where you realized things could not be turned around? What did you do next?

### **Acts 22:25**

*But when they had tied him up with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?"* (For context, read 22:22-29.)

Paul's teaching about Jesus had caused a riot, and he was saved from violence only by the intervention of Roman troops. The Roman tribune then ordered Paul to be "examined by flogging" (v. 24), a fate that Paul escaped only by revealing that he was a Roman citizen by birth (v. 28). While it was not common for Hebrews to be granted citizenship, it was not impossible, especially if the Hebrew had done some useful deed for the empire. Since Paul's citizenship was from birth, presumably his father was one upon whom Roman citizenship had been conferred, making his offspring citizens as well.

In any case, appealing to his rights as a citizen, caused the tribune to treat Paul more carefully, indicating that Roman citizenship was a significant standing in that society.

As a citizen, however, Paul had a responsibility to follow the laws of the empire. There is no indication that he failed to do so.

**Questions:** Assuming an investigation of Muthana's father's status (as a diplomat or not) at the time of her birth determines that she is a citizen, should that change whether or not she is allowed to return to America to face justice here? Why or why not? By what responsibilities of citizenship should she be judged?

### **Luke 22:60-62**

*But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.* (For context read 22:54-62.)

### **John 21:17**

*[Jesus] said to [Peter] the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."* (For context, read 21:15-19.)

Peter's statement in the first sentence of the Luke passage above is his third denial of being a follower of Jesus. Then, seeing Jesus, Peter realizes the depth of his failure. The consequences of shame descend on him and he weeps "bitterly."

But that's not the end of Peter's story. The John passage records Jesus' post-resurrection conversation with Peter, where Jesus three times asks Peter if he loves him, and, when Peter insists that he does, receives Jesus' command to "feed" those for whom Jesus came.

Jesus is a giver of second chances.

**Questions:** What is the hope Peter's story provides for us today? What is implied for us by Jesus' questions about Peter's love? What is implied for us about his command to Peter?