

# Taken by ISIS



In the popular new Netflix series *The Girl from Oslo*, Pia (Andrea Berntzen), a Norwegian medical student, is hanging out on the beach in Sinai with two 20-ish Israeli chums, Nadav (Daniel Litman), and his sister Noa (Shira Yosef), when all three are kidnapped by ISIS. The terrorists announce that they'll release their captives only if 13 ISIS members who are being held prisoner – one in Norway, the others in Israel – are released forthwith.

The alternate title of *The Girl from Oslo* is *Bortført*, which in Norwegian means “abducted” but can also be translated as “taken.” But whereas in the movie franchise *Taken* the father, Bryan Mills (Liam Neeson), has a very particular set of skills that make him a nightmare for creeps who kidnap innocents, in this series the victim's parents have, well, other skills that may or may not prove useful under the circumstances. Her father, Karl (Anders T. Andersen), is a powerful judge, and

her mother, Alex (Anneke von der Lippe), is a veteran diplomat who took part in the Oslo Accords in 1993.

Just as Bryan Mills in *Taken* has longtime contacts in Paris, where his daughter has been made off with by wily Albanian gangsters, Alex has her share of contacts in Israel. So as soon as word comes of Pia's abduction, it's Alex who heads off for the Holy Land, hoping that her diplomatic skills – and her impressive Israeli connections – will accomplish more than they did back in the Clinton era.

*The Girl from Oslo* is a Norwegian–Israeli co-production, co-created by Norway's Kyrre Holm Johannessen and Israel's Ronit Weiss-Berkowitz, co-directed by Norway's Stian Kristiansen and Israel's Uri Barbash, and co-written by Johannessen, Weiss-Berkowitz, Stephen Uhlander, and Tal Miller. It's in no fewer than four languages: Norwegian, Hebrew, Arabic, and English (which Alex speaks far more clunkily than one would expect from a Norwegian diplomat with decades of experience).

In Israel, Alex meets the mother of Nadav and Noa, who begs her to do all she can to get Israel and Norway to meet ISIS's demands. Alex also sits down with her old friend Arik (Amos Tamam), an Omar Sharif type who's now the Israeli Minister of Intelligence and, possibly, the next prime minister. The minute their eyes lock, you immediately figure out the secret that Alex will reveal to him shortly and that ends up being crucial to the plot. Alex begs Arik to save Pia, but he says his hands are tied.

Secretly, however, Arik arranges for a team of mercenaries to rescue the captives. (Of course, it fails, since we're only into Episode Two.) For her part, Alex goes to Gaza to seek help from her old friend Layla (Raida Adon), a Palestinian doctor and terrorist widow who, she knows, has ties with Hamas. Back in Oslo, for his part, Karl meets with a Norwegian convert to Islam who seems to have a pipeline to ISIS. Meanwhile, apparently to give Pia some screen time, she

escapes from her captors and runs around the desert for a while – every now and then falling and getting up and whimpering and flailing and so on – before being eventually recaptured.

Anyway, on and on it goes. Ten half-hour episodes, baby. Plenty of plot twists and dramatic confrontations and new characters, including Sayyid Bashir (Jameel Khoury), the wheelchair-bound head of Hamas, who calls ISIS “a lost cause” but won’t use his influence to try to free the hostages because he disapproves of “Muslims against Muslims for the sake of Israelis.” When Alex, introduced to him by Layla, offers to increase Norwegian funding for Hamas if he helps Pia, he angrily accuses her of insulting him.

We also meet Abu Salim (Abhin Galeya), the ISIS prisoner in Oslo, whom Karl takes on as a client, hoping to find a judicial means of obtaining his release. When called a terrorist, Abu Salim sneers, noting that Jews were called terrorists when they fought to create Israel, and that members of the Norwegian resistance were called terrorists by the Nazis. “If only Westerners would see us as we see ourselves,” Abu Salim says. “We just want our world to be the way our God wants it to be.”

Needless to say, we’re supposed to sympathize with Pia and Alex. We don’t. Like other damsels in distress in movies like this (not just Kim, the daughter in *Taken*, but also the senator’s daughter in *Silence of the Lambs*), Pia comes off as whiny and annoying. And Alex? Although she’s supposed to be a Norwegian diplomat, than which there’s no more polished subspecies known to man, she’s terribly unpleasant and pushy – a bitch of the first water. Is this really the intention of the filmmakers? Hard to tell. What’s undeniable is that she’s terribly acted – which is rather odd, given that von der Lippe has had a long and distinguished career in the Oslo theater and has won major film acting awards.

We're also encouraged to warm up to at least some of the terrorists. Arguing on Abu Salim's behalf, Karl tells a colleague that "my terrorist is your freedom fighter." Layla's son Yusuf (Shadi Mar'i), an ISIS member who was involved in the kidnapping of Pia, Nadav, and Noa but who has a change of heart, is presented as a good and gentle-hearted boy whose devotion to his fellow Gazans led him astray. "I'm not a killer," he tells his captors. "I made a mistake." Even Bashir, the Hamas boss, is depicted as a caring leader of his people. "All I want," he tells Layla, "is for the pain of the women of Gaza to stop."

Connect some of the dots in this script and they make a rather unsettling picture. Yes, we're expected to conclude, ISIS is bad news – but it can attract sweet, misguided youths like Yusuf. Yes, some Hamas members are rough characters – but others, like Bashir, are high-minded and noble. Yes, Layla (who's very effectively portrayed by Adon) is a terrorist widow – but she's also a dedicated doctor (apparently a pediatric oncologist), a pillar of virtue, and a voice of truth and wisdom. That Alex, a Norwegian diplomat, considers this terrorist widow a trusted friend is presented matter-of-factly. Then there's the casual reminder that Hamas collects a boatload of cash every year from Norwegian taxpayers.

If you've watched your share of terrorist dramas, you're accustomed to the passionate little set speeches in which the bad guys justify themselves. (In *True Lies*, for example, the Crimson Jihad leader played by Art Malik holds forth as follows: "You have killed our women and children, bombed our cities from afar like cowards, and dare to call us terrorists. But now the oppressed have been given a mighty sword to strike back at their enemies!") Needless to say, there's a good dramatic reason for those speeches. But there's more than the usual amount of that kind of stuff in *The Girl from Oslo*, and one gets the impression that the series creators actually want these vile arguments to be taken seriously.

At the very least, they seem to be thumbing their noses at Benjamin Netanyahu while endorsing the kind of diplomatic cringe one associates with the likes of John Kerry. As one American Jewish website (approvingly) [summed](#) up the series' message: "The key is people over politics, personal relationships forged over food and conversation in a room apart from the media, to determine points of commonality and compromise." Yeah, right. It's not surprising to see Norwegians, with their peace fetishism and post-Lutheran missionary mentality, selling such naive nonsense – but Israelis, who've lived with the bloodthirsty reality of jihad all their lives? Honestly!

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