

# Reception of Returnees: **Reintegration and Rehabilitation after Repatriation from Northeast Syria**

Guidance Document for Emerging Practices  
With Lessons From Sweden



# Abstract

In the aftermath of the fall of ISIS' so-called "caliphate", tens of thousands of children, women, and men with alleged ISIS affiliations from some 60 countries fell under the custody of the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). As an increasing number of states start to heed the call for repatriation of their citizens, countries prepare for the reception of returnees. Upon return, returnees suspected of crimes will be handled by the juridical system, while others must be reintegrated into their societies and, if needed, rehabilitated.

Little research on best practices is available, but lessons can be gleaned from reception practices that have already worked well - and practices that have caused delays in the reintegration and recovery processes, including family separation - across receiving countries.

One example is the case of Sweden's repatriation practices. This report presents unique insights by examining the reception and first year integration of repatriated Swedish citizens. It includes a compilation of the official immediate reception of returning families to Sweden between 2021-2022 - from the families perspective - as well as analysis and recommendations for long-term strategies from a non-governmental frontline practitioner's perspective after following the developments and needs of the returnees.

The findings suggest that the reception of returning families needs to take place in an orderly manner, creating conditions for rehabilitation and reintegration where the children's needs are taken into account and the child's best interest remains the focus. A multi-agency collaboration with relevant authorities and civil society actors (including faith communities) with contextual knowledge and understanding could be one component to successfully plan and implement a holistic reception to assess and meet the needs of the families and prevent radicalization. This would include contributing to the families' access to support aimed at empowering their emotional, psychological, social, and theological resilience.

Reintegration and rehabilitation have a higher likelihood of success when the repatriated individuals, their extended family members, and other key persons are included in the planning. Such involvement keeps families together, avoids new separations, and promotes a favorable psychological recovery. However, separating a child from its caregiver and source of safety increases the risk of reinforcing the child's trauma and creating more anxiety and insecurity in the child. The main goal must be to shield returning children and their families from destructive or violent environments.

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# Introduction

In the aftermath of the fall of ISIS' so-called "caliphate", tens of thousands of children, women, and men with alleged ISIS affiliations from almost 60 states, fell under the custody of the Kurdish-led *Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria* (AANES). Most of the children and women were put in locked, tented detention camps in the desert, while most men and teenage boys were put in prisons. Since the beginning of 2019, the AANES has repeatedly appealed to the international community to repatriate their citizens. By the end of 2022, 38,000 foreign nationals are still being held in dire conditions in the two camps al-Hol and Roj<sup>1</sup>. Approximately 28,000 of the foreigners are from neighboring Iraq, while an estimated 10,000 others are non-Iraqi third-country nationals<sup>2</sup>. While multiple countries have made some repatriation efforts, the vast majority of all foreign detainees remain. However, during late 2022 there have been some new developments. Countries that previously have been reluctant to bring their citizens home, such as France, Australia, and the Netherlands, have started to repatriate children and their mothers<sup>3</sup>.

Upon return, individuals suspected of crimes will be handled by the juridical system, while others must be reintegrated into their societies and, if needed, rehabilitated. It is important to note that there have been different reasons for individuals to travel to Syria and Iraq. While some foreigners traveled with the purpose of fighting or joining a terrorist organisation, this was not the case for everyone who left their

1 *Syria: Dire Conditions for ISIS Suspects' Families*. Human Rights Watch (2019) [hrw.org/news/2019/07/23/syria-dire-conditions-isis-suspects-families](https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/23/syria-dire-conditions-isis-suspects-families)

2 "My Son is Just Another Kid" - Experiences of Children Repatriated from Camps for ISIS Suspects and Their Families in Northeast Syria. Human Rights Watch (2022) [hrw.org/report/2022/11/21/my-son-just-another-kid-experiences-children-repatriated-camps-isis-suspects-and](https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/11/21/my-son-just-another-kid-experiences-children-repatriated-camps-isis-suspects-and)

3 Le Monde on French repatriations: [lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/10/20/with-new-mass-repatriation-of-women-and-children-from-syria-france-breaks-away-from-case-by-case-approach\\_6001172\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/10/20/with-new-mass-repatriation-of-women-and-children-from-syria-france-breaks-away-from-case-by-case-approach_6001172_4.html)

BBC on Australian repatriations: [bbc.com/news/world-australia-63437210](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-63437210)

DW on Dutch repatriations: [dw.com/en/netherlands-to-repatriate-40-women-and-children-from-syria-camps/a-63615355](https://www.dw.com/en/netherlands-to-repatriate-40-women-and-children-from-syria-camps/a-63615355)

home to travel to Syria and Iraq. A large number came with families and friends to start a new life and to stay and live in the conflict zones<sup>4</sup>. There may also be human trafficking cases<sup>5</sup>.

During their time in the so-called “caliphate” and later in detention camps, there has been different levels of exposure to the radical ideology of ISIS. Therefore, there must be individual assessments after repatriation to determine if returnees are engaged in violent extremism. Disengagement from violent extremist groups is often related to engagement in something else. What makes reintegration into society successful is the support of this other engagement<sup>6</sup>.

There is obviously a difference in the management for authorities if the mothers are detained upon arrival and charged for crimes, or if they are not suspected for any crime and able to begin to reintegrate immediately. Legal justice must be applied when appropriate.

Little research is available on best practices and services for reintegrating the returning families, and it is important to state that no guide could offer a one-size-fits-all template, since every individual’s circumstances and challenges are different and distinctive, but there are lessons to be learned from what has worked well - and practices that have caused delays in the reintegration and recovery processes, including family separation - in the reception of countries<sup>7</sup>. One example to examine is the case of Sweden’s repatriation practices.

As a social worker within the non-governmental children’s right organization, *Repatriate the Children - Sweden*<sup>8</sup> - offering the returning families psycho-social support and guidance, the author has unique insight into the reception of the returning families – from the families’ perspective.

### **“The Real Risk is Not Bringing These Children Home, It’s Leaving Them In The Camps”**

This guide is thus written from a frontline practitioner’s perspective and aims to contribute with an example. It is intended to assist relevant decision makers on multiple

4 *Remaining Foreign Fighters: Fear, Misconceptions and Counterproductive Responses*. Landström. Department of Security, Strategy and Leadership, Swedish Defence University, Stockholm, Sweden in *Understanding the Creeping Crises*. Palgrave Macmillan (2021)

*Returning Islamist foreign fighters: Threats and challenges to the west*. Pokalova. Palgrave Macmillan (2020)

Jennie Sivenbring, The Segerstedt Institute, on her research on women traveling from the Gothenburg area: <https://www.dn.se/sverige/forskare-flera-myter-om-de-svenska-is-kvinnorna/>

5 *Trafficked to Syria: British families trafficked to Syria*. Reprieve (2021) [reprieve.org/uk/2021/04/30/trafficked-to-syria/](https://www.reprieve.org/uk/2021/04/30/trafficked-to-syria/)

6 *Managing the Reintegration of Violent Extremists and their Families - A Guide to Proactive Reintegration*. Lowe, Stafford, and Sherburn. Commonwealth Secretariat (2022) [thecommonwealth.org/news/manual-managing-rehabilitation-ex-terrorists-launches-commonwealth-heads](https://www.commonwealth.org/news/manual-managing-rehabilitation-ex-terrorists-launches-commonwealth-heads)

7 Ibid

8 *Repatriate the Children* (RTC) is an international children’s rights organization existing to raise awareness of children being detained in Northeast Syria, and to contribute to knowledge-based decision making where humanitarian principles, rule of law, and global security are united. RTC operates with three autonomous national branches

levels, as well as other frontline workers, with deeper understanding in order to identify appropriate intervention and reintegration support plans. This report includes analysis and suggestions for long-term strategies for the repatriated families to prevent radicalization. **A constant goal must be to shield returning children and their families from destructive or violent environments.**

The result of the report is aimed at displaying to governmental decision makers that repatriation of families from the Northeast Syrian detention camps is possible and necessary. As Jo Becker, Children's Rights Advocacy Director at *Human Rights Watch*, has concluded:

*"The real risk is not bringing these children home, it's leaving them in the camps where they risk death, illness, and recruitment<sup>9</sup>".*

## Methodology

The content of this report includes experiences described by repatriated Swedish women and their family members, public documents from law rulings, as well as social services child protection records including medical records. The child protection records are confidential from the public, but mothers have shared the documentation with the author of this report.

The author has in total met with 23 repatriated Swedish children, and been in close and continuous contact with eight returning women upon their arrival in Sweden. The author has talked to an additional three returning women, and in total has been in contact with some 40 extended family members in Sweden (and more extended family members of other nationals in other countries).

The mothers have consented to participate in this report and have been offered to read the report before publication.

-Denmark, U.S., and Sweden - and has been an integral actor in the first instances of Western countries repatriating their citizens from the camps in Northeast Syria. RTC advocates for the families languishing in these camps, supports the families awaiting their return, and collaborates with the international community to bring these families home.  
[repatriatethechildren.org](http://repatriatethechildren.org)

<sup>9</sup> *Children of Conflict Thrive Back Home After Returning From Syria*. Human Rights Watch report launch on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2022, with Jo Becker, children's rights advocacy director at HRW, Letta Tayler, associate director in the Crisis and Conflict Division at HRW, Farida Deif, Canada Director at HRW, and Beatrice Eriksson, director and social worker of Repatriate the Children - Sweden.  
[twitter.com/ispaces/1ggGvyWRQvWKB](https://twitter.com/ispaces/1ggGvyWRQvWKB)

# The Example of Sweden – a Background

In May 2019, seven small children stranded in al-Hol camp were brought home by their grandfather Patricio Galvéz<sup>10</sup>. The siblings had been left orphaned in Syria after their parents, who had joined the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), were killed in the end battles of the so-called “caliphate”. After a massive campaign from Galvéz, media pressure, help from the AANES, support from the Chilean government and from other actors internationally and locally in Northeast Syria and in the Kurdish Region of Iraq, the Swedish government agreed to give their approval for repatriation of the seven siblings, and Galvéz was able to bring them to safety and a new life in Sweden<sup>11</sup>.

After this, more than two years passed until the Swedish repatriations from the Northeast Syrian camps resumed for other detainees. **In five instances between September 2021 and May 2022, the Swedish government brought 12 women and 23 children to Sweden.**

Before these repatriations, some 150 (of a total of some 300) Swedes who had traveled to Syria and Iraq had already returned to Sweden, leaving the so-called “caliphate” before its collapse in 2019. A majority of them are men. Another six Swedish women and their in total 11 children returned during 2020-2021 after smuggling themselves out of the detention camps. They were later assisted to return to Sweden through

<sup>10</sup> Isabel Coles and Rena Effendi made a trilogy of articles on the topic, published in WSJ: [wsj.com/articles/swede-brings-his-orphaned-grandchildren-home-from-isis-trauma-11558290653](https://www.wsj.com/articles/swede-brings-his-orphaned-grandchildren-home-from-isis-trauma-11558290653)

<sup>11</sup> More on the story and repatriation outcome is described in the report “*Waiting Is Not An Option. A Call for Repatriation of Foreign Citizens in Northeast Syria*.” Repatriate the Children - Sweden (2021) and in multiple media articles found on the RTC Sweden webpage. [repatriatethechildren.org/waiting-is-not-an-option](https://repatriatethechildren.org/waiting-is-not-an-option)  
[repatriatethechildren.org/publications](https://repatriatethechildren.org/publications)



Turkey and Lebanon.

During the time period when Swedes were traveling to Syria and Iraq (2012-2016), Sweden neither had laws in place to prevent people from traveling, nor laws to automatically prosecute those who came back. It was not illegal to join or to be affiliated with a designated terrorist group, though of course other criminal classifications may be relevant for returnees, such as terrorist offenses and war crimes. Few verdicts have yet been announced in Swedish courts regarding returnees from Syria, but there are still examples worth noting. In 2015, two men were convicted for terrorist crime; a woman was convicted for arbitrary conduct with a child in 2021; and another woman was convicted for violation of international law and grave war crimes in 2022<sup>12</sup>.

Of those 12 women repatriated to Sweden from the detention camps in Northeast Syria, 11 women were arrested for questioning on suspicion of, for example, war crimes by Swedish authorities upon their arrival to the country. (One additional woman was not arrested since she was initially brought to Syria as a young child, and not suspected for any crime.) Between a few weeks up to six months later, the suspicions were dropped. The investigation can recommence if new evidence emerges though, since relevant criminal classifications have no statute of limitations. As by the end of 2022, it has not been publicly announced that any investigations regarding these repatriated women would have been recommenced.

Aside from judicial investigations related to suspected crimes, there are other kinds of legislation in the Swedish law that have been used in the cases of the returning families related to child protection and custody issues.

12 Three verdicts announced in Swedish courts regarding returnees from Syria: [france24.com/en/20151214-sweden-sentenced-life-terrorist-syria](https://france24.com/en/20151214-sweden-sentenced-life-terrorist-syria)

[thelocal.se/20210309/sweden-jails-isis-mother-who-took-two-year-old-son-to-syria/](https://thelocal.se/20210309/sweden-jails-isis-mother-who-took-two-year-old-son-to-syria/)

[aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/4/sweden-jails-mother-for-war-crimes-over-minor-fighting-for-isil](https://aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/4/sweden-jails-mother-for-war-crimes-over-minor-fighting-for-isil)

# The Official Immediate Reception of Returnees to Sweden

There has been an official, immediate reception coordinated by authorities, however each authority is independent in their decision making and strategies<sup>13</sup>. When the families arrived back in Sweden, they were met at the airport by multiple authorities, and children and mothers were separated from each other<sup>14</sup>. The police took the mother into custody for interrogation, while the children were taken into the care of the child protection unit of social services, according to a law (*Swedish Care of Young Persons Special Provisions Act*, SFS 1990:52) that can be applied to temporarily remove parental custody of the child<sup>15</sup>. The mothers were detained some 24-48 hours before they were released, though in all but one case they remained separated from their children for weeks up to months (more on that below). **In most cases, these family separations have led to dramatic scenes with children screaming and crying as they were separated from their mothers the moment they landed on Swedish ground.** Child protection records state that one child, after being separated from its mother, expressed concern to the social services that his mother would never find him again.

After this first day upon arrival, the coordinated reception was transmitted into individual handling by the municipalities in the locations where the returnees lived before

13 The governmental Center for Preventing Violent Extremism (CVE) has had a coordinating role in preparing the official reception. [cve.se/](http://cve.se/)

14 These are the families that have been repatriated from the Northeast Syrian detention camps between September 2021 and May 2022. Among these 12 women, 11 of them are mothers, and since their arrival to Sweden, the author has been in close contact with eight of these 11 mothers. The reception of the other three mothers and their experiences is therefore not part of this report.

15 Swedish Care of Young Persons (Special Provisions) Act (SFS 1990:52) [riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/lag-199052-med-sarskilda-bestammelser-om-ward\\_sfs-1990-52](http://riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/lag-199052-med-sarskilda-bestammelser-om-ward_sfs-1990-52)

leaving for Syria. The authority of social services are organized under self-governing municipalities and have confidentiality legislation vis-à-vis each other. As a result of the Swedish structure for child protection procedures and social services practices, the treatment of the returning families has varied case by case.

The temporary removal of parental custody and state protection of a child at risk is a mechanism of the general child-protection system in Sweden and part of an established legal process<sup>16</sup>. It can though be applied without physically separating a child from its primary caregiver. Placing parent and child together in a social institution for observation when there are concerns that a child is at risk is a common practice that creates the conditions for an adequate and thorough assessment of the child's needs, and the mother's parental ability and situation.

After some time, this intervention did however occur with most of the returning families, and lasted anywhere from three months to a year, where the family was observed by social workers, as the mother's custody rights continued to be withheld. Even if several mothers experienced this intervention as being locked up in a prison, due to the strict restrictions where they in some cases were not allowed to go outdoors (and had to stay within some 100 meters from the institution) more than one hour per day, and not allowed to meet with anyone else - not even family members - the mothers were relieved to be able to care for their children again.

But in only one case were children reunited with their mother *immediately* after her release from police detention. In other cases, it took weeks or months - six months in one case - before children were able to rejoin their primary caregiver again. The children, ranging in age from 3 to 10, have reacted strongly to the displacements, responding with stress-related and child psychiatric symptoms after being separated from their mother. Several children have expressed their desire to return to Syria rather than stay in Sweden, since in Syria they had access to their mother. One child said: *"I hate Sweden, because Sweden has stolen my mother from me"*. Several children have shown symptoms of anxiety, depression, decreased appetite, and

16 FAQ om omhändertaganden av barn enligt LVU – på engelska. The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (2018) [socialstyrelsen.se/globalassets/sharepoint-dokument/dokument-webb/ovrigt/faq-swedish-social-services-and-childcare-according-to-the-act-lvu.pdf](https://socialstyrelsen.se/globalassets/sharepoint-dokument/dokument-webb/ovrigt/faq-swedish-social-services-and-childcare-according-to-the-act-lvu.pdf)

sleeping problems after being separated from their mothers, and it has been hard for them to stabilize without their primary caregiver. The children have also expressed confusion of why they are not with their mothers, expressing longing for their mothers and repeated requests to be reunited with their mother. One child used to sit by the door at the foster family's house, saying he is waiting for his mother to come and pick him up. Child protection records read that several times, he tried to escape from the foster family, screaming and crying for his mother and searching for her. There are several documented examples of a range of independent actors related to the Swedish returned children, such as temporary foster parents, medical doctors, child psychiatrists, psychotherapists, and children's legal representatives, who have been opposing the separation between the children and their mothers because of the symptoms displayed by the children.

In a few instances, the social services have not yet, after one year in Sweden, let children be reunited with their mothers - even though the mothers are not suspected of any crime and fully distance themselves from ISIS and violent ideologies. It can be interpreted as a lack of knowledge at the social services on a municipal level on how to value and assess one's ideological residence. It is difficult to know though, whether social services had other reasons for their decisions in these cases of extended separation. However, there is a common practice within social services in Sweden where families can meet under the supervision of social workers, but also this practice has not been applied in one of the cases. The social services has announced to the mother that she will be able to see her children, giving her specific dates, and later postponing even supervised visitation. This kind of treatment from the social services has not only resulted in the continued breach of contact between children and their caregiver, but also, for the mother, in reproduced lack of trust in the authorities.

None of the mothers have questioned that their children would be assessed by the social services child protection unit, or that the *Swedish Care of Young Persons (Special Provisions) Act* would be applied to their cases. Actually, most of them initiated contact themselves with the social services already

from the camp in Northeast Syria, explaining that they understand that their children will be subject to assessment upon arrival, and to say that they will be cooperative for the best interest of their children – but appealing to the social services to not separate the children from their mother, for the sake of the children’s wellbeing after the dire years in Syria.

## **An Examination of The Child Protection Court Rulings**

An examination of the court rulings, which are based on the social services assessments, regarding the returning families shows that there are in general two motives used for the application of the *Swedish Care of Young Persons (Special Provisions) Act*;

1. The mothers are assumed of sympathizing with a terrorist organization, and
2. The mothers are assumed to be failing to care for their children.

These motives used by the courts could be subject to scrutiny, considering the conditions in which these families have lived.

Beginning with the assumption that the mothers are not capable as caregivers for their children. In Syria, the mothers have been the only caregiver and source of safety for their children in an extraordinarily high-threat environment, and there is de facto no one else who has offered the children care. Professionals in Sweden have expressed astonishment over the well-being of returning children<sup>17</sup>. That is an indicator of the mothers parental ability, and this will further be discussed in the concluding chapter of this report. In the assessment of the mother’s judgment and decision making ability, it also needs to be taken into account that regardless of the reason why the mother traveled to Syria some seven or eight years earlier, in all cases except one, this decision was made before the children were even born.

Regarding the assumed allegiance with a terrorist organization, there is a risk of arbitrariness in making the assessment about the mothers’ ideologies, since radicalization assessments are

17 According to several statements found in the social services child protection records.

Another report describing the situation for returning children is the Human Rights Watch report: “My Son is Just Another Kid” - Experiences of Children Repatriated from Camps for ISIS Suspects and Their Families in Northeast Syria by Jo Becker and colleagues (2022). Human Rights Watch found that despite years of detention in life-threatening conditions with insufficient water, fresh food, and health care, and little to no access to education, many of the children have reintegrated smoothly and appear to be adjusting well and performing well in school in their home countries after being repatriated. [hrw.org/news/2022/11/21/many-children-returned-syria-detention-doing-well](https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/21/many-children-returned-syria-detention-doing-well)

complex and requires specialized expertise. If there would have been a nationally coordinated expert function to assess all the returning mothers, this would have increased the conditions for equal assessments, but this has not been the case.

### **The Reception Interlinks With The Swedish Welfare System**

There have been many professionals and authorities involved in coordinating and implementing the immediate reception. The mothers and children are being offered psychological, social, educational and financial support - such as any Swedish citizen in need of any welfare aid. However, for the mothers, key aspects of reintegration - such as joining the workforce, returning to studies, and finding their own place to live, are difficult as they attempt to obtain information on the whereabouts and wellbeing of their children and anxiously anticipate reunification. As the social services in some cases have expressed to mothers that they need to find a job and their own apartment before they can live with their children, the mothers followed the instructions. However, once they are placed with their children at an institution, the social services have in several cases not enabled the mother to work. For the mothers, losing a job opportunity further prolonged the struggle for reintegration into society.

Finally, the mothers have been informed about the possibility to change their name and apply for protected identity, which many of them have done.

### **Exclusion of Extended Family Members in The Reception Causing Grief and Confusion**

Some extended family networks did not see any signs that their family members intended to travel to Syria and were shocked to learn their daughter or son had left for the war zone. Other parents saw signs of radicalization and reached out to multiple Swedish authorities to warn them and ask for help to hinder their family member's intended travel. As it was not illegal to travel to Syria, nor to be affiliated with a designated terrorist group, Swedish authorities could not easily prevent these travels.

When the mothers and children finally have been repatriated to Sweden, often, the extended family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles to the children have not been included in the planning of the reception, with social services postponing family member visitation to even see the children. Some children have not yet, after one year in Sweden, been allowed to meet anyone from their extended family in Sweden, even though these relatives are not involved in violent extremism or other kinds of destructive behavior. This causes additional confusion for the children, who during their time in Syria had been in contact with their extended family members back home in Sweden and expected to see them upon arrival. It has also added to the trauma for the extended family members who have struggled for years and long to receive their children and grandchildren, but have been deprived of any contact upon the return of the family.

### **A Crucial Example of Successful Reintegration**

In one case, the social services in one municipality responded to a request of contact with the extended family members in Sweden in advance of the repatriation. When the mother and her children landed at the airport, the grandmother of the children was included to receive the children and initially stay with them at a social institution while the mother was kept at the police detention for 24 hours. Once the mother was released, she was reunited with her children and the grandmother, and they were allowed to stay together at the institution. This created a sense of psychological and emotional safety for both children and the mother, as well as a sense of inclusion and relief for the grandmother. The legal custody was removed from the mother, while physically the family was placed together. The social services made a comprehensive assessment of the mother, both through psycho-social aspects, parental ability, and also regarding her ideological beliefs. As a result of this, she was provided with a social support function and a mentor. Soon after, other extended family members were included in the planning and contact with the returning family, and the mother and her children were allowed to leave the institution during weekends to be with their family, and to initiate a state of

normality for the children. When the authorities were sure the children were safe and in good care with their mother, she got back the custody of them and the family was allowed to fully leave the institution and start living an independent life. As the authorities were able to build trust with the mother, she has chosen to stay in contact with the support person and mentor from the social services even after she regained custody over her children. Both the children and the mother in this family have recovered well and have quickly been reintegrated. The mother has gotten back to school, and the children have started school for the first time - and are thriving. **This, unfortunately unique, example among the returning families to Sweden shows that it is possible to plan and implement the immediate reception in accordance with the best interests of the child.**



# Analysis: The Importance of Keeping the Family Together Upon Return

The *International Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 9, requests that no child should be separated from its parents, unless it is necessary for the best interests of the child<sup>18</sup>. All interventions carried out by authorities must aim to establish safety and well-being for the children. There must also be a do-no-harm perspective in the decision-making. The interventions should reduce suffering, and create a sense of coherence.

The child's needs, in relation to the mother's parenting ability and situation, must be assessed by competent authorities subject to judicial review. It is reasonable that the authorities create the conditions to be able to observe the interaction between the child and the mother; to see the child's wellbeing and development together with its mother, and how the mother responds to the child's needs.

When the children arrive in the country, everything is new for them; it becomes a crisis-like experience as they are acquainted with a new reality. It is a time when their children would need stability, and their caregiver's support and guidance<sup>19</sup>.

The Swedish child welfare system's stated purpose is to

18 The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by UN General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989 entry into force 2 September 1990, in accordance with article 49: [unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text](https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text)

19 All repatriated children from the families included in this report are below the age of 10 years old.

protect children, work to ensure that children grow up in safe and good conditions, and make decisions or take other measures relating to care or treatment interventions for children. What is best for the child shall be decisive. But in several cases there is concern that the social services' interventions have contributed to an uneasy start for the children in Sweden, and there could be questions of a gap between policy and practice. Despite the need for stability, most of the returning children have been moved multiple times by the social services during their first year in Sweden. From emergency foster placement, to an institution, to another institution, and so on. There are examples of returning children that the authorities have moved between seven different placements since they were repatriated. There are several examples where mothers and extended family members describe how children have had bad experiences in their temporary foster placements and at the institutions. The stories are difficult to verify, even if the perceptions of the children and their families have been documented in the social services child protection records, and/or been told by family members. Although there are no convictions for these offenses, and thus they should be viewed with some caution, it is of relevance to mention the descriptions that have come to light. The examples described include one where a child was placed in a temporary foster family that did not take good care of the child's hygiene, letting him be dirty without cleaning him. Another example describes how children were placed in a temporary foster family where they were emotionally abused and deprived from contact with other siblings despite instructions from the social services that the foster family should promote the relations between the siblings. In a third example, children placed in a social institution said they were bullied by other children, and sad when they were not allowed to be in contact with extended family members to console them. In a fourth example, children expressed that they had experienced some physical abuse by their temporary foster parent. At least two of the institutions where the social services have placed children have been controversial. In one case, the institution had recently been reported to the judicial ombudsman for neglecting children's rights<sup>20</sup>. Another institution was closed down shortly after the social services had placed returning children there. The

20 Case one of institution in controversy: [dagensvimmerby.se/nyheter/e/104583/verksamhet-med-uppdrag-fran-kommunen-anmald-till-jo/?desktop=true](https://www.dagensvimmerby.se/nyheter/e/104583/verksamhet-med-uppdrag-fran-kommunen-anmald-till-jo/?desktop=true)

reason was that another placed child had died in the care of the institution, which was accused of understaffing the business and lacking capacity to care for all children placed<sup>21</sup>.

21 Case two of institution in controversy:  
[svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/aklagarens-besked-om-atal-for-drunknade-5-aringen](https://svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/aklagarens-besked-om-atal-for-drunknade-5-aringen)

Since there is nothing documented about each specific child's condition and situation during the time before they were repatriated to Sweden, it is not possible to officially compare and evaluate the causal factors of the symptoms the children exhibited after the separation from their mothers. However, as mentioned, there are several documented examples of temporary foster parents, medical doctors, child psychiatrists, psychotherapists, and children's legal representatives who have been opposing the separation between the children and their mothers because of the symptoms displayed by the children.

A few examples:

In one case a child had been separated from its mother for several weeks. The child's medical records include the evaluating doctor recommending that contact with the mother should be established as soon as possible for the sake of the well-being of the child. Additionally, a social services child protection record reads that the temporary foster parent requested the child be allowed to meet with his mother, believing it was of utmost importance for him. When the child later was allowed to meet with his mother, even only for a few hours every second week, the temporary foster parent stated improvements in the child's well-being, saying he felt more happy, and stopped crying himself to sleep since he also knew he was going to meet his mother again and this made him calmer.

Shortly after being reunited, the mother noticed that the child had been traumatized by their time apart, and expressed that her child is showing separation anxiety symptoms:

*"He is so scared that we will be separated again, and continuously needs reassurance that I will stay with him. I believe that [the child protection unit at social services] has made his situation worse, but in the belief that they were making it better. The*

*intervention to separate us spurred a behavior and response that would exhibit for any child who would be separated from their caregiver. And then [the child protection unit at social services] used this against me, claiming that it was because of me that my child was showing negative behaviors and signs of trauma. But my child did not have these symptoms before. To me, this is far from acting in the best interest of the child. This is what makes me so sad and angry. Especially when I have been cooperative from the start, and they knew very well how close we are to each other.”*

In another child’s medical record signed by a specialized child psychologist and a licensed psychotherapist, the development of the child is depicted from his arrival in Sweden, during the four months that the child was separated from his mother, and the following two months when the child was reunited with the mother. The statement reads that the child exhibited several serious child psychiatric symptoms during the months the child was separated from his mother. When the child later was reunited with his mother, the evaluating professionals noted that the child’s well-being gradually improved and stabilized. The child psychologist and psychotherapist state that *“the mother has a good ability to meet the needs of her children”,* and that *“it is clear that the mother is the key person for [the child’s] attachment”.* They also state that *“another separation from the mother would have a very serious negative impact on [the child’s] psychological well-being and continued development.”*

In a third example, a child stopped speaking when he was separated from his mother. At first, the temporary foster parents thought he was mute. When he later was reunited with his mother, he started speaking again but with a speech disorder, stuttering. Another few months later, he is successively recovering.

These examples are representative for many of the repatriated children. When the children are reunited with their mothers, who are their primary caregivers, the children begin to recover. Yet the mothers describe how the effects their children suffer from the separation and their time apart.

Encouragingly, the children's separation anxiety seems to ease as time passes. Mothers describe that their children are recovering step by step. One mother says: *"When we had just been reunited, I could not leave my child even for short moments, without her expressing fear that I would not return. Now she has started school and I can also leave her with my mother and it is going well."*

There is much research on psychosocial consequences of serious events and risk indicators of adverse psychological recovery<sup>22</sup>. A basic principle in modern crisis support and psychological first aid is to keep groups and families together and to avoid new separations<sup>23</sup>. **If a child is separated from its caregiver and source of safety, there is an increased risk of reinforcing the child's trauma and creating more anxiety and insecurity in the child.** A family separation is potentially harmful and goes against research on attachment theory and trauma processing, and the child may develop posttraumatic responses<sup>24</sup>.

Obviously, if by remaining with the mother there is a true risk to a child then the child must be protected and an investigation conducted to establish any necessary arrangements for the child's wellbeing. Otherwise, it is difficult to defend from a child protection and child rights perspective that the child should be separated from its primary caregiver and other family members, while being assessed for a long-term solution of the best interest of the child in regards to custody and living arrangements.

In all cases where the children and their mother have been placed together, the social services have had the motives from the court rulings of temporary removal of parental custody refuted, and the family have later been let to continue to live together in their own residence.

A parallel process is to strengthen the pro-social biological network around the child with extended family members and key persons who can be protective factors in the child's life. For some children, it has been comforting to know they have family in their home country who are waiting for them and love them. It would then be counterproductive for the

22 *Kristöd vid allvarlig händelse*. The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (2018) [socialstyrelsen.se/globalassets/sharepoint-dokument/artikelkatalog/ovrigt/2018-10-9.pdf](https://socialstyrelsen.se/globalassets/sharepoint-dokument/artikelkatalog/ovrigt/2018-10-9.pdf)

23 *Psychological First Aid (PFA) Field Operations Guide: 2nd Edition*. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2006) [nctsn.org/resources/psychological-first-aid-pfa-field-operations-guide-2nd-edition](https://nctsn.org/resources/psychological-first-aid-pfa-field-operations-guide-2nd-edition)

24 *Children with Traumatic Separation: Information for Professionals*. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2016) [nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/children\\_with\\_traumatic\\_separation\\_professionals.pdf](https://nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/children_with_traumatic_separation_professionals.pdf)

children's rehabilitation if they are not allowed to meet their family after being repatriated. **For children who have been exposed to severe stress, the risk of future mental health problems can be reduced if the child's environment includes protective factors and the important adults in the child's everyday environment are allowed to create the conditions for recovery through good care and support**<sup>25</sup>. In several cases, the social services have denied children access to their extended family members, citing that the children should not be exposed to too many new contacts. However, at the institutions, there have been several cases of children growing attached to staff that then leave the institution due to staff changes, only then to be exposed to additional staff and additional staff changes.

25 *Psykologens tips till dig som möter barn som flytt till Sverige. Save the Children - Sweden (2016) [raddabarnen.se/rad-och-kunskap/arbetar-med-barn/psykologens-tips-till-dig-som-moter-barn-som-flytt-till-sverige/](https://raddabarnen.se/rad-och-kunskap/arbetar-med-barn/psykologens-tips-till-dig-som-moter-barn-som-flytt-till-sverige/)*

# Long-term Reception Strategies to Prevent Risks of Radicalization

The author's contact with the families during their first year back in Sweden after the repatriation from the Northeast Syrian detention camps has resulted in the following analysis and recommendations for long term reception.

Every returnee must be assessed on a case-by-case basis and their support plan customized to suit their needs - there may be different needs for different individuals depending on what they have experienced and to which life conditions they are returning. However, a national coordination for relevant authorities and frontline practitioners can contribute to a common base of knowledge and contextual understanding of the situation. This can in the next stage contribute to the families being met based on equal treatment in the assessments, even though they have individual situations and may have different needs for interventions.

Some mothers have been subjected to violence and many have lost family members and friends during their time in Syria. **They have all lived in a war zone, and some have seen their children or spouses die. They have lived under psychological stress of trying to survive day by day, fearing for their lives and the lives of their children, and with uncertainty for their future.** Living in danger often means

a loss of sense of security and safety as well as an experience of helplessness and powerlessness over one's life situation. Witnessing the suffering of others combined with feeling helpless and powerless has been shown to be an indicator of later post-traumatic reactions<sup>26</sup>.

Supporting the returnees to reintegrate and, if needed, rehabilitate is a strategy to decrease their vulnerability and to counter the risks of radicalization or other destructive development. The support cannot be forced upon the family, but needs to be based on the mothers will to improve the situation for herself and her children. It must be made easy for the family to receive support - if and when they need it. The support must be flexibly designed based on the families' needs and individual situations. It should include humane support for the families and aim to contribute to their recovery and reintegration in order to work with the reduction of risk factors and with empowering and promoting protective factors.

### **Mentorship and Guidance: Practical Support and Reintegration**

Mentorship supporting individuals as they exit destructive environments is proven to be a productive tactic in Sweden<sup>27</sup>. A mentor's educational background and direct expertise may vary, (e.g., a social worker, an imam, or a psychologist). **Close social support and mentoring for returning mothers can build trust and support the mother's reintegration while creating psychological safety.** Supporting the mother's work toward goals and objectives could help her take steps towards education, employment and pro-social contexts. This could also contribute to her recognition of her ability to take responsibility and move forward in life, empowering her problem-solving skills and reducing the feeling of victimhood. A mentor can be a role model and offer advice, support and guidance to the mother and family based on their needs and situation. A mentor may also work to build trust between the mother and societal institutions so that the mother will seek professional psychological treatment or social support if needed. Another important aim could be to strengthen the mother in her resilience against fake news, and contribute to countering

26 *Krisstöd vid allvarlig händelse*. The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (2018) [socialstyrelsen.se/globalassets/sharepoint-dokument/artikelkatalog/ovrigt/2018-10-9.pdf](https://socialstyrelsen.se/globalassets/sharepoint-dokument/artikelkatalog/ovrigt/2018-10-9.pdf)

27 The non-governmental organization *Flamman Socialt Förebyggande Centrum* and their work called *Safe Space* is an example of a mentorship program where mentors act as role models and coaches who support and guide young people, where the aim is to counter anti-democratic behavior and violent extremism: [flammanmalmo.se/projekt/safe-space/](https://flammanmalmo.se/projekt/safe-space/)



risks of radicalization.

## Mental Health and Psycho-social Support

Developing the mother's sense of agency consists of multiple factors, three of which are an increased sense of meaningfulness, comprehensibility, and manageability of her life. The mother may need support in developing strategies to deal with emotional stress and situations that may arise and may affect her mental health. **The mother should be offered humane, practical, psychological and social support that can help alleviate the consequences of traumatic experiences and help avoid new stresses.** The mother can then develop stability in her well-being, self-worth, self-confidence and self-esteem. This could help the mother in finding strategies to deal with anxiety and various types of dysfunctions that may be present in her life. A support function or mentor may help coordinate and participate in activities together with the family which contributes to the family's experience of a sense of connection to society.

## Existential Health Support and Theological Guidance

**After exposure to the radical ideology of ISIS, some returnees could be in need of support for their existential health as well as theological guidance.** For those considering themselves to be religious or persons of faith, this guidance can contribute to building a stable foundation, which can have an immunizing effect against discrimination, propaganda and future radicalized recruitment.

It is important that the mother sense that her religious beliefs, belonging, and identity are permitted (e.g., she feels she is permitted to be Muslim and Swedish at the same time). It goes without saying that the mothers must be both questioned and scrutinized when they return, after having traveled to live under an area controlled by an extreme terrorist organization embedded in religious terms. But several mothers perceive that they have been exposed to Islamophobic treatment in contact with the authorities, and that they feel that they have been questioned because they are *Muslims*. This could be an indication that more education

is necessary for the receiving authorities for dignified and humane reception practices regarding religious faith, identity and affiliation. If staff confuse Islam with violent extremism, authorities risk contributing to the reproduction of extremists' narrative about authorities, and such perceived or actual discrimination for the individual could, in the worst case, contribute to fueling extremism. It is important that authorities are not contributing to the stigmatization or discrimination of returnees since this can be a push factor for radicalization and drivers of violent extremism<sup>28</sup>. Support and interventions from the authorities, such as the social services and health care sector, as well as from civil society actors, must aim to empower the mother, enabling her recovery and reintegration into society.

28 *Drivers of violent extremism*. UNODC [unodc.org/e4j/en/terrorism/module-2/key-issues/drivers-of-violent-extremism.html](https://unodc.org/e4j/en/terrorism/module-2/key-issues/drivers-of-violent-extremism.html)

29 *Krisstöd vid allvarlig händelse*. The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (2018) [socialstyrelsen.se/globalassets/sharepoint-dokument/artikelkatalog/ovrigt/2018-10-9.pdf](https://socialstyrelsen.se/globalassets/sharepoint-dokument/artikelkatalog/ovrigt/2018-10-9.pdf)

## Promoting Social Cohesion Through Established Support

During their time in Syria, several of the returnees lived together and shared everyday life, helping each other survive challenges and deal with the traumas in the war and later in the camps. In one example, two women and their children shared the same tent during their four years in the detention camp in Northeast Syria, where their children grew up side by side. After their arrival in Sweden, some mothers perceive to have been prohibited by social services from contacting other mothers now repatriated from Syria. **Excluding any case where there is a demonstrated security risk, allowing families with close ties to remain in contact and support each other during the reintegration process can be beneficial for all parties.** As the women return, several of them are being socially isolated and experience loneliness. Research shows that people who have lived under severe stress can benefit from the support of others who have experienced the same trauma<sup>29</sup>. Self-help or support groups have been proven to be of great importance to those affected, as it is only the ones who have endured the same crisis that can understand and fully relate. The authorities should promote this aspect of social cohesion which can have a therapeutic effect and strengthen protective factors for the mother, and by extension for the child.

## To Support the Children is to Support the Network Around the Children

The author has been in contact with some 40 family members of women and men who left Sweden for Syria and Iraq and found that years of lack of dialogue with families has led to a loss of trust in authorities, as well as feelings of powerlessness and need for support.

In their own words<sup>30</sup>:

*“I am completely alone in this. No one has contacted me. I don’t know where to turn. I dare not to tell anyone. I feel so bad.”*

*“Mental illness has increased significantly among us families (...) The information I get [from the camps] crushes me, the only way to try to keep functioning is by suppressing it until something can be done about it. But what can we do? We, as relatives, need support. No one of us has been contacted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or any government agency, health center, etc. No one has reached out. Time has proven there is no help for us.”*

***“You can see my body, physically I am here. But that’s all that’s left of me now, an empty shell.”***

*“I have been on sick leave for several years because of everything that has happened. I can’t sleep at night.”*

Patricio Galvéz, the grandfather of the seven orphans, has said: *“As a relative, you are in a vulnerable position and it is difficult to understand why decisions [to help the children] are not made, and why you do not receive help and information. It would have helped so much. We carry frustration, sadness and worry. An informative communication from authorities in the total crisis would have made the situation more comprehensible and manageable.”*

Patricio Galvéz’s situation as an extended family member of detained children in Northeast Syria is depicted in the documentary *Children of the Enemy*, an insight into the vulnerable situation in which relatives find themselves<sup>31</sup>.

30 The author of this report has been in contact with around 40 extended family members in Sweden, and even more in multiple countries in most continents, since 2019.

31 *Children of the Enemy* (2021) is a documentary by Gorki Glaser-Müller, depicting Patricio Galvéz’ struggle to rescue his seven orphaned grandchildren from Syria. [cinenicfilm.se/children-of-the-enemy/](http://cinenicfilm.se/children-of-the-enemy/)

The situation seems to be particularly difficult for the relatives who have male family members detained in Northeast Syria, as there is even less information about the men, larger stigma, and less advocacy support for repatriation of men. Several families describe how the uncertainty is consuming and affects the family's entire life situation.

Even if the repatriations are a significant relief for extended family members (such as grandparents, uncles and aunts of returning children) they do not automatically move into a state of recovery, but instead they enter a new phase of continued, ongoing crisis and reinforcement of trauma when they are not allowed to meet with their repatriated family members.

Extended family members and other key persons of the returning families should, from an early stage, be involved in the reintegration strategy for returning families. The authorities should also offer the extended family members adequate and relevant information, as well as psycho-social support, as they contribute to an increased recovery for the returning families. The extended family members typically remain in the children's lives long after the interventions from the social services have ended.

### **Civil Society Collaboration: Trust Capital and Complementary Skills**

Civil society actors can build trustworthy relationships with individuals whom the authorities, for various reasons, have difficulty reaching. For individuals involved in violent extremism, the reasons for wanting to leave a destructive environment are rarely ideological, but the desire to leave often arises due to other, more social and practical aspects. The support from the authorities, such as the social services, healthcare, and different kinds of aid and psychological treatments, are vital. **However, authorities have a narrow aperture for implementable mechanisms. Cooperation with civil society is therefore needed in order to fill the gap between support from authorities and the additional needs of the returning families.** A multi-agency collaboration with relevant authorities and civil society actors

(including faith communities) with contextual knowledge and understanding could be one component to successfully plan and implement a holistic reception to assess and meet the needs of the families and prevent radicalization<sup>32</sup>. This would include contributing to the families' access to support aimed at empowering their emotional, psychological, social, and theological resilience. For example, faith-based organizations can offer guidance to a religious faith, identity and belonging.

Without enough pro-social contexts in which to return, as mentioned, some mothers experience loneliness. They experience difficulties creating participation in new pro-social contexts because they live in fear of being identified and stigmatized within society. Civil society can play an important role in its prevention. A holistic reception includes empowering various fields within the individual's social environment, such as family, relationships, work, housing and reintegration into society.

32 The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, highlights an integrated, multidisciplinary and inter-agency approach to reintegration as a good practice, in the assessment of reintegration after repatriations to Uzbekistan. (2022) [ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc4945add1-visit-uzbekistan-report-special-rapporteur-promotion-and](https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc4945add1-visit-uzbekistan-report-special-rapporteur-promotion-and)

# Of Importance to the Swedish Returning Mothers

All mothers participating in this report claim to fully distance themselves from ISIS and violent extreme ideologies, but say they don't know how to prove to the Swedish authorities that they are not radical or sympathizers of ISIS ideology. The mothers claim to have been wanting to return to Sweden, and to have their children grow up in Swedish society, but have not been allowed to leave Syria. It is difficult to determine whether they have had the opportunity to leave Syria earlier, while living under ISIS controlled areas, before being locked up in the AANES controlled detention camps. The mothers themselves state various reasons why they could not leave Syria during their time in the so-called "caliphate", where the main reason is that they did not dare to risk their children's lives in order to try to escape, but instead have made the decision to wait for a controlled exit where the children and the mothers could safely leave Syria. When the families were placed in the detention camps, Roj and al-Hol, which are surrounded by high fences with barbed wire and guarded by the military, it was not possible to leave. They have been detained in these detention camps in Northeast Syria between 3-5 years.

The critical factor for the returning mothers is to be with their

children as they return home. The mothers also describe the extended family members as a necessary component of successful reintegration and allowing their involvement in the children's rehabilitation and reintegration from the start.

The mothers believe preconceived notions and misconceptions have influenced authorities decisions regarding the families in a negative way. Several mothers express how they feel they have not been believed or listened to, and that the social services, for example, have not had knowledge and understanding of the context the family comes from. Mothers perceive that the social services are not realizing that the children's survival and their return to Sweden is because of their mothers. Social services have attributed children's symptoms of trauma and expressions of pain to the mothers, and claimed that they have had a lack of caring capacity. For the mothers, however, it is obvious that these symptoms have begun after the separation between child and mother, and that it is the social services' interventions that has led to the children developing in a negative direction upon arrival in Sweden. Once the children have been reunited with their mothers, they have recovered and are doing better, but the mothers find that the stressful separation has had far-reaching negative consequences and caused harm to the children. The mothers understand that the children need to be subject to child protection assessments upon arrival, and have been consenting to whatever care and interventions the social services has offered. However, the mothers have perceived a gap between the children's and the families' needs, and the interventions carried out by the social services. **A knowledge-based and understanding approach from social services can contribute to accurate interventions anchored in the family's actual needs, rather than notions of what the families need. A solution-focused and inclusive process of the intervention can make a difference.**

Mothers also describe how humane treatment, kindness, and a non-judgemental approach from officials aid the transition. A point of contact at the social service who is available for questions and information, and a mentor and/or support function to turn to are other important components of suc-

cessful reintegration into society. The mothers also suggest an increased equal treatment in handling the reception of the families.



# Conclusions: The Best Interest of the Child as the Guiding Principle

The International Convention of the Rights of the Child requires that in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration<sup>33</sup>. During their time in Syria, the children and their mothers have lived in dire conditions; both from a humanitarian perspective and in terms of safety and security<sup>34</sup>. **The reception of returning families needs to take place in an orderly manner, creating conditions for rehabilitation and reintegration where the children's needs are taken into account and the child's best interests remain the focus.** The child's and mother's needs, risk factors and protective factors must be assessed by competent authorities with a contextual understanding of the family's situation and background.

According to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 24, every child has the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health<sup>35</sup>. Any rehabilitation and support should be designed

33 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) [unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text](https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text)

34 *Waiting Is Not An Option. A Call for Repatriation of Foreign Citizens in Northeast Syria.* Repatriate the Children - Sweden (2021) [repatriatethechildren.org/waiting-is-not-an-option](https://repatriatethechildren.org/waiting-is-not-an-option)

35 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) [unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text](https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text)

from each specific child's needs and promote the safety, dignity, and well-being of the child. If children are involved in having an impact in their own situation, it facilitates their recovery from difficulties, increases their self-esteem, and empowers their own competence.

Experiences from the Swedish case signal that reintegration and rehabilitation have a higher likelihood of success when the repatriated individuals and their families are included in the planning. Such involvement keeps families together, avoids new separations, and promotes a favorable psychological recovery. However, separating a child from its caregiver and source of safety increases the risk of reinforcing the child's trauma and spurring more anxiety and insecurity. In case a joint placement of the child and its caregiver is not possible, it has shown beneficial for the child's well being when regular contact to its mother and any siblings has been facilitated as soon as possible. If appropriate, the child's extended family members should be the first priority of choice for foster care, with support and guidance from relevant support functions from social services.

By the end of 2022, the families that were repatriated from the Northeast Syrian detention camps during 2021-2022 have been back in Sweden for between seven to 15 months. All eight mothers participating in this report have started studying or found a job and are working. For those six mothers who are placed together with their children, these children have integrated step by step. They are in school, have made friends and participate in social activities. Just like any other children, they all have their interests and hobbies. One child loves reading books about Pippi Longstocking and was amazed to visit the child theater to meet with the "real" Pippi. Another child loves singing and writes her own songs, which she teaches her sister to sing along with. Yet another child loves visiting museums. Many of the children are curious to learn and perform well in school. As a grandparent of returned children said: *"It is almost like the children are trying to catch up with everything they have missed. Now they have gotten a new chance in life, and they are surely embracing it."* The children that are back together with their primary caregiver seem to have recovered well and adapted to their new

lives quickly. If one would meet with them at the playground or in their schoolyard, one would never think these are the children that have been brought out of the prison camps. Still, their mothers say the children continue to be affected by their separation when they first returned to Sweden and their time in social-service institutions. Mothers give examples of their children panicking when the mother is out of sight or waking in the middle of the night to make sure the mother is still there. In several cases, children are having flashbacks from the stress of separation and still ask, "What happened - why did they take you, mom?"

An analysis of the positive reintegration outcomes suggests the important role the mothers played in not only protecting their children from threats during their time in the war and later in the detention camps, but despite the hard circumstances, have also created possibilities for their children to develop during their time in Syria. Upon their arrival to Sweden, the children's chance to live in safety and dignity with their mothers, to be able to begin school and get to know friends among classmates, to have access to nutritious food and pro-social activities can be viewed as elements for the well-being of the child. This, along with the support from extended family and other key persons in the children's life, as well as professionals, provides the children and their mothers protection and a stable foundation for recovery and reintegration.

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Att få komma hem - Ett stödmaterial till socialtjänsten i de kommuner som har tagit emot, eller väntar på att ta emot, familjer från interneringsläger i nordöstra Syrien.

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