THE COLLAPSE OF AL HOL CAMP

The Human Rights, Child Protection, and Security Costs of Non-Repatriation of Third-Country Nationals in Syria - and the Way Forward.

RTC SWEDEN AND RTC DENMARK

REPATRIATE THE CHILDREN, MAY 2026

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Executive Summary

Thousands of individuals held in arbitrary and unlawful detention in northeast Syria, or displaced from such detention, are subject to a sustained and preventable crisis affecting human rights, security, and due process. For years, they have been deprived of liberty without charge or trial. The vast majority are children, many of whom have spent most or all of their lives in conditions of indefinite detention amounting to torture.

The disorderly collapse of Al Hol camp in January 2026 demonstrates that such a detention system is not only unlawful and harmful, but fundamentally unsustainable. The consequences for the individuals detained were immediate and severe, both during the camp's existence and when it collapsed.

Developments in Syria since December 2024, and especially since January 2026, have altered the context in which these individuals are held. While this development has increased the risks of trafficking, exploitation, and ongoing forms of detention, it has also created new opportunities to resolve the situation. The shift from control by non-state actors to increasing control by internationally recognised state authorities in Syria may facilitate access to consular services, enable more direct engagement by states of origin with their nationals, and create clearer pathways for the deportation / repatriation of third-country nationals. These developments underscore both the urgency of action and the feasibility of solutions.

Continued non-repatriation perpetuates harm and generational trauma. These individuals are exposed to regular violence, deprivation, lack of education and healthcare, and heightened risks of exploitation, human trafficking and recruitment to non-state armed groups. Unlawful detention and abandonment do not dismantle ISIS's legacy; they preserve the very social and psychological conditions in which violent extremism regenerates and feed into extremist propaganda's foundational narratives. From a counterterrorism perspective, keeping individuals unlawfully detained under catastrophic circumstances is not risk reduction. It is risk production.

A child rights approach leaves little ambiguity. Children must be treated first and foremost as victims of war, and as rights-holders entitled to protection,

recovery, family life, education, and development. All decisions must be guided by the best interests of the child and the “do no harm” principle, ensuring that neither action nor inaction exposes them to further harm or risk. Unnecessary separation of children from their primary caregivers must be avoided.

Repatriation of third-country nationals constitutes the only viable and durable solution to this crisis. Conducted under controlled protocols, it offers a concrete opportunity for states to support individuals’ disengagement from the previous life in the so-called ISIS caliphate and to protect children from growing up in environments shaped by violent extremist influence.

Managed returns restore state responsibility and enable controlled, lawful responses: child protection and other safeguarding measures, documentation, individual risk assessments, reintegration and rehabilitation support, and, where appropriate, criminal investigation and accountability in accordance with due process. Justice for victims of ISIS must be delivered. Adults suspected of crimes must be investigated and tried, as appropriate, and non-suspects released.

There is clear evidence that this approach works. Children who are repatriated with their primary caregivers and supported through coordinated, rights-based frameworks show strong prospects for recovery and reintegration. Systems already exist to manage return in a way that protects both the families and the public.

The required actions are concrete and achievable. States must urgently identify their nationals and those for whom they bear responsibility; facilitate safe and dignified repatriation, and ensure access to healthcare, education, psychosocial support, and long-term reintegration pathways.

Responses must be coordinated, multi-agency, and grounded in the best interests of the child. Coordination across government agencies, civil society, including faith leaders, and local communities is essential to provide holistic, effective, and dignified support.

The situation in Syria remains volatile, but the obligations of states are constant. A rights-based response is the most effective way to uphold fundamental rights, prevent further cycles of harm, and strengthen long-term security and stability.

Background: The Arbitrary Detention of Children and Their Families in Northeast Syria After the Fall of the So-Called ISIS Caliphate

Since 2019, tens of thousands of individuals, including a significant number of third-country nationals, have been held in the custody of the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), later named the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), and its military coalition, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), following ISIS'[1] territorial defeat in Syria. However, years before the group's defeat in 2019, during the ISIS occupation of areas of Syria, individuals and families who either surrendered to or were captured by the SDF were arbitrarily detained.

Men were placed in makeshift detention facilities, while women and children were primarily held in tented camps, including Al Hol and Roj. Adolescent boys were separated from their families and placed in sites referred to as "rehabilitation centers," such as Houri and Orkesh, which in practice functioned as youth detention facilities. **All of them were subjected to arbitrary, unlawful, and effectively indeterminate detention without due process.**

A complex combination of push and pull factors contributed to thousands of third-country nationals leaving their countries and travelling to Syria and ending up in the so-called caliphate established by the terrorist organisation ISIS. Regardless of the underlying reasons for their presence in the region, many of those who survived the war were subsequently detained. The population of the detention camps included women who had differing levels of awareness and/or involvement with ISIS and other armed groups. This includes both those who demonstrated ideological commitment and support for ISIS, helping to facilitate and perpetrate some of its greatest atrocities, as well as those who

1 ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), also commonly referred to as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), or IS (Islamic State)

arrived in Syria through human trafficking, coercion, grooming, or other forms of manipulation or misinformation.[2] Given this complexity, it is inaccurate to generalise or stereotype this population. There are those who said they thought they would come and live in a "utopia", and be part of creating a new kind of society, while upon arrival being met with the reality; "a society built on oppression, brutality and dominated by the will of men".[3] Others came to Syria through circumstance; some simply followed husbands or other male family members, or sought to escape abusive lives at home.[4] The camp populations have been heterogeneous and diverse, comprising alleged ISIS fighters' family members, individuals with alleged ISIS affiliation, victims of ISIS, including Yazidi women and children who were held captive following the terrorist group's attacks on their communities in 2014.[5] The detention has also included individuals with no known links to ISIS, for example individuals placed there solely on the basis of having lived in areas previously under ISIS control, as well as individuals who had been in Al Hol prior to 2019 due to earlier displacement.[6]

Developments in Northeast Syria Following the Fall of the Assad Regime

Following the fall of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024, the Syrian transitional government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa (hereinafter referred to as the Syrian government) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) entered into an agreement on 10 March 2025 aimed at integrating the SDF/DAANES-controlled civilian and military institutions with the state.[7] This agreement was intended to be implemented before the end of 2025, however, the political transition to unify Syria and consolidate armed groups under government control failed to materialize within that timeframe.[8] In early January 2026, hostilities broke out in Aleppo, rapidly escalating and spreading to northeast Syria, the geographical

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2 Cook, Joana., & Vale, Gina. *A, From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the women and minors of Islamic State.* International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (2018) http://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/from-daesh-to-diaspora-tracing-the-women-and-minors-of-islamic-st/

3 Baker, Josh, *I'm Not a Monster, Series 2: The Shamima Begum Story.* BBC Radio 5 Live (2023) https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p08yblkf

4 *Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS.* International Crisis Group (18 November 2019) https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/middle-east-north-africa/syria/208-women-and-children-first-repatriating-westerners-affiliated-isis

5 Eriksson, Beatrice, *Mass detention in Syria's northeast: A crisis of global responsibility.* L'Orient Today (5 February 2026) https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1494022/mass-detention-in-syrias-northeast-a-crisis-of-global-responsibility.html

6 Fuglei, Carly, *Understanding the lives of the women, men and children of Al Hol camp.* UN Women (2025) https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/Understanding-the-lives-of-the-women-men-and-children-of-Al-Hol-camp-en.pdf

7 Taha, Jaidaa and AlaaElDin, Menna, *Syria reaches deal to integrate SDF within state institutions, presidency says.* Reuters (10 March 2025) https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-reaches-deal-integrate-sdf-within-state-institutions-presidency-says-2025-03-10/

8 United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,* UN Doc A/HRC/61/62 (2026) https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session61/advance-version/a-hrc-61-62-auv.pdf

area where Roj and Al Hol camps were located.[9] The Syrian government forces carried out a military advance and asserted control over large areas, resulting in the SDF losing much of the territory the group held for years.[10] Ceasefire attempts between the Syrian government and the SDF were made several times in January, but it was not until a further agreement on 30 January 2026, that the large-scale hostilities halted.[11] This agreement included the gradual integration of the SDF military and DAANES administrative structures into the Syrian government.

During the same period, the United States and the Global Coalition against ISIS, initiated and conducted transfers of men and boys, detained on the basis of alleged ISIS affiliation, to Iraq. These transfers were justified by reference to security concerns relating to the detention facilities, including reports of instability, risks of prison breaches (and actual prison escapes that occured), and the risk that detainees could be released or escape in the context of shifting territorial control.[12] Within a matter of weeks, approximately 5,700 male individuals were transferred from northeast Syria to Iraq.[13] While attention was directed towards these transfers, developments in Al Hol camp and Roj camp were unfolding in parallel, with limited oversight or monitoring. During the fighting, turmoil and mass transfers of men to Iraq, the situation for the individuals in Roj and Al Hol camps massively changed.

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9 *Ibrahim Olabi on the situation in the Middle East*. United Nations Web TV (13 February 2026) https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k10/k10fojll71

10 Lister, Charles, *Integration or Conflict in Northeastern Syria? Ten Key Points to Consider*. Middle East Institute (29 January 2026) https://mei.edu/publication/integration-or-conflict-in-northeastern-syria-ten-key-points-to-consider/

11 United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, UN Doc A/HRC/61/62 (2026) https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session61/advance-version/a-hrc-61-62-auv.pdf

12 Charbord, Anne and Ní Aoláin, Fionnuala, *A Legal Black Hole: Does Iraq Have the Right to Detain Prisoners Transferred from Syria?* Just Security (11 February 2026) https://www.justsecurity.org/131218/legal-black-hole-detainees-iraq-syria/

13 *U.S. Forces Complete Mission in Syria to Transfer ISIS Detainees to Iraq*. U.S. Central Command (13 February 2026) https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/4406293/us-forces-complete-mission-in-syria-to-transfer-isis-detainees-to-iraq/

The Collapse of Al Hol Camp and the Dispersal of Its Population

On 20 January 2026, the SDF released a press statement saying *"Due to the international indifference [..] our forces were compelled to withdraw from Al Hol Camp"*.[14] The precise sequence of events following the withdrawal of the SDF from Al Hol camp is subject to differing accounts. **What is clear is that amid the shifts in control over the area, a chaotic situation developed in which individuals either left the camp or were transferred elsewhere, through a series of irregular and uncoordinated movements over the following days and weeks**.[15]

From 1 February 2026, RTC began to receive reports from women in Roj who had been in contact with individuals previously held in Al Hol, indicating that the camp had been largely emptied, aside from a couple of thousands of Iraqi citizens remaining, and around seven third-country national families.

One woman in Roj camp told RTC: *"I want to inform you that all [..] women from Al-Hol camp have reportedly been transferred to Idlib. They were told that this transfer "had to happen." At the moment, they are not responding to messages. I also saw a public post shared by someone in Idlib stating that these women have arrived there. In the same post, people are being asked to donate money for their accommodation, clothing, food, and other basic needs. I am very concerned and would like to ask whether this is something the international community is aware of, and whether such transfers are lawful and appropriate. There are also rumors that women from Roj camp may be transferred next. This worries me greatly. I do not want to live in Idlib. I want repatriation/deportation to my home country, not relocation to another conflict area."*

The first public reporting on the situation emerged approximately ten days later when Fionnuala Ní Aoláin and Anne Charbord for Just Security reported that

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14 Gritten, David, *New ceasefire in Syria after Kurdish-led forces pull out of camp for IS families*. BBC (20 January 2026) https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4g39w8k8zwo

15 Christou, William, *'Open the gates': riots, fires and escape attempts as Syrian army takes over IS camp*. The Guardian (2026-01-22) https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/22/open-the-gates-riots-fires-and-escape-attempts-as-syrian-army-takes-over-is-camp

"the notorious Annex[16] *of Al Hol camp exists no more"*[17], and Middle East Eye reported that third-country nationals were no longer present in Al Hol camp.[18]

Before this event, the UN Refugee Agency assessed the population in Al Hol camp to 23,411 individuals; many of them Syrian nationals, others of Iraqi origin, and around 6,300 individuals with origins of more than 40 other countries.[19]

When the Syrian government later commented on Al Hol camp, a spokesperson from the Ministry of Interior described the humanitarian situation inside the camp as *"shocking by all standards,"* citing harsh living conditions in a semi-desert area lacking adequate infrastructure and stating that conditions contradict *"basic principles of justice and human rights."*[20]

In RTC's contact with a small number of European women previously held in Al Hol camp, from February onwards, RTC were informed that following the withdrawal of SDF and in circumstances where security control was absent, large groups of individuals left the camp in a rapid and uncoordinated manner. Some individuals were able to walk out of the official gates, while others could get out of the camp through holes in the fences.[21] Some describe it as if they were able to leave, others that they were taken from the camp and transported to different locations across Syria, including areas such as Idlib and Deir ez-Zor.[22]

Al Hol camp did not simply open or transition in an orderly manner. Rather, accounts indicate that it collapsed under chaotic and uncoordinated circumstances. Accounts describe a process in which individuals left Al Hol camp under urgent and unstructured conditions and were subsequently dispersed to multiple locations, where they seem to remain under varying forms of control

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16 The Annex was the section of Al Hol camp holding third country nationals.

17 Charbord, Anne and Ní Aoláin, Fionnuala, *A Legal Black Hole: Does Iraq Have the Right to Detain Prisoners Transferred from Syria?* Just Security (11 February 2026) https://www.justsecurity.org/131218/legal-black-hole-detainees-iraq-syria/

18 van Wilgenburg, Wladimir, *Syria's al-Hol camp emptied of foreigners, sources say*. Middle East Eye (12 February 2026) https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syrias-al-hol-camp-emptied-foreigners-sources-say

19 The UN Refugee Agency, *"Al Hol Camp Statistical Profile in NES 12/30/2025"* in the Lead Inspector General (Lead IG) report to Congress on Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) (2026-02-17) www.media.defense.gov/2026/Feb/19/2003876973/-1/-1/1/OPERATION%20INHERENT%20RESOLVE_2026.PDF

20 Jan, Atoun, *Syrian Interior Ministry says it monitoring irregular departures from al-Hawl Camp*. North Press Agency (25 February 2026) www.npasyria.com/en/135836/

21 Christou, William, *NGOs sound alarm as foreign families flee camp holding suspected IS members*. The Guardian (13 February 2026) www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/13/ngos-sound-alarm-as-families-flee-islamic-state-camp

22 Salhani, Justin and Adler, Nils, *Exodus of ISIL-linked detainees from Syria camp sparks security concerns*. Al Jazeera (17 February 2026) www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/17/exodus-of-isil-linked-detainees-from-syria-camp-sparks-security-concerns

rather than in conditions of full freedom.[23] The accounts further indicate that, following their irregular departure from the camp, some individuals have been held in conditions in their new locations where their freedom of movement appears to remain restricted to varying degrees, under the control of actors whose identity and legal authority remain unclear.[24] **It is reported that some individuals are under uncertainty as to whether they have been liberated or kidnapped.** One European woman initially informed RTC that she had been *"liberated by the Syrian Army"*, as this was her understanding at the time. However, in contact with her a few weeks later, she stated that she had come to realise that this was not the case. She explained that those currently holding her had instructed her that, if she were to encounter Syrian Army personnel, she should hide in order not to be discovered. She reported that she does not know who currently has custody of her. According to her account, she was staying in an apartment together with other women, awaiting further instructions regarding her situation, although she had not been informed of what the next steps will be.

Individuals previously held in al Hol camp have been released from one form of detention but may instead have been subjected to forms of situations that may amount to abduction or trafficking.[25] What happened to the approximately 6,300 third-country nationals, representing more than 40 nationalities, previously held in Al Hol camp could not be determined.

The U.S. Special Envoy to Syria stated that the role of the SDF as the *primary anti-ISIS force on the ground had "largely expired,"* and that the Syrian government is *"willing and positioned to take over security responsibilities,"* including responsibility for detention facilities holding individuals associated with Islamic State.[26]

After the vast majority of individuals in Al Hol camp had either left or been transferred, a small number of families remained in the camp. The Syrian authorities subsequently made the decision to transfer those remaining individuals to

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23 Coles, Isabel, *The Syrian prison collapse that has scattered Isis families to the wind.* The Observer (26 February 2026) www.observer.co.uk/news/international/article/the-syrian-prison-collapse-that-has-scattered-isis-families-to-the-wind

24 Jalabi, Raya, *How thousands of people linked to Isis went missing.* Financial Times (19 February 2026) www.ft.com/content/8c7b09f2-1ce6-4363-9e8a-b36d031b3c7c

25 Eriksson, Beatrice, *Syria's Al-Hol Camp Is Closed, But Another Remains, as Does International Responsibility.* Just Security (27 February 2026) www.justsecurity.org/132656/syria-al-hol-closed-international-responsibility/

26 Ward, Euan, Rubin, Alissa J., Goldbaum, Christina and Schmitt, Eric, U.S. *Shifts Away From Kurdish-Led Forces in Fight Against ISIS.* The New York Times (20 January 2026) www.nytimes.com/2026/01/20/world/middleeast/syria-isis-camp-al-hol-kurds.html

another locked camp, close to Akhtarin in Aleppo governorate.

In February 2026, Al Hol camp was officially closed by the Syrian government[27], who later declared Al Hol camp and its surroundings a fully closed military zone.[28]

27 Alsayed, Ghaith, *A notorious camp in Syria tied to alleged IS families is emptied as final convoy departs.* Associated Press (22 February 2026) www.apnews.com/article/syria-camp-alhol-islamic-state-emptied-6527081227b4aec678b58355a3c8c3b3

28 *Syria declares Al-Hol camp 'closed military zone'.* Middle East Monitor (6 April 2026) www.middleeastmonitor.com/20260406-syria-declares-al-hol-camp-closed-military-zone/

Developments in Roj Camp, January - May 2026: “Fear, Panic, Exhaustion”

In parallel with the collapse of Al Hol camp, developments also unfolded in Roj camp. Reports indicate that, following the escalation of hostilities in northeast Syria in January 2026, the humanitarian and security situation within Roj camp, controlled and administrated by the SDF/DAANES, deteriorated.

Even before the 2026 developments, the population in Roj camp were subject to “gross and systematic human rights violations”.[29] The humanitarian situation in SDF/DAANES controlled and administrated camps in northeastern Syria, including Roj, has been described by UN experts as exposing detainees to conditions that may amount to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.[30] In a report by *Amnesty International*, several women described being subjected to acts of gender-based violence amounting to torture or other forms of ill-treatment in detention facilities.[31] Since 2019, there have been recurring reports of violations against individuals in Roj camp.[32] Also in RTC´s follow-up with women who have been repatriated to multiple countries, and in some cases after accessing professional psychological support, many have provided accounts of ill-treatment experienced in Roj camp, matters that they were too afraid to disclose while still detained in the camp.

During and in the aftermath of the January 2026 developments, reports of violations towards the detainees in Roj camp increased significantly in both frequency and severity. RTC has remained in contact with a number of women in Roj camp, representing multiple nationalities and residing in different sections of the camp. In several cases, these are long-standing contacts maintained over

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29 Ní Aoláin, Fionnuala, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism*. United Nations General Assembly, UN Doc A/78/520 (10 October 2023) www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a78520-report-special-rapporteur-promotion-and-protection-human-rights

30 *Syria: UN experts urge 57 States to repatriate women and children from squalid camps*. OHCH (8 February 2021) www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/02/syria-un-experts-urge-57-states-repatriate-women-and-children-squalid-camps?utm_source=chatgpt.com

31 *Aftermath: Injustice, Torture and Death in Detention in North-East Syria*. Amnesty International (2024) www.amnesty.org.uk/latest/syria-tens-thousands-marooned-detention-camps-and-facilities-where-death-torture-and/

32 Adler, Nils, *To love a child who joined ISIS*. Al Jazeera English (19 May 2025) www.aljazeera.com/features/long-form/2025/5/19/a-fathers-fight-to-find-out-what-happened-to-his-son-who-joined-isis

several years. While it is not possible to independently verify these accounts, the volume, consistency, and specificity of the testimonies received, together with long-term engagement with the individuals concerned, allow for the identification of recurring patterns in the information reported. In parallel, RTC has also received a high volume of highly concerning reports from relatives of individuals across multiple countries, describing how their family members in Roj are experiencing increased violence and degrading treatment.

During the fighting in northeast Syria in January 2026, it is reported that the SDF placed sandbags around Roj camp, indicating that the area could become a location for armed confrontation. This was described as extremely distressing for the families in the camp, who are confined and unable to leave. **One woman in Roj camp shared an image of her children's arms on which she had written the contact details of relatives in their country of origin, in case the family were to be separated as a result of attacks and forced separation or death.** At the same time, the presence of external actors in the camp decreased as international non-governmental organisations evacuated their staff, resulting in fewer witnesses to violations in the camp and a reduction in external protection mechanisms. During this time, individuals in Roj camp have described the situation as escalating in a way that has caused them fear, panic, and exhaustion - more on this in following chapters of this report.

According to these accounts, personnel affiliated with the DAANES and SDF, including security, military, and camp administration staff (hereafter referred to as 'self-administration personnel'), maintained a continuous presence both inside and outside the camp and were alleged to have been responsible for threats, violence, and degrading treatment. Women in Roj camp reported that during the January escalations, many individuals were afraid to leave their tents, because self-administration personnel had threatened to kill individuals who did. Testimonies describe incidents in which self-administration personnel have discharged firearms within the camp, which, although not reported to have caused physical injury, has had a significant psychological impact on the population. Women have further reported threats directed at families, including death threats, and accounts of weapons being pointed at individuals. There are testimonies of forced separation between family members; instances where mothers were taken to detention facilities and returned days or weeks later, or that this happened to children. Upon their return, some have reported having

been subjected to physical abuse.[33] In some cases, it has been reported that financial demands have been made in exchange for the return of children taken from their mothers.[34] There have been reports that detainees have had cold water poured over them as a way of abusing them, to make them freeze further in the cold winter conditions. There have been reports that representatives from the camp administration have told detainees things such as: *"There are no human rights"* and *"See if your God can save you now."* One woman detained in Roj camp described the situation as follows, making the connection between the SDF loss of territorial control in northeast Syria and the increased violence in the camp: ***"It is like they are taking out all of their frustration on us, and we cannot do anything to protect ourselves."*** In addition, women have reported repeated raids within the camp, especially during night, with self-administration personnel looting and confiscation of money and other possessions. Access to basic services were also affected, including decrease in electricity and fuel, during winter conditions that posed additional challenges, with reports of insufficient access to fuel for heating. Food availability was described as limited, with goods available only in small quantities and at significantly increased prices, making them unaffordable for many individuals.

Arbitrary Detention and Living Conditions in Roj Camp

The arbitrary detention of women and children in Roj camp in northeastern Syria is both large in scale and prolonged in duration.

Similar to how it used to be in Al Hol camp, individuals in Roj camp are not permitted to leave the camp and are confined there against their will. **The individuals in Roj camp are held in extrajudicial detention without having been subject to any criminal proceedings or trial, their situation represents *"an indefensible legal black hole"*.**[35]

Conditions in Roj camp constitute an open-air detention environment. The individuals held there have been exposed to prolonged periods of armed conflict, displacement, violence, and other potentially traumatic events that may have

33 *Northeast Syria: Camp Closures Leave Thousands Stranded.* Human Rights Watch (23 February 2026) www.hrw.org/news/2026/02/23/northeast-syria-camp-closures-leave-thousands-stranded

34 Ullah, Areeb, *Women and children face abuse in Syria's al-Roj camp amid chaotic handover.* Middle East Eye (10 February 2026) www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-islamic-state-women-and-children-face-abuse-syrias-al-roj-camp-amid-control-handover

35 Ní Aoláin, Fionnuala and Charbord, Anne, *We Told You So: Now What for Northeast Syria?* Just Security (27 January 2026) www.justsecurity.org/129727/northeast-syria-prisons-camps-security/

a negative impact on child development.[36] A 2025 report by UN Women on the population in Al Hol, some of the findings of which RTC assess to be largely applicable also to the population in Roj, indicates that individuals in the camp have been exposed to serious human rights violations and high levels of trauma both prior to and during their detention. [37]

In RTC's contact over several years with women of multiple nationalities held in Roj camp, a number have described how women there previously have been subject to forced marriages and domestic violence, including sexual violence, prior to their arrival in the camps. Interviews RTC have conducted with individuals in Roj camp describe experiences of exposure to violence, in some cases loss of family members, and, for others, lasting physical injury. In almost all cases, individuals report mental health impacts arising from both past and current events. The psychological impact of these experiences appears to be severe and ongoing. Many individuals continue to live with largely untreated trauma and have not had access to any form of remedy or reparation.[38] **Despite clear needs for protection, healthcare, education, and family reunification, they remain in a state of ongoing crisis with no identifiable end point.**

From a distance, Roj camp appears similar to a refugee camp or a camp for internally displaced persons. However, upon closer observation, it would show to be a militarised area, surrounded by high fences with barbed wire, and guarded by armed personnel and watchtowers. Roj camp functions as a controlled and securitised environment in which residents have been deprived of freedom of movement, and where several other fundamental rights under international human rights law have not been realised in practice.

In addition, weather conditions in northeast Syria are adding a further layer of hardship for individuals living in tents. During the winter months, temperatures can drop to levels at which snow accumulates and water freezes. In the summer, temperatures can reach 45°C or higher, and there is no adequate provision of shade beyond the interior of the tents. One woman interviewed by RTC in Roj camp described the conditions as follows: *"Being inside the tent in summer is*

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36 Cook, Joana, *Distinguishing Children From ISIS-Affiliated Families in Iraq and Their Unique Barriers for Rehabilitation and Reintegration.* Perspectives on Terrorism (2023) www.pt.icct.nl/article/distinguishing-children-isis-affiliated-families-iraq-and-their-unique-barriers?#

37 Fuglei, Carly, *Understanding the lives of the women, men and children of Al Hol camp.* UN Women (2025) www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/Understanding-the-lives-of-the-women-men-and-children-of-Al-Hol-camp-en.pdf

38 ibid

like being inside a plastic bag. You can hardly breathe, but the alternative is to remain outside in direct sunlight and get burned, as there is no place to find shade."

Each autumn, women have expressed hope that they would be repatriated before the onset of the harsh winter; each spring, they have hoped to leave before the summer heat sets in, in order to avoid enduring another season under these conditions. **Ensuring the survival and well-being of their children has been a constant and demanding effort in this context.**

Taken together, these factors indicate multiple, compounding risks affecting individuals in Roj camp, and the conditions have posed a serious and ongoing threat to health and survival.

In an article from March 2026 on the situation in Roj, journalist Nermina Trbonja wrote: *"One day it will be studied as part of institutional history. Today, it feels closer to what Hannah Arendt warned about, the quiet transformation of extraordinary suffering into something administratively manageable. Not monstrous enough to interrupt systems, yet profound enough to mark a generation".*[39]

Population, Scale and Duration of Detention of Children and Women

As of December 2025, the UN Refugee Agency reported that the population of Roj camp was 2,324 individuals.[40] This comprised 63% children, 35% women, and 2% men. Approximately 94% were third-country nationals (i.e. not Syrian or Iraqi). Between January and May 2026, only two reported releases of families from Roj camp took place, involving a total of 23 children and 11 women from Australia.[41] One French woman, mother of two young girls, died in Roj camp during the same period.[42]

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39 Trbonja, Nermina, *Inside Roj: Syria Tensions Fuel Fears for Balkan Women, Children in Detention Camp.* Balkan Insight (5 March 2026) www.balkaninsight.com/2026/03/05/inside-roj-syria-tensions-fuel-fears-for-balkan-women-children-in-detention-camp/bi/

40 The UN Refugee Agency, *"Al Hol Camp Statistical Profile in NES 12/30/2025"* in the Lead Inspector General (Lead IG) report to Congress on Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) (2026-02-17) www.media.defense.gov/2026/Feb/19/2003876973/-1/-1/1/OPERATION%20INHERENT%20RESOLVE_2026.PDF

41 Doran, Matthew, Yazbeck, Cherine and Ahmad, Baderkhan, *Australians with ISIS links leave Al-Roj camp in Syria to attempt journey to Australia.* ABC News (24 April 2026) www.abc.net.au/news/2026-04-24/australian-isis-brides-syria-refugee-camp-attempt-to-leave-again/106604896
Doherty, Ben and Jervis-Bardy, Dan, *Last Australian women and children linked to IS leave Syrian camp before expected return home – report.* The Guardian (22 May 2026) www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2026/may/22/last-australian-women-children-is-linked-islamic-state-leave-syria-ntwnfb

42 Shehadi, Lemma, *Two French girls orphaned in Syria's Al Roj camp.* The National (24 April 2026) www.thenationalnews.com/news/uk/2026/04/24/two-french-girls-orphaned-in-syrias-al-roj-camp/

The arbitrary detention in Roj camp has been characterized by its prolonged and oppressive nature. Children formed the vast majority of those held de-facto unlawfully detained. While some of the third-country national children were brought to Syria, most of the children held in Roj camp were born in Syria. Hence, most of the children were at a very young age at the time of their arrival to the camps or even born there. As a result, these children have spent the majority, and in some cases the entirety, of their lives in conditions of detention. Children are of extreme vulnerability, alongside individuals with medical needs arising from injury, illness, or chronic health conditions, within a context where access to adequate medical care has been largely unavailable.

Lived Experiences of Detained Children and Women Under the Control of SDF/DAANES in Roj Camp Following Developments, January–May 2026

The following chapter presents a collection of testimonies from women in Roj camp between January and May 2026, with a primary focus on the period of end of January and February. During this period, RTC were in contact with more than 40 women in Roj camp. All quoted individuals have provided their consent to be included in this report.

During this period, Roj camp was controlled and administered by the SDF/DAANES.

RTC has not been present on the ground in northeast Syria during this period of time and has not been able to verify the information provided by women in Roj camp. However, the testimonies presented below demonstrate recurring patterns across multiple accounts. RTC has sought to triangulate the information through cross-referencing testimonies, as well as through engagement with colleagues in the field and family members of women in multiple countries.

Communication Under Surveillance and Risk

While it has been prohibited for individuals in Roj camp to communicate with the outside world, aside from very limited and supervised access through official camp communication channels, in practice, there has been a widespread informal system through which mobile phones were smuggled into the camp, and it was common for several women to share access to a single device.

The use of phones carried significant risk. **Women who were found in possession of a phone faced consequences including being separated from their children and taken to another detention facility where they could be subject to physical abuse.** Despite these risks, many women continued to communicate with external contacts, as such communication represented a lifeline to the outside

world, especially with family members. Access was typically irregular and limited, depending on when and how phones were available.

Many of the women whose testimonies are included in this chapter have been in contact with RTC over several years. Communication is initiated by the women themselves, and RTC responds when contacted, while consistently encouraging them not to take risks in communicating.

One woman described the personal risks associated with communicating, stating: *"Right now the situation is very stressful as the searches for mobile phones have increased, so I'm afraid to use the phone. And unable to focus whilst using it".*

Escalation of Raids and Violence, and an Atmosphere of Fear

Other women similarly described how the search for phones has intensified during this period, often triggering violent raids. One woman stated: *"The situation is so scary. Curfew starting from 6. Kidnapping people n beating them till they abt yo [to] die [..] they come back with broken bones and blue eyes and have so much bruises. They raid three tents last night n threatened that they will yeqbrona all! Put us all in the grave."* A few days later, she said: *"Last two night they did big raid n beat ppl n kidnapped boys scared everyone to death."*

Women in Roj camp repeatedly described a situation characterised by fear, insecurity, and unpredictability. They reported that nightly self-administration personnel raids intensified since January, with armed personnel entering tents, creating a constant state of anticipation and distress. One woman describes the atmosphere as one of sustained fear: ***"Every night it's the same we don't know whether they will enter upon us and we are always afraid. Their pointing guns at women [..] hoping they don't enter our tents next. Until the car leaves, emotions are uncontrollable, heart beating legs quivering from fear".***

Women also described incidents involving live gunfire and the use of force during raids and patrols. One woman reported: *"Yesterday I was unfortunately outside n they came suddenly, the bullets was so close to me alhamdulillah I'm still alive😣 no doctors tho."* Another described how *"they drove around the camp, shot in the air, frightened everyone and drove them into tents."*

Other testimonies indicated that threats of lethal force are used to control movement within the camp. One woman stated: *"Today the military told us*

that if they shout into the megaphone not to come out, so that we do not leave the tents, otherwise the sniper on the tower will shoot at us."

They reported incidents of individuals being taken from their tents, subjected to physical violence, and having their belongings confiscated. One woman said: *"The night before the car came outside my tent. They entered my [nationality] neighbor, they took her to the house and beat her. They stayed parked outside for 2 hours. I was in bed wondering when they will enter. [..]. We were just silent waiting for the car to go. It was an awful night. I heard the woman when she was back she cried so loud. I felt so bad for her. The next morning I saw her tent and I was in shock. They damaged it all. They took her money and her phone"*. According to women, such incidents have had a broader impact on the camp population, contributing to an environment in which individuals feel unsafe and exposed: *"You don't know if you will be their next victim. Honestly I've never experienced fear like this before."*

Additional testimonies describe similar patterns of violence, looting, and intimidation. One woman explained: *"Last night they robbed the tents again, took out everything, carpets, blankets, wardrobes, even food, some were beaten again and demanded a phone."* Another described a raid on a neighbour: *"They went inside a neighbor who has little shop. Put their kids in the wall put the gun on her head n asking her to give them her fob [phone]. she stayed calm"*

Children as Direct Targets

Women further reported that children were also affected by the situation, including witnessing events and, in some cases, being directly targeted. Threats and coercion have been used in relation to children, including separating children from their mothers for days and that money has been demanded for their return.

Several accounts describe children being detained, beaten, or used to extract money. One woman reported: *"They still keep coming n stealing n kidnapping kids or mom's n ask for thousands of dollars to bring them back. Beating too."* Another described a specific case involving a child: ***"The military took him away. about 12 years old. he was kept for about 2–3 days. The child is stressed. There are bruises of beatings on the body [..] they told him they would shoot him."***

Other accounts describe large-scale violence affecting entire families. One

woman reported: *"Tonight we had horror again. At night at 1 am. The military broke into [a family's] house. She has 3 daughters. 16, 13, 9 years old children. Her older two children were severely beaten, the mother herself was also severely beaten. With iron sticks. They took all the children with them."* Another stated: *"I have just visited the [nationality] women who have suffered. Everyone was beaten. The old grandmother was left. She is 85 years old, she was also beaten."*

Other testimonies describe collective punishment and intimidation when women attempt to seek information about detained children. One woman stated: *"Today we gathered and went to their headquarters to demand that everyone be returned. But they pounced on us. If you don't leave, we'll keep the boys for another 10 days."*

Psychological Impact on Children and Families

One woman described the psychological impact of these conditions on both herself and others, including the effect on children who are exposed to these events. She recounted observing children following such incidents: *"Their faces, no expression, they were quiet, eyes wide open. Honestly my heart broke."* She also reported the impact on her own children, expressing concern about their exposure to violence and fear: ***"I'm worried for [my children] I don't want them to witness their cruelty."***

Other women described similar psychological effects on children growing up in the camp. One woman shared: *"My son is telling me that he doesn't want to grow. I asked him why. He said so u don't get older. I feel bad when I see them growing in this limbo."*

Another woman shared: *"They are destroying our mental health, majority women here needs psychological care - this humiliation, belittlement, mockery has affected us mentally."*

Daily Survival and Disrupted Childhood

In addition to security concerns, women describe ongoing hardship in meeting their children's everyday needs and supporting their development. One woman explains that her children are increasingly asking questions about life outside the camp, of which they do not have experience from: ***"They now ask me so much about life outside, and what I did when I was young, how school was like, what I would do in the holidays etc. they're at the age of understanding and are***

questioning along more." One woman describes her attempts to provide some form of education and normality: "*I teach them English [..] Recently, I've taught them their timetables up to the 6times*".

Another woman expressed: "*I want to go to my relatives. We are all very tired. It's not even that we are tired of such a life, I am already so desperate that it seems to me that I will die here, and as if I have already resigned myself to this thought... But the children... I think about children. I want to do everything for them so that they are happy.*"

Deterioration of Living Conditions and Health

Women also described the deterioration of basic living conditions. One stated: "*Everyone is sitting in tents. There is no electricity. The generator that gave electricity was taken away... The whole camp raised money for this generator... but it was stolen.*" Another described the impact of the stress on their health: "*Our health is deteriorating because of this [..] Sometimes I can't get up in the morning.*"

Women also reported the near-total absence of basic services and access to adequate healthcare. One woman stated: "*No power to know the news keeping ppl busy to find food n fill water... no doctors thu.*"

Accounts also highlighted serious concerns regarding access to healthcare. One woman reported that in April 2026, ***"a French woman passed away, she [was] complaining of severe headaches and pain. They told her to go back to her tent. In the afternoon she had a heart attack and died."***

Emotional Impact and Sense of Abandonment

Women also described the emotional impact of being unable to provide for their children in the way they would wish. One woman says: "*It breaks my heart. I want to give them everything but I can't.*" *She expressed the sense of abandonment and lack of protection: "Honestly, we really do feel abandoned.*"

This sense of abandonment was echoed in multiple accounts. One woman stated: "*We just can't provide evidence of everything that's going on here... [We] are afraid to even talk about being beaten, let alone take a picture.*" Another reflected on the absence of oversight, referring to the collapse of Al Hol camp: ***"Why didn't the international community stay to oversee the [Al Hol] camp? later everyone will say the women went voluntarily, but they didn't have a choice"***, referring to those displaced to other parts of Syria.

Cumulative Trauma, Fear, and Ongoing Harm

Women described the cumulative impact of these conditions as overwhelming, both physically and psychologically. One woman said: ***"It's a horror movie. Live horror movie. We're living thru it".*** Another woman similarly described the daily reality: *"I am very tired of living in fear and anxiety. Every night is painful."*

Women also described the impact of disappearances and ongoing uncertainty. One woman stated: *"[My friend] was not returned. Her children are afraid to spend the night at home. They spend the night with others. I didn't see them again. I don't know who has them."*

Testimonies further described conditions in detention facilities, where some women were taken to. One woman said: *"About prison. There are very small ones. Like a toilet. Even the mattress does not fit there completely. You can't [talk to other women] between rooms through the window, [if you do] men come and beat you with iron sticks. Sometimes children are kept in the same room with their mother, sometimes they are separated."*

Other accounts described severe abuse and humiliation in detention in such a facility as described above. One woman reported: *"Recently, children, three girls, were returned. The children are very shocked, scared, they were humiliated, forced to kiss their shoes, beaten in the face. the woman was kicked and beaten with a walkie-talkie, her whole face was swollen."*

Fear of Forced Transfer and Human Trafficking

Among women and girls, there are individuals who previously have been subjected to forced marriage, including child marriage. For example, the legal action non-governmental organisation Reprieve assess that the majority of British women who ended up in Roj camp are victims of human trafficking.[43] These include having been subjected to sexual and other forms of exploitation and were either transported to Syria as children; coerced into travelling to Syria; or kept and moved within Syria against their will.[44]

Several women expressed growing fear about their future and the risk of being transferred elsewhere within Syria. One woman stated: *"For me, who wants to go back, I know this is a problem and I'm scared I'll be stuck in Syria. If they*

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43 *Trafficked to ISIS: British families detained in Syria after being trafficked to Islamic State.* Reprieve (2021) www.reprieve.org/uk/2021/04/30/most-british-women-and-children-detained-in-north-east-syria-are-trafficking-victims/

44 ibid

come, they'll take all the women to Idlib, that's my fear." Another explained: *"It is becoming clearer and clearer to me that I will probably really have to go to Idlib. I've had a headache for days because of that."*

Other accounts described conditions faced by women who had already been displaced. One woman in Roj said about women previously in Al Hol, now in Idlib: ***"The fact that women are hiding there should be a clear sign that something's off. They're stuck there. They say they can't go outside, no solution in sight."***

Short- and Long-Term Hopes and Prospects

In the short term, and pending repatriation, many women expressed a wish to be transferred to areas under the control of the Syrian government due to protection needs - similar to those who previously remained in Al Hol camp after its collapse, and were relocated to the camp near Akhtarin. One woman in Roj camp said: *"From the Akhtarin camp they write that it is easier there. There is a market, there is even a store where they sell phones, they are not persecuted inside the camp"*.

In addition to describing the conditions in the camp, women have also shared their aspirations for life beyond detention, particularly in relation to her children's future and wellbeing.

Everyone RTC have been in contact with in Roj camp has expressed a clear desire to return to their countries of origin, unless there is a risk of refoulement, in which situation women hope to be resettled in a safe third country. One woman reflected on a future with stability, family life, and access to basic opportunities: ***"I see a happy life for us once we're out of here. I want my girls to meet all my family members in [country] (they cannot wait to meet my girls and give them presents). I want to do whatever I can to make my girls have the best time. I want to take them to the zoo, theme parks, restaurants, parks, on holiday. I want them to go to school, but also I would love for them to have a private tutor so that they catch up on their education and don't feel inferior to others in class as I don't want their confidence to be broken."***

What is Next for Third Country National Children and Women in Syria?

The developments in Syria, especially 2024-2026, demonstrate that circumstances can change rapidly, with conditions shifting significantly from one day to the next. In this context of local, national, and regional political, military, and security unpredictability, the situation remains adverse overall for the third country nationals detained or displaced in the country. Children and women, whether in detention camps or displaced from such, are in a situation characterised by little personal agency in relation to decision-making, where outcomes are shaped by external actors and circumstances beyond their control. **Unless third-country national individuals are allowed to return to their countries of origin, or are resettled elsewhere when return is not possible, they may remain deprived of their liberty and/or rights without a lawful basis or due process, and may effectively be transferred from one form of custody to another within Syria rather than being released.** Even when released from detention, they do not hold citizenship or lawful residency status in Syria. This further constrains their ability to exercise freedom of movement or to independently secure safety, accommodation, or legal status within the country. Prolonged detention and displacement continues to expose individuals to gross and systematic human rights violations.

Following developments in Al Hol Camp, the few remaining individuals after the departure of most detainees, as well as individuals held in Al Bayda camp in Jarabulus, were transferred in a controlled manner by Syrian authorities from northeast Syria to Aq Burhan camp close to Akhtarin in northern Aleppo governorate. While such transfers occurred orderly, and conditions for families are reported to be significantly improved compared to detention camps in northeast Syria, the underlying issue - namely, the failure of responsible states to allow their citizens to return - remains the primary obstacle to a durable resolution.[45] Aq Burhan/Akhtarin camp is also a closed camp, where individuals remain with restricted freedom of movement. This suggests a continuation of

45 *After years of detention former Al Hol residents face uncertain future*. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (27 February 2026) www.msf.org/syria-closure-al-hol-camp-leaves-thousands-without-healthcare

de facto detention under new administrative arrangements and in a different geographical location, rather than a resolution of the underlying issues. For this issue to be resolved, there needs to be an internationally coordinated process including responsible states from where these families originate.

The collapse of Al Hol camp has demonstrated that without a managed and coordinated exit process, and in the absence of documentation, protection mechanisms, or safe pathways home, children and their caregivers are highly vulnerable to trafficking, coercion, exploitation, and recruitment by armed or violent extremist groups, particularly in a context of reported growth in ISIS activity in Syria.[46] This is an immediate and real threat.

Exposure to Radicalisation, Exploitation, and Harm

Individuals may be exposed to destructive ideological influence, as there may be radical factions within camps, as well outside of them. Experts assess that women and minors detained require specific attention including the risks of being radicalised while detained.[47] It is well established in research[48] and practice[49] that situations of extreme vulnerability, combined with a lack of viable and lawful pathways for safety and survival, in combination with grievance from being abandoned by the state you thought would protect you, may increase the risk of individuals being drawn, whether voluntarily or under coercion, into the influence of armed or extremist actors. Where individuals face prolonged insecurity, limited access to basic needs, and no realistic prospects for protection or reintegration, the range of available choices becomes severely constrained. This risk is particularly relevant in Syria, where non-state armed groups, including terrorist organisations such as ISIS, continue to operate and recruit.

It is well documented that victims of human trafficking are at a heightened risk of being re-trafficked and exploited.[50] In situations of armed conflict, rather than being recognised as victims entitled to protection, recovery, and reintegration, children are often punished, stigmatised, or neglected.[51] Despite the widespread exposure to human trafficking within this population, as well as

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46 Morris, Loveday and Salim, Mustafa, *Iraqi spy chief warns of reemerging threat from ISIS as its ranks swell*. The Washington Post (26 February 2026) www.washingtonpost.com/world/2026/01/26/islamic-state-isis-syria-iraq-threat/

47 Cook, Joana., & Vale, Gina. *A, From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the women and minors of Islamic State*. International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (2018) www.kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/from-daesh-to-diaspora-tracing-the-women-and-minors-of-islamic-st/

48 Journey to Extremism in Africa, *Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement*. United Nations Development Programme (2003) www.undp.org/africa/publications/journey-extremism-africa-pathways-recruitment-and-disengagement

49 *Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System*. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2017) www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Child-Victims/Handbook_on_Children_Recruited_and_Exploited_by_Terrorist_and_Violent_Extremist_Groups_the_Role_of_the_Justice_System.E.pdf

50 Jobe, Alison, *The Causes and Consequences of Re-trafficking: Evidence from the IOM Human Trafficking Database*. International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2010) www.publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/causes_of_re-trafficking.pdf

51 Huckerby, Jayne, *Child trafficking and armed conflict*. Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict United Nations Secretariat, UN (2023) www.childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Child-trafficking-and-armed-conflict-2.pdf

other consequences of armed conflict, there is no established mechanism to ensure access to protection and support, notwithstanding the extensive legal framework that applies.[52]

As noted by Jo Becker from Human Rights Watch, *"The real risk is not bringing these children home, it's leaving them in the camps where they risk death, illness, and recruitment"*.[53] Although this statement predates recent developments, subsequent events have further underscored the relevance in the statement.

Risks of Non-Repatriation and Loss of State Control

Non-repatriation by countries of which individuals originate may reduce a state's ability to manage potential risks in a controlled and structured manner, and may contribute to less predictable and more complex security outcomes over time. The risks associated with continued non-repatriation are foreseeable, as described above, and a number of broader national security considerations arise in relation to state inaction. Thousands of children and women "disappeared" when Al Hol camp collapsed, which has resulted in reduced visibility and traceability, thereby complicating any future efforts by states to assess, monitor, or engage with those individuals.

Where individuals have expressed a willingness to engage with and return to the state with which they have nationality or established links, but such return is not facilitated, there are limited alternative pathways available to them. Syria remains a highly unstable and fragile context, shaped by prolonged conflict, governance challenges, and ongoing security concerns. Leaving individuals in unregulated or semi-governed environments reduces the ability of states to manage or mitigate potential risks over time.

Continued State Inaction Undermines Security, Stability and Due Process

The number of alarming reports on consequences of not repatriating are many and come from multiple sources:

The, at the time, acting U.S. coordinator for counterterrorism and special envoy

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52 Huebner, Gillian, *International Law is Unambiguous When it Comes to Protecting Children in the Midst of Conflict.* The Collaborative Forum, Georgetown University (5 July 2023) www.globalchildren.georgetown.edu/posts/international-law-is-unambiguous-when-it-comes-to-protecting-children-in-the-midst-of-conflict#:~:text=The%20Rome%20Statute%20of%20the,forcible%20separated%20across%20conflict%20lines.

53 Becker, Jo, at the Report launch of *Children of Conflict Thrive Back Home After Returning From Syria*. Human Rights Watch (2022)

for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, Timothy Alan Betts, said in July 2022: *"Leaving fighters and family members in northeast Syria is not a viable option; we risk these individuals migrating from conflict to conflict in a way that creates new strife and instability elsewhere, threatens our collective security, and presents serious threats to innocent civilians."*[54]

Similarly, the UN's counterterrorism chief, Vladimir Voronkov, has said that inaction on repatriation threatened to *"bring about the very outcomes we intend to prevent," including "the radicalization and recruitment of a new generation of terrorists, and the strengthening of terrorist groups in the region and around the world."*[55]

The United States Department of State have multiple times over the years reiterated their appeal for states to take action to prevent a security crisis through repatriating their nationals, in statements such as the following from 2025: *"The only durable solution to the humanitarian and security crisis in these displaced persons camps in northeast Syria is for countries of origin to repatriate, rehabilitate, reintegrate, and where appropriate, ensure accountability for their nationals. The same goes for former ISIS fighters held in detention centers in northeast Syria. As we do with our own nationals, every country must take responsibility for its nationals in northeast Syria and not look to others to solve the problem for them. They should also share in the burden incurred in caring for and repatriating their nationals"*[56] and *"Repatriation will also reduce the risk of an ISIS resurgence in the region and help ensure a stable future for Syria"*.[57]

In the broader strategic considerations. The continued presence of foreign nationals detained or displaced within the country with no residency or permission to be in Syria, could be a factor contributing to instability in Syria and in the region. In this context, non-repatriation may contribute to security risks not only within Syria but with potential implications for both regional and international security.

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54 *Resolving the Detainee Dilemma: What Next for the Men, Women & Children of the Islamic State.* United States, Department of State (13 July 2022) www.2021-2025.state.gov/resolving-the-detainee-dilemma-what-next-for-the-men-women-children-of-the-islamic-state-2/

55 *Statement by Mr. Vladimir Voronkov Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, on the occasion of the Launch of the Global Framework for United Nations Support on Syria and Iraq Third Country National Returnees.* United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (29 September 2021) www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/default/files/210929_usg_remarks_gf_launch.pdf

56 *Repatriation of Unaccompanied U.S. Citizen Minor from Northeast Syria.* United States, Department of State (29 July 2025) www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/07/repatriation-of-unaccompanied-u-s-citizen-minor-from-northeast-syria?utm_source=chatgpt.com

57 *United States Appreciates Tanzania's Repatriation of Displaced Persons from Northeast Syria.* United States, Department of State (20 August 2025) www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/08/united-states-appreciates-tanzanias-repatriation-of-displaced-persons-from-northeast-syria

Children have been held in these detention camps because of their parents' former alleged affiliation with ISIS. In any other context, this would be deemed collective punishment. However, many countries appear to have accepted and normalised the idea that keeping children and their parents unlawfully detained serves their national security interests. Human rights organisations, child protection experts, humanitarians, and security specialists have long warned that the continued detention of families in these camps was neither sustainable nor helpful in dismantling ISIS's legacy. Instead, the camps have maintained environments shaped by fear, coercion, and unaddressed trauma, precisely the dynamics that violent extremist movements have historically exploited. Prolonged de-facto detention under such conditions does not contain or prevent risk. Rather, it poses a dual security concern: the immediate threat to children forced to grow up in constant danger, and the longer-term threat to society if and when these children are exploited and recruited by extremist predators. **The upholding of systems of arbitrary detention demonstrates that security and an international commitment to children's rights and international legal standards are inextricably linked: The erosion of the latter precipitates the erosion of the former.**

Citizenship Deprivation as a Specific Vulnerability and Risk Factor

The risks described in this report are likely to have a particularly acute impact on individuals who have had their citizenship revoked.

Given the central importance of citizenship as a gateway to the exercise of a wide range of fundamental rights, as well as the corresponding responsibilities of states towards their nationals, the deprivation of citizenship places some of the detainees in a position of heightened vulnerability. The use of nationality deprivation as a counter-terrorism measure has not been demonstrated to be effective.[58] On the contrary, there is an increasing recognition in policy and research that such measures may be counterproductive to broader security objectives. In particular, they impede the return, rehabilitation, and reintegration of individuals who seek to disengage and who may no longer present a security risk, while at the same time transferring or externalising potential risks to other states and local populations.

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58 *Children affected by the foreign-fighter phenomenon: Ensuring a child rights-based approach.* United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, United Nations Counter-Terrorism Center (2019) www.un.org/counterterrorism/en/handbook-children-affected-foreign-fighter-phenomenon-ensuring-child-rights-based-approach

New Possibilities for Resolution

Developments in Syria since December 2024 have significantly altered the context in which third-country national children and their families are detained or displaced. While some events have increased risks, particularly exposure to trafficking, exploitation, and continued forms of detention, they have also created new opportunities to resolve the situation.

A key shift is the transition from control by a non-state actor (SDF/DAANES) to increasing control by internationally-recognized, legal state authorities. This may reduce some of the practical and political barriers that have previously limited engagement by countries of origin of detainees.

In practical terms, this shift may facilitate access to consular services, enable more direct coordination between Syrian authorities and countries of origin, and support efforts to identify and locate individuals dispersed following the collapse of Al Hol camp. It may also create clearer pathways for the deportation of third-country nationals unlawfully present in Syria.

A similar dynamic applies to those transferred to Iraq, where the government now plays a central role in shaping outcomes.

For children, these developments are particularly significant. While the risks they face have intensified, the current context may also present a critical opportunity to end prolonged exposure to detention, instability, and harm. **Whether this opportunity is realised and materialised will depend on coordinated action by all relevant stakeholders.**

Syria's Transition and International Responsibility

After more than a decade of war and terrorism, and more than five decades of dictatorship under the Assad regime - marked by arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and unlawful mass imprisonment - Syria is at a critical juncture. A central issue is whether the country will move away from unlawful detention as a governing practice, or whether such systems will persist.

This question is closely linked to the role of the international community. As Syria reasserts state authority, the continued presence of thousands of third-country

nationals in legal limbo on Syrian territory remains unresolved. This raises the question of whether countries of origin of detainees will assume responsibility for their citizens and their family members.

The 30 January 2026 agreement between the government of Syria and the SDF, aimed at incorporating SDF/DAANES institutions and forces into the Syrian state apparatus, represents a significant shift. For several years, some foreign governments have justified limited engagement regarding their citizens held in arbitrary detention by the SDF/DAANES by pointing to the lack of diplomatic relations with the non-state actors controlling and administering the camps.

At the same time, the camps are often discussed primarily through a counterterrorism lens. However, they also reflect broader structural issues. Arbitrary detention without charge, trial, or time limit was a defining feature of the Assad era. The continuation of large-scale detention in similar forms risks reinforcing practices that Syria would need to move away from in order to establish a credible legal framework.

Continued inaction by foreign governments - often framed in terms of complexity, security concerns, or questions of legal obligation - has the effect of shifting responsibility onto Syria, even though the underlying policy decisions remain those of the foreign governments themselves. This contributes to a situation in which detention is maintained on Syrian territory, while countries of origin of detainees do not engage, leaving Syria to bear the practical consequences of policies over which it has limited control.

As a result, the question of Syria's future legal and institutional trajectory is closely linked to international action. Efforts to move away from systems of mass detention may be constrained if large numbers of thor-country nationals remain on Syrian territory without legal status and without resolution due to a lack of engagement by their countries of origin.

The continued existence of detention sites is frequently treated as an inevitable outcome of conflict. However, it reflects a series of political decisions that may contribute to the persistence of detention-based practices.

Whether Syria is able to move away from this legacy will depend not only on domestic developments, but on whether foreign governments assume responsibility for their nationals. In the absence of such action, there is a risk that future

systems will replicate elements of past practices.

An Opportunity for States to Support Disengagement From Violent Extremism and Protect Children

The situation in Syria remains volatile, unstable, and highly unpredictable. Both northeast Syria, and Syria more broadly, continue to face security and humanitarian challenges. The security environment in Syria is further affected by the involvement and competing interests of external actors, including military operations and foreign occupations on Syrian territory, such as Israel's cross-border attacks and its occupation of parts of Syrian territory. In addition, regional dynamics, including conflicts in neighbouring countries, continue to affect the situation in Syria. This includes implications for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS's activities, including its withdrawal of forces in Syria.[59]

The pace of change has been such that conditions on the ground can alter significantly within short timeframes. These dynamics have direct humanitarian consequences, including for those in arbitrarily detained.

For years, experts across the globe have warned that holding people in prolonged, lawless detention would end in harm. What has been unfolding in these camps and other detention sites in northeast Syria since the January developments is the predictable result of prolonged international abandonment and failure to take responsibility.[60] States have had opportunities to repatriate their citizens under controlled protocols, but many have chosen not to.

It is important to note that many detainees have expressed a clear desire to return to their countries of origin and a willingness to cooperate with authorities. **States from which individuals originate have an opportunity to engage with those who seek to disengage from their experiences in the so-called ISIS caliphate and rebuild their lives in a stable environment, while prioritising the safety and well-being of children.**

Where such engagement is not facilitated, and individuals are denied protection, citizenship, or other basic rights, they are left without viable or lawful

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59 Blanchard, Christopher M., *Syria: Transition and U.S. Policy.* Congressional Research Service (26 February 2026) www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33487

60 Ní Aoláin, Fionnuala, *Technical Visit to the Northeast of the Syrian Arab Republic: End of Mission Statement by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism.* Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, (21 July 2023) www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/terrorism/sr/statements/EoM-Visit-to-Syria-20230721.pdf

pathways. In such circumstances, there is a risk that they may be exposed to, or unwillingly drawn into, the influence of non-state armed groups or extremist actors. In the absence of alternatives, individuals may have little choice but to turn elsewhere. ISIS and other non-state armed groups in Syria have demonstrated an interest in recruiting, coercing, and exploiting women and children. **By repatriating their citizens, states could mitigate foreseeable risks and prevent further marginalisation of already vulnerable individuals in a high-risk environment.** State engagement opens opportunities for structured intervention, monitoring, and rehabilitation. Repatriation enables authorities to implement safeguarding measures, risk assessment processes, and, where appropriate, criminal justice responses.

The Need for a Managed, Rights-Based Response

Ending arbitrary detention is necessary. It is though unnecessary that it takes place through chaotic or unstructured processes where more orderly alternatives exist. The lessons from this dark chapter must be heeded both now and in the future to ensure that similar mistakes are not repeated.

States of origin, in coordination with Syrian authorities and existing repatriation mechanisms including international community stakeholders, can establish safe, dignified, and internationally coordinated processes that focus on protection through repatriation. A vast body of good practice and experience shows that this is a path to answer security concerns and uphold fundamental rights.[61]

Solutions Through a Child Rights Approach

In light of the fact that some of the detainees are part of families with multinational backgrounds, there is a need for states to act in accordance with the best interests and rights of the child. An example of this is a case from Denmark concerning a child who held Danish citizenship, while the child's mother did not. The mother had her Danish citizenship revoked in 2020, due to her travel to Syria in 2014, when she was 16 years old. As a result, the mother was denied repatriation, while the Danish authorities offered to repatriate the child without her. As family separation was not considered a viable option, the matter was brought before the courts.

RTC Denmark represented the family and initiated legal proceedings against

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61 Eriksson, Beatrice, *Repatriating children from Syria's IS camps is the right thing and the smart thing to do.* The New Humanitarian (3 February 2026) www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2026/02/03/repatriating-children-syria-camps-right-thing-al-hol-al-roj

the Danish government. In a judgment announced in August 2024, the Danish Supreme Court held that the Danish authorities were required to take all necessary steps to secure the evacuation of the child from Roj camp. The Court further found that, in order to give practical effect to the child's rights, this obligation extended to facilitating the evacuation of the child together with the mother.

As a result of this decision, in October 2024, the Danish child and his non-Danish mother were repatriated to Denmark.[62] The judgment was grounded in the European Convention on Human Rights, and may serve as guidance of EU states responsibilities towards a citizen child and their non-citizen parent.

62 *Denmark repatriates mother, son from Syria detention camp.* Middle East Monitor (29 October 2024) www.middleeastmonitor.com/20241029-denmark-repatriates-mother-son-from-syria-detention-camp/

Experiences of Other Women and Children who Have Been Successfully Repatriated From Roj and Al Hol

Despite initial concerns over security risks and voter alienation, since 2019, some 40 countries have repatriated some or many of their citizens from Roj and Al Hol.[63] These women and children were brought home through coordinated efforts involving multiple authorities, and in many cases, the reception was supported by public agencies as well as civil society organisations.

Experiences show that returnee families can reintegrate successfully when the reception is structured and rooted in rights-based principles.[64]

Since 2019, RTC and colleagues have monitored the trajectories of families repatriated from the camps to multiple countries, especially in Europe. The overall outcome has been positive; adults suspected of crimes were investigated and, where appropriate, prosecuted, and children were protected when a parent posed a genuine risk. RTC found that many children adjusted well, enrolling in schools and forming friendships. Surviving war, detention, and family separation leaves a mark (more on that below), and some require ongoing support, but it is important to distinguish between the problems children have and those they were expected to pose. Although there can be challenges, repatriated children have bounced back in a remarkable way, demonstrating how effective comprehensive support measures can be in counteracting early childhood adversities. The first step was to get the children out of the war and high-risk environment in Syria. Once returned to their countries of origin, central to the rehabilitation process has been establishing stability for these children with a

63 *Punishing the Innocent: Ending Violations Against Children in Northeast Syria.* Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (20 March 2024) www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyria/policypapersieges29aywar/2024-03-18-punishing-innocent.pdf

64 Becker, Jo, and Tayler, Letta, *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) www.hrw.org/report/2022/11/21/my-son-just-another-kid/experiences-children-repatriated-camps-isis-suspects-and

caring approach, ensuring they are safe, secure, and have their needs met.[65]

Many of those involved in reception efforts have been amazed by how children adapted more rapidly than expected, integrating into daily life and routines in a comparatively short period of time despite the unfamiliarity of their surroundings.[66]

The nature of the reception matters, whether it is experienced as welcoming and humane can significantly shape the returnees' reintegration journey. Children must foremost be considered victims of armed conflict and terrorism.[67] Families returning have endured extremely difficult conditions over a prolonged period. The receiving society must be prepared to build trust and offer a supportive social response.[68] Interventions are most effective when they are embedded and delivered within a holistic approach that addresses psychological, social - including familial - and practical issues associated with reintegration efforts.[69] Contexts which provide a safe, secure, supportive and due process environment are more likely to be conducive to effective interventions than those which are not.[70] A constructive and rights-based social response from institutions and communities fosters safety, trust, and social cohesion at the community level, while supporting psychological recovery for individuals. It is a key element in laying the groundwork for successful long-term reintegration.[71]

In most cases RTC and colleagues have been observing, the mother and other family members play a crucial role in providing the stable foundation for

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65 Eriksson, Beatrice, *Lost Childhoods: The Ongoing Plight of Children in Detention Camps in Northeast Syria*. The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, ICCT (28 June 2024) www.icct.nl/publication/lost-childhoods-ongoing-plight-children-detention-camps-northeast-syria

66 Loots, Gerrit, Jamaï, Hannan, *Reception and (re)integration of returning children from detention camps in Northeast Syria. The return*. Faculty of Social Sciences; Vrije Universiteit Brussel - VUB (2022) www.reguide.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Report-reintegration-of-the-children-.pdf

67 *Repatriation and reintegration of children affected by conflict in Syria and Iraq to Central Asia. A Compendium of Promising Practices from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan*. UNICEF (2003) www.unicef.org/eca/reports/repatriation-and-reintegration-children-affected-conflict-syria-and-iraq-central-asia

68 Social response refers to how individuals or communities react and behave in response to a crisis or significant event, including how they respond to those affected and the impact of these responses on the affected individuals. Allan Wade, Ph.D., City University, Canada, has concluded: *"There is a large body of evidence suggesting the quality of social responses may be the single best predictor of the level of victim distress, of future disclosure and of cooperation with authorities."* More info on response based practice: www.allanwade.ca/

69 *Council of Europe Handbook for Prison and Probation Services Regarding Radicalisation and Violent Extremism*. European Committee on Crime Problems and Council for Penological Co-operation 'Strasbourg: Council of Europe (2016) www.rm.coe.int/16806f9aa9

70 ibid

71 Eriksson, Beatrice, *Supporting Returnee Families: Guidance for States and Communities on Reception, Reintegration, and Rehabilitation. Key Principles and Recommendations from RTC Sweden and RTC Denmark*. Repatriate the Children Sweden, Repatriate the Children, Denmark (2025) www.repatriatethechildren.org/reception-of-returnees

returned children.[72] Additionally, key elements include enrolling the children in school with educational support to help them integrate smoothly, offering psychological counselling, and if possible and appropriate, facilitating changes to their names for privacy and protection to avoid stigmatization. Hobbies, friendships, and personal interests seem to constitute resilience factors that help children overcome the challenges they face.

Dr. Lynn Schneider, principal investigator of the PERSIST research project at Oxford University, has built an extensive empirical evidence base on the psycho-social development of child returnees to Europe following repatriation. She finds that the needs of children and their mothers are closely interlinked. While some children may require individual support measures such as therapy, educational support, or mentorship, these interventions are not sufficient in isolation and are most effective when the needs of the mothers are addressed simultaneously. As she notes, *"supporting mothers to find a new job and stabilize their lives or address their own traumas can be seen as a direct support measure for children too"*.[73]

Dr. Schneider further highlights that the securitisation of these children in public and policy discourse, such as referring to them as "ISIS children" or "child soldiers", is, in most cases, neither accurate nor relevant, but derives from ISIS propaganda. Instead, she emphasises that child reintegration efforts should draw less on de-radicalisation frameworks and more on established good practice in safeguarding and the best interests of the child, particularly in the context of maternal imprisonment and custody decisions upon arrival to their country of origin.[74]

The many returnee children RTC and colleagues have followed up on since 2019 adjusted well to their new environments, and none of the children have displayed behaviour suggesting radicalisation or a propensity to violence.[75] Cases in which professional support was combined with support from civil society and public services proved particularly effective.

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72 *Repatriation and reintegration of children affected by conflict in Syria and Iraq to Central Asia. A Compendium of Promising Practices from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.* UNICEF (2003) www.unicef.org/eca/reports/repatriation-and-reintegration-children-affected-conflict-syria-and-iraq-central-asia

73 Schneider, Lynn, in the webinar *Human Rights Through Arts, Conversations on Cinema, Justice & Rights - "Children of the Enemy"*. Essex Human Rights Centre (20 November 2025) www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6cBY1kqF-Mo&t=2173s

74 ibid

75 Eriksson, Beatrice, *Repatriating children from Syria's IS camps is the right thing and the smart thing to do.* The New Humanitarian (3 February 2026) www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2026/02/03/repatriating-children-syria-camps-right-thing-al-hol-al-roj

Age is a matter. The longer children remain stranded in the crisis, the more support they will require once repatriated, but this is no longer uncharted territory.[76] New child protection systems and tools have emerged.[77] Schools, healthcare services, and local communities have successfully integrated returning children and mothers.

Among women, reintegration outcomes are largely contingent upon the legal and social conditions they encounter upon return to their countries of origin. At the level of social integration, cross-national differences can be observed. In some countries, such as Denmark[78] women were automatically convicted of criminal offenses and incarcerated upon repatriation. In Sweden[79], by contrast, the legal framework at the time did not generally lead to the automatic prosecution of adult returnees, and a majority of Swedish female returnees repatriated since 2019 got engaged in higher education or full-time employment, enabling them to support themselves and their children.

Experience shows that reintegration and rehabilitation have a higher likelihood of success when the repatriated individuals and their families are included in the planning.[80] Such involvement keeps families together, avoids new separations, and promotes favorable psychological recovery.[81]

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76 Lowe, Peta and Stafford, Stacey, and Sherburn, Anna, *Managing the Reintegration of Violent Extremists and their Families. A Guide to Proactive Reintegration.* Commonwealth Secretariat (2022) www.thecommonwealth-ilibrary.org/index.php/comsec/catalog/view/966/963/8251

77 *Enhancing the resilience of children exposed to violent extremist environments. PREPARE toolkit.* www.prepare-project.eu/prepare-toolkit/

78 Rée Mikkelsen, Natascha, Foldschack, Knud, and Sneum Madsen, Marie, *Reception of Returning Danish Children: Reintegration and Rehabilitation after Repatriation from Detention Camps in Northeast Syria. Recommendations and lessons from Denmark.* Repatriate the Children Denmark (2023) www.repatriatethechildren.dk/onewebmedia/Reception%20of%20Returning%20Danish%20Children%20-%20Reintegration%20and%20Rehabilitation.PDF

79 Eriksson, Beatrice, *Reception of Returnees: Reintegration and Rehabilitation after Repatriation from Northeast Syria - Guidance Document for Emerging Practices With Lessons From Sweden.* Repatriate the Children Sweden (2022) www.repatriatethechildren.org/reception-of-returnees

80 Rée Mikkelsen, Natascha, Foldschack, Knud, and Sneum Madsen, Marie, *Reception of Returning Danish Children: Reintegration and Rehabilitation after Repatriation from Detention Camps in Northeast Syria. Recommendations and lessons from Denmark.* Repatriate the Children Denmark (2023) www.repatriatethechildren.dk/onewebmedia/Reception%20of%20Returning%20Danish%20Children%20-%20Reintegration%20and%20Rehabilitation.PDF

81 Eriksson, Beatrice, *"As Women and Children Return to the West from Syrian Camps, Lessons From Sweden".* Just Security (6 December 2002) www.justsecurity.org/84311/as-women-and-children-return-to-the-west-from-syrian-camps-lessons-from-sweden/

The Impact of Separation of Children From Their Mothers

There is a substantial body of research on the psychosocial consequences of serious events and on the risks such experiences pose for psychological recovery. Family separation is widely recognised as potentially harmful, as reflected in attachment theory and empirical research, which demonstrate that disruption of the bond between a child and their primary caregiver can lead to adverse developmental outcomes and trauma-related symptoms.[82] The relationship with a parent or primary caregiver is critical to a child's sense of self, safety, and trust.[83] A fundamental principle in modern crisis support and psychological first aid is to keep families and groups together and to avoid further separations.[84]

From a child protection perspective, the risks associated with separation in this context are extensive.[85] These children have been with their mothers continuously since birth, meaning that they are not only their primary caregivers but their sole attachment figures. Removing the mothers from the children may therefore have serious consequences for the children's sense of safety and psychological stability.

In managing situations like this, it is essential that responses are grounded in the "do not harm" principle, and the best interest of the child, recognising the heightened vulnerability of children in crisis.

Security considerations, human rights and child protection are not competing priorities; when approached within a rights-based, child-centred framework and under the rule of law, both security and protection assessments can be carried out in a manner that is safe, dignified, and appropriate to the needs and rights of the child.[86] The United Nations General Assembly Resolution on the Rights of the Child underscores the importance of children being raised in a family environment and recognises the child's right to family life. The resolution also highlights the need to avoid unnecessary separation of children from their

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82 Briggs-Gowan, M. J., Greene, C., Ford, J., Clark, R., McCarthy, K. J., & Carter, A. S, *Adverse impact of multiple separations or loss of primary caregivers on young children.* European Journal of Psychotraumatology, 10(1) (2019) www.doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2019.1646965

83 *Children with Traumatic Separation: Information for Professionals.* National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2016) www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/children_with_traumatic_separation_professionals.pdf

84 *Psychological First Aid: Field Operations Guide, 2nd Edition.* National Child Traumatic Stress Network & National Center for PTSD (2006) www.nctsn.org/resources/psychological-first-aid-pfa-field-operations-guide-2nd-edition

85 *Children with Traumatic Separation: Information for Professionals.* National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2016) www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/children_with_traumatic_separation_professionals.pdf

86 Shapoval, Yuliya, Bekmaganbetova, Madina, Aimukhambetov, Timur and Seitakhmetova, Natalya, Kazakhstan's *Approach to the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Child Returnees from Syria and Iraq: Restoring the Rights to Life and Development.* Perspectives on Terrorism (2025) www.jstor.org/stable/27389738

families and raises concerns regarding the unlawful or arbitrary detention of children. Furthermore, it calls for efforts to facilitate family reunification where this is in the best interests of the child.[87]

Once repatriated to their country or origin, while inevitable during potential pre-trial detention and prosecution, or due to serious concerns about a child's wellbeing, RTC and colleagues found that family separation can have a highly adverse impact on children, especially separation from mothers and other relatives, such as a grandmother or aunt, who functioned as their only sources of comfort and safety abroad. In situations involving the detention or imprisonment of a mother, RTC and colleagues have noted the importance of maintaining regular and predictable contact between the child and the mother. This may include frequent telephone, digital, and, where possible, in-person contact throughout the period.[88]

When young children arrive in their country after repatriation, everything is unfamiliar to them; this often becomes a crisis-like experience, as they are suddenly thrust into an entirely new reality. Separation between children and their mothers or primary caregiver is associated with a significant risk of harm to the child's psychological wellbeing.[89] What RTC and colleagues have observed is that when a child is separated from its caregiver and source of safety, such separation may exacerbate existing trauma, heightening anxiety and undermine the child's sense of safety and stability, and result in acute distress and trauma-related symptoms, including anxiety, sleep disturbances, and behavioural regression. Especially in light of the adversities experienced in the conflict zone, the separation between children and mothers has created a significant compounding vulnerability for many children. Psychologists have linked PTSD symptoms in some children directly to the separation from their mothers upon arrival to their country of origin after repatriation.[90] As an example, in Sweden, where social services authorities were responsible for implementing temporary separations following repatriation, professional assessments by medical doctors, psychologists, and child psychiatrists have, in multiple instances involving Swedish returnee families, opposed

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87 *Rights of the Child.* United Nations General Assembly. UN Doc A/RES/74/133 (18 December 2019)

88 Loots, Gerrit, Jamaï, Hannan, *Reception and (re)integration of returning children from detention camps in North-east Syria. The return.* Faculty of Social Sciences; Vrije Universiteit Brussel - VUB (2022) www.reguide.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Report-reintegration-of-the-children-.pdf

89 Schneider, Lynn, in the webinar *Human Rights Through Arts, Conversations on Cinema, Justice & Rights - "Children of the Enemy".* Essex Human Rights Centre (20 November 2025) www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6cBY1kqF-Mo&t=2173s

90 ibid

prolonged separation due to its negative impact on the child's wellbeing.[91]

When children subsequently were reunited with their mothers, their condition improved, and symptoms gradually stabilised.

The child's needs, in relation to the mother's parenting capacity and circumstances, require assessment by competent authorities and may be subject to judicial oversight, according to Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.[92] In such contexts, it is relevant that conditions allow for observation of the interaction between the child and the mother, including the child's well-being and development, as well as the mother's responsiveness to the child's needs.[93] Unless remaining with the mother presents a genuine risk to the child, maintaining or restoring the relationship has shown to be a critical step for successful reintegration.[94]

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91 Eriksson, Beatrice, *Reception of Returnees: Reintegration and Rehabilitation after Repatriation from Northeast Syria - Guidance Document for Emerging Practices With Lessons From Sweden.* Repatriate the Children Sweden (2022) www.repatriatethechildren.org/reception-of-returnees

92 *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child

93 Eriksson, Beatrice, *Reception of Returnees: Reintegration and Rehabilitation after Repatriation from Northeast Syria.* Repatriate the Children Sweden (2022) www.repatriatethechildren.org/reception-of-returnees

94 ibid

Prospects For Children Repatriated With Their Mothers

Repatriation enables protection of vulnerable children and is relevant in efforts to prevent further cycles of harm, including continued exposure to environments associated with violence and violent extremism.

Based on available information from repatriations carried out by multiple countries over the past seven years, as well as follow-up with returnee families, the overall outlook for children repatriated together with their mothers is generally positive.

Observations from these cases indicate that, where children are returned with their primary caregiver and receive appropriate support, there are clear prospects for stabilisation and recovery over time. For children exposed to severe stress, the risk of future mental health difficulties may be reduced where their environment includes protective factors and where important adults in their everyday lives are enabled to provide consistent care and support. Needs will vary depending on individual experiences and the conditions to which individuals return.

The possibility for children to live in safety and dignity with their family, to begin schooling, and to have access to adequate nutrition and positive social activities are essential elements for their wellbeing. These factors, together with support from extended family members and other key individuals who remain present in the child's life beyond formal interventions, contribute to more stable and sustainable reintegration outcomes. Support and interventions from authorities, including social services and healthcare, as well as from civil society organisations, should aim to empower mothers and facilitate their recovery and reintegration. Mental health and psychosocial support are key components in this process. A multi-agency approach involving relevant authorities and civil society organisations, including FoRB informed actors including faith-based communities, with contextual knowledge and trust-building approaches,

supports a holistic reception process.[95] Cooperation between governmental and non-governmental actors can assist in assessing and meeting the needs of families, while also strengthening emotional, psychological, social, and theological resilience. Mentorship programmes and non-judgmental, sustained support for returning mothers have been shown to support reintegration and help build trust. Access to appropriate guidance and counseling may contribute to strengthening resilience and reducing vulnerability to future harm.

The balance between long-term support availability and respect for family autonomy and self-determination, including recognizing that for many, healing includes the right to start over in life without being defined by their past, can be helpful to enable this transition.

Drawing on seven years of professional experience following up on returned families, RTC's experience is that repatriation, combined with adequate reintegration support, contributes to improved protection and wellbeing outcomes for children, while reducing the risk of future exploitation by extremist actors. Well-prepared systems, grounded in legal safeguards, due process, and the principle that returnees are treated as any other citizens without stigmatization, can also support longer-term objectives related to social cohesion, institutional trust, and public safety.

Key Principles for Reception, Reintegration, and Rehabilitation

CHILD-CENTERED APPROACH

All reception measures must be guided by the best interests of the child, as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This includes ensuring children are protected from harm, treated with human dignity, and supported in their emotional, educational, and developmental needs. Children should be given the opportunity to express their views, and their perspectives should be taken seriously in all matters that affect them.

INDIVIDUALIZED CASE MANAGEMENT

Returnees' needs and risks must be assessed on a case-by-case basis, recognizing that every person and family has experienced conflict and detention differently. A standardized or one-size-fits-all approach risks overlooking spe-

95 Ní Aoláin, Fionnuala. *Visit to Uzbekistan: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism*, United Nations Human Rights Council, UN Doc A/HRC/49/45/Add.1, (3 March 2022) www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc4945add1-visit-uzbekistan-report-special-rapporteur-promotion-and

cific vulnerabilities or strengths. Personalized assessments are essential for providing appropriate interventions, as well as meaningful, and timely support.

FAMILY-CENTERED REINTEGRATION

Keeping families together, or ensuring timely and compassionate reunification, is vital for psychological recovery, especially for children. A stable family environment fosters emotional healing and helps returnees rebuild trust and identity. In most cases, the mother has been the child's only attachment figure and source of safety throughout their upbringing, making the bond especially critical to preserve. Arriving in the country can feel like a crisis-like experience for a child. In such a vulnerable moment, they should not be deprived of their only source of safety and emotional stability. Whenever possible, interventions should strengthen the family unit and avoid unnecessary disruptions to these primary bonds of care and psychological and emotional safety.

MULTI-STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION AND TRUST-BUILDING

Coordination across government agencies, civil society including faith leaders, and local communities is essential to provide holistic, effective, and dignified support. Collaborative efforts must prioritize building trust with returnee families, many of whom may feel uncertain or fearful upon arrival. Establishing respectful, transparent, and consistent communication from the start fosters confidence in public systems and strengthens the foundation for long-term reintegration.

DO NO HARM PERSPECTIVE

All interventions must aim to support and ease returnees' transition - not complicate it. The guiding approach should be one of sensitivity and responsiveness to the unique needs of each family. Support measures should be based on joint planning, individualised assessment, and informed consent. Respecting a family's autonomy and readiness is crucial for building trust and enabling long-term stability.

Recommendations

CHILD-CENTRED PRINCIPLES (TO GUIDE ALL ACTIONS BY ALL STAKEHOLDERS)

- Treat children, and those who were children upon arriving to the so-called caliphate, are treated primarily as victims of conflict and rights-holders
- Ensure that the best interests of the children guide all decisions
- Prevent further harm, including exposure to violence, exploitation, and instability
- Protect family unity and avoid unnecessary separation of children from their mothers
- Prioritise long-term recovery, development, and reintegration

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA, AND - WHERE APPLICABLE - TO THE GOVERNMENT OF IRAQ

- End arbitrary and unlawful detention of children and their family members
- Identify and locate children and women displaced following the collapse of Al Hol camp
- Take immediate measures to protect children and their family members, and prevent trafficking, exploitation, and abuse
- Identify all detained children and other individuals and assess their individual circumstances and protection needs
- Facilitate access to consular services for all third-country nationals
- Enable and support communication between detainees/displaced persons and their countries of origin
- Engage with countries of origin for processes of safe and timely deportation of third-country nationals

TO COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN OF DETAINEES AND DISPLACED THIRD-COUNTRY NATIONALS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

- Identify and assume responsibility for all nationals and their family members in Syria and Iraq
- Provide consular assistance to detained and displaced nationals
- Issue emergency travel documents without delay
- Establish and implement procedures for safe, dignified, and coordinated repatriation
- Avoid policies that result in the separation of children from their mothers, according to the best interests of the child
- Ensure immediate access to reintegration and rehabilitation services, including access to healthcare, education, and psychosocial support upon return
- Investigate and, where appropriate, prosecute adults suspected of crimes in accordance with due process and fair trial standards

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- Support and enable coordination and implementation of repatriation, protection, and legal processes as described above
- Establish and support mechanisms for third-country resettlement of individuals who cannot safely return to their countries of origin due to risks of refoulement, persecution, or serious harm

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About Repatriate the Children (RTC)

Repatriate the Children (RTC) is a non-governmental, non-profit children's rights organisation committed to promoting the dignity, safety, and long-term well-being of children affected by conflict and detention. RTC advocates for knowledge-based decision-making where humanitarian principles, the rule of law, and global security converge. RTC operates through two national branches in Sweden and Denmark.

RTC has played an active role in advocating for the repatriation of third-country national children and their families from northeast Syria. The organisation contributed to early efforts to return children and their mothers from the camps and was involved in supporting some of the first repatriations of orphaned children to Sweden and Denmark in 2019.

RTC has supported the reception, reintegration, and rehabilitation of returnee families in Sweden and Denmark, with a focus on centring the best interests of the child and promoting a rights-based approach to post-conflict, post-detention recovery.

Drawing on its operational experience, RTC offers technical support and policy guidance to states and communities developing or improving reception frameworks for returnee families. This includes guidance on child protection, psychosocial support, civil society collaboration, and strategies for long-term social cohesion.

Through close engagement with returnee families and frontline practitioners, RTC provides practical, context-sensitive expertise to help governments and other relevant stakeholders implement effective, humane, and sustainable reception systems.

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