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Influencing and Promoting Global Peace and Security



# Horizon Insights

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**Reintegration of ISIS Returnees:  
A Myth or Reality?**

**Perspective: Can We Repatriate the  
ISIS Children?**

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**Questioning the Sectarian Discourse:  
A More Holistic Look into Changing  
Dynamics of the Syrian Civil War**

**Life Inside Syria's al-Hol Camp**

**Book Review: Russia's Border War  
and Frozen Conflicts**

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## Foreword

### Dear Reader,

We are happy to welcome you again with this third issue of the Horizon Insights in 2020. The issue in your hand has a special focus on the ongoing civil war in Syria and its repercussions onto Europe. It will have four articles and a book review. Here's a quick look inside...

The first article is about issue of returnees and pathways into their reintegration / rehabilitatiton. The three authors, each representing a specific outlook based on their expertise highlight the chances Europe has in terms of reintegration of the returnees and risks concomitant with their return. The article carries pieces of interviews conducted with European FTFs in Iraqi prisons to provide insight and explores the potential role restorative justice can play for their reintegration alongside existing approaches.

The second article focusses on repatriation of the children held in the custody of SDF Forces in Syria. Taking a more case-specific approach, Speckhard and Ellenberg delve deeper into individual cases to highlight various aspects of repatriation of these children such as political, legal, societal and moral. Highlighting their innocence as they have no role in the crimes committed by their parents, the authors attract readers attention to the fact that leaving these minors across camps in Syria means risking them become a future generation of ideologically indoctrinated militants.

The third article is about questioning the sectarian discourse of the Syrian Civil War with a more holistic look into changing dynamics of the protracted civil war. The author argues Syrian civil war is not solely a sectarian civil war. But the involvement of actors with ethnosectarian agendas has rendered as one perceived as such. The author invites readers to be careful about over emphasized speech act of the actors in an effort to use their own agenda while politicizing the security environment.

The fourth article is an effort to reflect the camp life in the much debated and publicized al-Hol Camp in Syria. The author accomplishes to give the reader an alternative interpretation of what (s)he reads in newspapers as she unlocks new insights about “pretense of loyalty – financial support – harsh living conditions” triangle to survive in the camp. Based on 20 in-depth interviews she attracts attention of policy makers about risks of assessing the situation of the nationals in the camps based on their citizens' online footprints and demands government support not to leave nationals open to the offers from others.

Last, but not least, we have a book review on James J. Coyle's book “Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts”. Coyle's work comes at a critical juncture where the issue of frozen conflicts in post-Soviet countries and the Russian foreign policy pattern that feeds onto destabilizing its borderlands are subject to intense debate. The author recommends the West to come up with ways to increase the cost for Russia, until it is no longer in the Russian interest to encourage frozen conflicts. The reviewer accomplishes to carry main message of the author and disassembling his methodology in expounding the subject.

Sincerely yours,

Beyond the Horizon ISSG

# Reintegration of ISIS Returnees: A Myth or Reality?

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Onur Sultan<sup>1</sup>, Emanuela Biffi<sup>2</sup>, Pilar Cebrián<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

The returnees, their repatriation and measures to be taken to ascertain their reintegration into their home countries attract the attention of scholars, politicians and general public. Despite current wide public aversion, it is estimated that nationals of the member states currently filling prisons and camps in North and East Syria will be repatriated due to internal and external pressures in the near future. This article aims to inform policy makers and relevant authorities on the latest situation regarding current and potential future returnees and explore the role of restorative justice for their reintegration to their home countries alongside existing approaches. The article ends by an array of policy recommendations of the authors.

**Keywords:** Restorative justice, ISIS, foreign terrorist fighter, FTF, returnee, reintegration, rehabilitation, support circle

## Introduction

The issue of returning fighters that has become subject of so much political debate has already taken place in trickles and waves since 2013. About one third of those who have travelled to war zone to join various groups like ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) or al-Nusra have already returned to their home countries in Europe. In the meanwhile, thousands of captured ISIS fighters and their families currently fill overcrowded, crumbling, makeshift prisons or camps in Syria (Seldin, 2019). On top of the limited Kurdish capacity to guard and look after so many prisoners, there is also risk of collapse of the Kurdish administration in the North and East of Syria.

On 9 October 2019, Turkish troops conducted cross-border operations to create a 30 km-deep safe-zone within the country. As a result of this Turkish offensive, more than 800 ISIS detainees (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), escaped (Turak, 2019). The collapse of the Kurdish autonomous region due to Turkish incursions and -as a by-product the escape of ISIS detainees, guarded by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), is a scenario considered within range of possibility. Besides, Turkey has also started to deport captured foreign fighters to their home countries, including Europe. In an interview, Turkish minister of interior Soyly said, Turkey deported 780 out of more than 1000 foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) to their countries of origin in 2019 (Daily Sabah with AA, 2020). This comes as an addition to 430 FTFs deported to France, UK, Germany and Spain before 2019.<sup>4</sup> This massive exodus back may overwhelm the response system in their home countries and it could be used by extreme-right populist parties as a tool to bolster their position in the political system.

In February 2019, the US President Trump made a call to EU to take back the 800 European ISIS fighters captured by US forces in Syria and Iraq, and put them on trial (Wintour, 2019). The US is the leading state of the Global Coalition against ISIS and has been in charge of funding the prisons renovations and other inmates' expenses.<sup>5</sup> It is not possible to say the EU has responded positively to this call. The main

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<sup>1</sup> Onur Sultan is senior research fellow and project coordinator at Beyond the Horizon International Strategic Studies Group ([www.behorizon.org](http://www.behorizon.org)). In this article, he contributed with the overview of the current problem of returnees in Europe and existing approaches to their reintegration.

<sup>2</sup> Emanuela Biffi is a project officer at the European Forum for Restorative Justice ([www.euforumrj.org](http://www.euforumrj.org)). Among others, she follows the EFRJ initiatives in relation to violent extremism, radicalization, hate crime and polarization. In this article, she contributed with the reflections on the potential of restorative justice for the reintegration of returnees.

<sup>3</sup> Pilar Cebrián is an investigative journalist who has conducted interviews to 26 European-born ISIS members jailed in Syria and Iraq (she's the only foreign researcher who got access in Baghdad). The research is funded by BBVA (Leonardo Grants 2018) and will be published in a book in 2021. Cebrián is a Middle East/War reporter based in Istanbul for ATresMedia Spanish network.

<sup>4</sup> This figure was given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Turkey to the third author, Pilar Cebrián.

<sup>5</sup> According to the Global Coalition spokesperson, Col. Sean Ryan, the US had donated \$1.6 millions for the rehabilitation of northern Syria prisons in order them to meet international standards.



European rationale is that this battle-hardened group trained with weapons and holding extremist views could radicalize European youth or carry out new attacks. The root causes for such fear include **political risks** connected to the public aversion for the returns,<sup>6</sup> **security risks** associated with not accurately understanding the real motivations behind returns, and finally **incapacity to monitor and prosecute** returnees due to relatively lenient criminal laws effective in Europe.

### Efforts to Block / Delay Returns

In February 2020, Syrian Kurds stated they would hold trials for 1000 male and 4000 female Islamic State fighters from 50 countries. This came after failure to agree on if and how they would be repatriated to their home countries to face justice or setup of an internationally recognized tribunal (Sabagh, 2020). A leaked draft agreement between the Kurds and the EU foresaw among other items the following:

- a. Separation of the women based on their radicalization level and level of faithfulness to ISIS within Al-Hol Camp.
- b. Immediate set-up of schools to separate children from mothers during daytime and -if possible- during night through boarding schools to prevent radicalization.
- c. Categorization of the women as:
  - (1) Those who have been dragged there under pressure and have “shown themselves innocent”, and
  - (2) Those who have knowingly joined the terrorist group.
- d. Rapid repatriation of women in the first category to their home countries without delay “in consultation with their country”.
- e. Trial of the second group together with men through local courts that would not deliver death penalty, but would punish those:
  - (1) who committed the worst atrocities with 15 years to life imprisonment, and
  - (2) who can only be accused of membership of IS with up to four years in prison.
- f. Repatriation of those convicted also “after a period of time and in good conduct” (Vlierden, 2020)

It is unlikely that European foreign fighters and their families will be tried in local courts for many reasons. The primary reason is that SDF is not a state actor recognized by European member states. Especially considering the Turkish stance vis-à-vis Kurdish administration and the fact that Turkey is a NATO member taking role in the Coalition, such finality becomes even more elusive. More importantly, SDF does not have capacity to try them with Western standards. Lawyer André Seebregts who has witnessed the trials of many of the women articulates his concerns as: *“I was there myself at the court last summer and no trial can now be conducted by our standards. There is no question of hearing witnesses or assistance from a lawyer. In fifteen minutes, a case is ready and tried”* (Rosman, 2020).

It is also difficult to really differentiate those who are die-hard ISIS fanatics and those who have “shown themselves innocent”. A recent article by Vera Miranova shows how economic and social dynamics take over in defining the behavior of the women in camps. As ISIS supporters send money to those still holding fast to the group and its ideology, many women in camps pretend to be aligned with the ideology, enforcing ISIS moral code in the camp or in online chat groups to receive supporter money

<sup>6</sup> The European public opinion is generally against repatriations or return of foreign fighters and their family members. For example, an online survey conducted on 27 and 28 February 2019 by Odoxa-Dentsu Consulting for Le Figaro and France Info with involvement of 1001 French nationals at the age of 18 and above shows, 82 % of the respondents approve prosecution of the jihadis in Iraq even though they risk receiving death penalty. The French public is against any kind of return including that of children. For the latter, 33% of respondents wants the maximum effort to be done to bring back the children whereas 67 % wants Iraq and Syria take care of them. In the words of the authors of the survey, “Faced with the perceived risks, the main principles of law, freedom and even the issue of the death penalty do not weigh heavily in the balance for our fellow citizens [French society]” (Leclerc, 2019). In Norway, the repatriation of one woman with two of her children caused Norway's anti-immigration Progress Party (right-wing, populist) to leave Prime Minister Erna Solberg's coalition after six years and two months being part of it. The party argued the risk of allowing a person linked to ISIS into Norway outweighs the country's humanitarian duty to help the child (AFP, 2020).

(2020). The question is how to differentiate who is real and who is a pretender before reaching a sound judgement or implementing a return program.

### The Size of the Target Groups

During the retreat and fall of ISIS, people living under ISIS controlled areas, as well as families and children of ISIS members, were relocated to two refugee and IDP camps (Internally Displaced Persons) in Northeastern Syria, namely Al-Hawl (also spelled as Hol) and Roj. A good understanding on the number of European detainees in those camps will shed light on the size of the problem.

**The Al-Hawl** camp is located in the east of Hassakah, close to the Iraq-Syria border. As of May 2019, the camp accommodated 73,000 residents of which 11,000 were neither Iraqi nor Syrian. Between December 2018 and March 2019, all those captured were primarily brought to this camp, except for men above 14-15 years old. Also, the men released from SDF controlled prisons were allowed to join their families. The camp is currently divided into three parts. The first two parts have been allocated to Syrian and Iraqi nationals whereas a fenced third part hosts third party nationals including those of US and Europe (Saad, 2020). The camp has intermittently received massive media coverage featuring women bullying those not living up to the ISIS ideology under the terror group's rule and attacking guards. More recently the camp has been subject to public discussion after the death of 8 children under five due to malnutrition, and poor health and sanitary conditions (UN, 2020).

Unfortunately, there are no exact figures on the number of ISIS linked family members in Al-Hawl camp. But, the camp is currently estimated to hold approximately **68,000 individuals** (Saad, 2020). A recent UN report estimates the number of **children** as **45,000** including those born as result of rape. Within the total, **28,000** are children of foreign fighters from more than 60 countries of whom **20,000** are **from Iraq**. (The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2020)

UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore states: *"Children in Al Hol, like all children affected by conflict, have the right to humanitarian assistance. Those born to foreign nationals have the right to be safeguarded, including with legal documentation, family reunification and repatriation to their home countries when it is in their best interest"* (UN, 2020). The number of foreign women and children (neither Iraqi nor Syrian) within the camp is approximately 10,000. 2500 of them should be transferred to Roj camp when the construction of new shelters is finished. The expansion of the Al-Hawl camp is also planned (RIC, 2020).

The camp **Roj** currently hosts **1700** ISIS family members and children of whom **1200** are **foreigners** (International Crisis Group, 2020). The camp, with the capacity of 470 shelters, is currently under construction to add some 400 shelters to its capacity (OCHA, 2020). It came under spotlights after a British national, Shamima Begum made an interview with a journalist that resulted in stripping away of her nationality. Due to what happened to her, current residents of the camp are unwilling to give statements to journalists (Moaveni, 2019). About 2000 "less radicalized" women and their children are currently being transferred to this camp from Al-Hawl (Omar, 2020). The main difference between camp Roj and Al-Hawl is that the former is home to more modern looking women that openly reject ISIS. Here, 100% of those in the camp have been identified, interrogated and photographed, and women are not allowed to wear black colour, cover their face and chant ISIS slogans. The camp also has an education facility with limited capacity.

If the figures mentioned above are put together, a rough estimation can be made that 11,200 ISIS foreign fighter families and children currently fill special compartments in Al-Hawl and Roj camps. Save the Children estimates that until 13 October 2019, there were **8,704** children of foreign origin of whom **85% were under age of 12** and **45% (4400) were under age of 5** (Save the Children, 2019). This figure roughly matches UN figures. As regards children of European origin, in November 2019, UNHCR human rights official Marie-Dominique Parent told the European Parliament that roughly 700 to 750 children with European links persisted in camps in the north and east of Syria, some 300 of them being French

(France 24, 2020).

### Disengagement, Deradicalisation, Rehabilitation

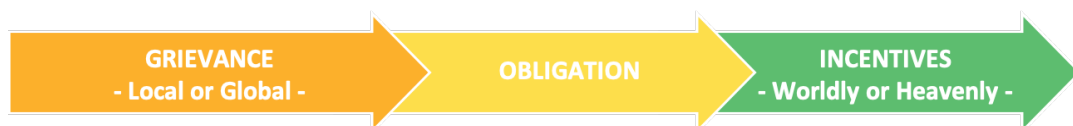
An important element of repatriations – if it happens- is to find ways to disengage / deradicalize the returnees and reintegrate them to their home countries. Member States, based on their historical, societal and local context, have tried to create structures that will work to that end, each with its own character. The programs are still in evolution, getting media coverage from time to time due to their successes (The Media Line Staff, 2020) or failures (Jacinto, 2017). In December 2019, the issue became a focal point for public scrutiny because of the London bridge attack involving a released terrorist offender who stabbed two participants at a conference on criminal rehabilitation in London (Shaw, 2019). The perpetrator, Usman Khan had participated in two rehabilitation schemes before release. Immediately after the event, the British government published recidivism rates of terrorist offenders to vent off public pressure. Accordingly, between January 2013 and December 2019 (7 years), 196 prisoners had been released in England and Wales and 7 were convicted again for terrorism-related offences, bringing the rate of recidivism to 3,6 % (Silke & Morrison, 2020).

In continental Europe, two similar statistics should be mentioned to enable better comparison. The first one belonging to 189 individuals supervised by 'team TER' (Terrorism, Extremism and Radicalization) under probation in the Netherlands between 2012-2018 shows 11 re-offended. Of the offenses, only 8 were terrorism-related. If we omit non-terror related 3 re-offenses, the rate of re-offense among terror-related crimes is 4,23%. A similar survey in Belgium on 557 perpetrators of jihadi related offences between 1990-2019 shows a modest 2,3% recidivism rate with only 13 re-offenders (Silke & Morrison, 2020). When compared with other crime types, the recidivism rate for terror-related crimes is extremely low: for example, in the Netherlands, the average recidivism rate for other crime types is 45-46 %.

In all cases, current and future returnees will be one day released from prison. A recent study by Globalsec that uses open source data over 199 terrorism convicts from 11 EU countries (including returnees) indicates 113 (57%) of them will be released from prison by the end of 2023 (Rekawek, Szucs, Babíková, & Hamel, 2019). For some countries like Belgium the situation is critical as most returnees will be released in 2020 as a result of general practice of 5 years sentences (Renard, et al., 2018). For the overall population of the returnees, there is no publicly available statistics.

### Is rehabilitation possible?

To start with, there is need for greater understanding on which push and pull factors influenced a person to make the journey to a warzone, leaving their families and friends behind. This relates to better understanding different human needs and requires analysis on a case-by-case basis for the formulation of a strategy for rehabilitation. Each individual grows and interacts in a specific context and the root causes or motivators relevant for his or her decision to join terrorist groups should be well understood and addressed, while new ones are not created. ISIS as well as others of its like use an unchanging linear three-step narrative to incite the youth to join their ranks (see figure below).



The dominant narratives indicate that terrorist groups initially elevate the target audience emotionally by exaggerating real or perceived grievances or creating new ones. Then the effort is directed to convince the audience that it is incumbent on him / her to contribute to efforts to build a caliphate/ Islamic state. In the final stage, the audience is convinced that he / she will get worldly / heavenly gains upon joining the advertised terrorist organization.



The audience attributes different values to the three different steps in the mechanism and there might be changes in the order. A research including semi structured interviews with 63 ISIS defectors by Speckhard et al. shows how different contexts create different motivations among target groups. Among 63 interviewees, for 33 Syrians two main transversal motivators have been reported as the desire to join the uprising against Assad and the heavy coercion from ISIS. For Syrian militia members, the primary motivators were the fact that ISIS was more successful and better equipped on the battlefield than other jihadi groups. Young respondents have reported that the promise of unheard salaries, marriages and cars were extremely stimulating. For the locals in the towns that fell under ISIS control, the main motivator was the fact that not joining meant suffering, targeted for punishments and potential starvation. For the Westerners, *“offers of a real salary, arranged marriages, sex slaves for men, traditional living for women, free housing and other amenities, along with the honors bestowed by ISIS on foreign fighters who come to Syria and Iraq were real attractions as many felt their lives to be lacking dignity, purpose, significance, and honor.”* (2018, p. 7)

Redouan Safdi, an imam that is involved in the deradicalization of FTFs alongside home-grown terrorists and radicals in a Belgian prison designed for terrorist offenders says : *“When dealing with such a person, trying to start a deradicalization program, the first question I would always ask is, ‘Why did this person go?’”* During his inquiries into the real causes for travels, Safdi says: *“They would usually start talking about that they have love for Islam, they want to live in an Islamic state, they want to live somewhere where shariah is implemented. When you go deeper with them in the conversation, when conversations are more meaningful, I would hardly hear them speak about Islamic state or the implementation of shariah. All I would hear is the injustices they have experienced in the past: racism, discrimination, poverty, lack of opportunity. [...] The majority of them are very young people. Many of them haven’t even reached the age of 18. They are frustrated, alienated socially. Young people who are in search of identity, a meaning in life. Young people that did not feel at home in their own countries where they were born, who felt they were not appreciated”* (Safdi, 2020)

Along the same lines, in an interview conducted by the first author, Onur Sultan, with a social worker in Brussels, the interviewee said: *“In each case we see a person making the travel to Syria and Iraq, if we scratch the surface [if we delve deeper into the issue], we find a familial, social or economic problem. The perceived urgency or greatness of that problem pushes the person to think if he goes, he will have a better life there and leave that problem behind.”*

When asked about if he thinks rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees is possible, the imam Safdi says for a great number of them it is possible depending on only one condition. He says: *“We have to be able and we have to be ready to listen to these people.”* He continues: *“By listening I mean we have to get rid of racism, discrimination. We have to give these people a feeling that they are wanted, they are needed. We have to make sure these people feel at home. But this is the one thing that nobody is ready to do.”*

Another interview with an exit worker in Ghent verifies what Safdi says. He told the first author that one of the inmates in the prison was extremely touched by a letter from his secondary school teacher addressed to him and totally changed his views towards others. He continued: *“However petty and simplistic it might seem, small gestures from time to time that shows they are cared for and respected creates great changes in their behaviors”* (Safdi, 2020).

So, although a positive attitude respecting the dignity of the person nearly always creates impact, there is need for understanding the real motivators for each individual. This is a key-message when considering any type of intervention (restorative, rehabilitative, etc.) as a response to any type of criminal behavior.

### Testimonies from European jihadists

The neo-jihadis or the new jihadi generation meet different criteria than the fighters in previous jihadi battlefields. The foreigner combatants within the mujahideen (mainly from Arab countries, Pakistan or Afghanistan), who were against the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan in the the 80s, responded to the

Abdullah Azzam's fatwa forcing every muslim to wage jihad. They were insurgents immersed in Sala-fi-jihadist or Wahhabi circles. This evolved into a less romantic and more corporative fight in Iraq, after the 2003 American-led invasion. Few westerners filled the jihadi ranks but they were knowledgeable in jihadi theology. **This purist profile changed in 2011 onwards.** The new generation of jihadis are theologically ignorants that use religion as a pretext to rebel against injustice or to escape the path of failure. The majority of Europeans who traveled to the so-called caliphate are millennials (born in 1981-1993 and grown up amidst economic instability, armed conflicts and the emergence of the Internet). They were vulnerable to a more visual and low elaborated narrative shared in social media that impelled an express radicalization process (sometimes one year or less). The fact that being part of a terrorist group materialised due to their failures rather than their ambitions, is an indicator that returnees rehabilitation is achievable. The establishment of an Islamic State, and their society, was never their *raison d'être*, but a tool to get a second opportunity or rise against the system. If they can be given a hope or clear path for success in their home countries, rehabilitation can be possible.

*"I wanted to enrol in the army that defends muslims, cause no armed forces safeguard muslim interests in the world. When Gaza is being bombed by Israel, who defends Palestinians?; when Syrians are being bombed by Assad, who goes to protect them?"*, asks rhetorically the Belgian ISIS prisoner Tarik Jadaoun, who fought alongside the terrorist group in Kobane, Deir ez-zor, Baiji and Mosul. Jadaoun was eventually sentenced to death by Rusafa court in Baghdad in may 2018. Paradoxically, **most of European-born ISIS recruits migrated to the caliphate in the seek for justice.** Their perception is that Muslims are being oppressed by world powers, like foreign intervention in the Middle East conflicts, and they conclude the same for Europe. They think Europe is in war against Islam, and there is no place for their values and traditions in the public sphere. *"The wear of hijab was forbidden in school, and it's part of our identity"*, recalls the Belgian ISIS hisbah (religious police) member Bilal al-Marchohi, sentenced to the death in Baghdad in March 2019. The Antwerp-born prisoner was raised in the paradigmatic Borgerhout neighbourhood, who became the Belgian front between police and migrants descendants after Sharia4Belgium gained popularity in 2010. He was early politicized, even as a minor attended pro-Palestinian demonstrations or a public debate on the hijab with the Minister of Education.

Many citizens in these areas of Belgium, like Borgerhout (Antwerp), Verviers or Vilvoorde —where 29 youngsters joined the fight in Syria— complain that Muslim discrimination is systematic. Neighbours agree that access to labor market is limited, and they can't get high qualified positions. *"My father came to Belgium as an engineer. But he was only accepted to clean trains at night for a very low salary. We grew up seeing my father at home the whole day, almost depressed because he never achieved his goals"*, says Elias T., a returnee from Vilvoorde, Belgium, who came back in 2013 after several months in Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen, a Syrian Jihadi brigade.

*"Every muslim dreams with the idea of living in an Islamic state, in a real Islamic state. For me, coming here has been my great opportunity"*, states German Lamia K., the first European woman sentenced to death in Iraq for ISIS membership; although the verdict was commuted for life in prison after the appeal process. Lamia, a 52-year-old woman of Moroccan descent, refers to the valuable significance of the migration in Islamic theology, the hijrah; a concept that has been profoundly manipulated by the ISIS media department. Hadiths and quranic verses have been chopped or transformed and publicized for the terrorist group political interests in the propaganda platforms. The theological status of ISIS publications triggered thousands of Europeans to move to Syria and Iraq. Lamia was in charge of her disabled daughter so she'd spend hours at home and suffered from loneliness and depression. That is what brought her to an online chat room to socialise. Nevertheless she ended up in jihadi rooms and, according to German intelligence files, she recruited dozens of people via Paltalk.

*"We were very ignorant, very stupid. We didn't have any knowledge of Islamic science"*, says Caner Cankurtaran, an ISIS Belgian combatant jailed in northeastern Syria, *"we didn't have any base of Islam. Why? Because our parents never brought us to the mosque. I didn't know how to pray. I only knew I couldn't drink any alcohol or eat any pork meat. Then I started learning, but I did it in an extreme way, and that's not right"*. Cankurtaran refers to the fact that his generation has turned to religion looking

for answers to their failed integration in European society. Their parents or grandparents migrated to Western European countries and spent their time concentrated in their jobs; however their sons still felt different from their classmates (mainly because of their name or skin colour). In the search of an explanation they turned to religion which was perceived as the differentiator. But the radical discourse was filling the vacuum of a unified Islamic narrative in Europe. Therefore radical individuals linked to Al Qaeda or ISIS got the mosques leadership and taught a vision of Islam that opposes western values. *“When I was in Brussels I’d hear that we had to leave Europe as soon as possible because we couldn’t stay there”,* says Cankurtaran, *“the same way ‘You can’t live seeing the fire set by infidels’”,* he concludes quoting a hadith given by ISIS.

While identity, discrimination and deprivation are common drivers in Muslim-background radicalization, for ISIS converts, who constitute 23% of the interviewees,<sup>7</sup> the individual and the family dimension play a stronger role. Many European teenagers took part in the ISIS proto-state, as the jihadi brides: many underage girls moved to the caliphate to marry a jihadi combatant. In this case, embarking on a journey to Syria was conceived as an act of rebellion against the parenthood and the school. Linda Wenzel, the German minor who travelled to Syria at the age of 16, was being bullied at school and suffered from relationship difficulties with her mother. The violence broadcasted during the Paris attacks in November 2015 was a catalyst for her radicalization. *“I asked my mother, ‘why do they do this?’ This is one of the reasons I started researching (on ISIS) in Facebook (...) The first thing I liked is that I wouldn’t have to smoke (as her classmates were doing) and I wouldn’t cut my self anymore”.* She firstly converted and then left to Syria in a timeframe of seven months.

Sometimes the family history has influenced one member to turn into jihadi radicalization, as was the case of the French ISIS member Léonard Lopez. He’s the descendant of a Polish Jew massacred in the Auschwitz concentration camp, and of a Spanish anarchist exiled to Algeria. Along the years, the concept of war losers passed on to the next generations. Lopez converted to Islam at the age of 17 and he crystallised the hunger for justice and victory. In most of the interviewees’ families, common elements re-occur: migration, exile and war. Many of them are descendants of migrants who traveled to Europe in order to escape violence, repression or scarcity. But others, as it’s the case of Léonard Lopez, have grown up in a family that was hit by the big war events of the 20th century.

This shows the importance of dialogue, understanding and efforts to ‘close bounds’ after a conflict has ended. Restorative justice introduces a new tool for the society to be able to move forward and close a chapter, in this case the ISIS caliphate and its resonance in Europe with dozens of terrorist attacks. Restorative justice offers an important practice to apply justice, take responsibility, show solidarity, speak about different truths and prevent that resentment, revenge, humiliation that are inherited by next generations, averting these future generations of further harm.

### **Restorative Justice: Can it be a solution?**

As mentioned above, there are some main fears, risks and considerations behind the issue of foreign fighters’ return in Europe: the strong public opinion fearing returns in local communities; the criminal justice and security responses often incapable to understand and tackle the root causes of radicalized behaviors; and the ethical considerations of proposing justice responses in line with the core democratic values of our societies. Despite the specificity of the case of returnees, these fears, risks and considerations are not much different from the responses given to other types of serious (but ordinary) crimes. Based on these core concerns, in the 1980s’ Europe, a group of academics and practitioners started to challenge the “traditional” criminal justice system, defining restorative justice as a set of values and practice principles for victims to be heard and for offenders to take responsibility over the harm done.

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<sup>7</sup> Pilar Cebrián’s research shows 6 out of 26 interviewees are muslim converts.

Restorative justice is based on these generally accepted assumptions:

- Crime is a consequence of certain social conditions and broken relationships.
- Communities are responsible for removing or at least reducing those social conditions leading to crime.
- The consequences of crime have a societal and an individual dimension.

Restorative justice adopts different communication practice models (e.g. victim offender mediation, restorative circles, conferences, etc.) to tailor the justice process to individual cases and needs. Its goal is **“addressing harm or the risk of harm through engaging all those affected in coming to a common understanding and agreement on how the harm or wrongdoing can be repaired and justice achieved”** (European Forum for Restorative Justice, 2018). This definition, focusing on the main outcomes instead of on different practice models, has been the result of a movement that attempts to bring restorative justice values and practice principles beyond its implementation in the criminal justice system. Indeed, in recent years its areas of implementation grew as a response to conflicts in schools, workplaces, neighbourhoods and communities.

It is exactly this wider expansion of its scope that makes restorative justice highly relevant to returns of foreign fighters. Restorative justice presents opportunities at different stages of the criminal procedure (pre-, during and post-sentence) for returnees but also for their families, communities of belonging and new hosting communities. In practice, it proposes interventions that are interactive, participatory, tailor-made, open ended, and non-directive. This goes beyond the mere risk assessment oriented approaches usually adopted with returnees; the focus on establishing relationships and constructive interactions with different affected groups has proven to support processes of de-radicalisation, disengagement, desistance, and reintegration (RAN, 2020). The table below is an adaptation of the findings with politically motivated prisoners in Northern Ireland (Chapman, 2018) and more generally with cases of violent extremism, intergroup conflicts, hate crime and polarization, as there is no research yet on the use of restorative justice with returnees.

| Specificities of cases involving returnees   | Opportunities for restorative justice   | Difficulties and challenges  |
|--|---|--|
| Returnees belonged to a “wider offender community” that supported their beliefs and actions, strengthening loyalty, commitment, and solidarity with the group. | Practices including the wider community (e.g. restorative circles) are preferred in cases of polarisation and intergroup conflict, thus they are relevant also for the reintegration of returnees.  | Returnees may deny the individual responsibility for their violent actions.  |
| Their victims are considered enemies belonging to a “wider targeted community”.  |   | Returnees may not recognize their victims as they are targeted enemies of the cause.                                       |
| Returnees may not identify with the label “offender”, while the wider community may keep on dehumanizing them (not considering them as human beings).          | Restorative justice practices avoid labels such as “victims/ offenders” to look at the many more experiences that identify and define an individual. Also, the core values of restorative justice (e.g. respect, inclusion and mutual understanding) can support returnees and communities at large in changing their opinions and consequent biases. | The public opinion and local communities may insist on seeing returnees only through the lenses of their past experiences. |

| Specificities of cases involving returnees  | Opportunities for restorative justice   | Difficulties and challenges  |
|---|---|--|
| Returnees may have suffered victimisation experiences (e.g. before entering the terrorist group, or in the camp, or in prison, or discriminations during the reintegration process) and they may be reluctant to report the offence to the police, fearing revenge or disbelief.  | Restorative justice practices beyond criminal proceedings have much potential because they permit a tailor-made approach to justice for these types of victimisation experiences.                                     | Returnees may have an antagonistic stance to authorities, not accepting to participate in a programme delivered by the system that they (and their community of belonging) oppose. |
| Reparation for harm is not as straightforward as in other type of offences (e.g. crimes against property). They may deny the harm, because of a clear ideology and strategy to support and justify their initiatives, violence and harmful consequences, and they are able to explain their views in a clear and convincing tone. | Creative solutions are needed to prevent one of the parties to prevail in the discussion and understanding of reparation and also to find a suitable and long-lasting action plan that tackles biases and prejudices. | Returnees may have difficulties to understand the consequences of their actions if they really believed in the values of the terrorist group.                                      |
| Professionals often represent the majority of the population (e.g. white middle class) and they may not reflect the vulnerabilities and specific needs of minorities (e.g. the Islamic community).  | Because of its tailored practices and flexible practitioners, restorative justice may reflect on these types of systemic issues.  | Restorative justice services as well as criminal justice agencies must take this into account when hiring new personnel.   |
|   | Restorative justice brings back the conflict to the individuals involved.   | The public opinion and mass media communications, may influence the implementation of restorative justice programmes in cases involving returnees.                                 |

It is exactly this wider expansion of its scope that makes restorative justice highly relevant to returns of foreign fighters. Restorative justice presents opportunities at different stages of the criminal procedure (pre-, during and post-sentence) for returnees but also for their families, communities of belonging and new hosting communities. In practice, it proposes interventions that are interactive, participatory, tailor-made, open ended, and non-directive. This goes beyond the mere risk assessment oriented approaches usually adopted with returnees; the focus on establishing relationships and constructive interactions with different affected groups has proven to support processes of de-radicalisation, disengagement, desistance, and reintegration (RAN, 2020). The table below is an adaptation of the findings with politically motivated prisoners in Northern Ireland (Chapman, 2018) and more generally with cases of violent extremism, intergroup conflicts, hate crime and polarization, as there is no research yet on the use of restorative justice with returnees.

Some concrete restorative-focused tools have been already adopted for the re-entry planning and reintegration in society of incarcerated individuals who committed serious crimes and could be adopted also for cases involving returnees: **1) support circles, 2) mentoring interventions by formers, and 3) restorative training for exit workers.**

Support circles are initiated to ensure that the person knows that he/she is cared for and also to make the supporting people aware of the person's needs. The **Huikahi restorative circle** developed in the Waiawa Correctional Facility in Hawaii and already adopted in de-radicalisation processes is a completely voluntary group dialogue process including the incarcerated individual, his/her family members and friends, and at least one prison representative (Pereira, 2019). This practice emphasises five



key restorative-oriented elements, proposed by the restorative facilitator (focus on strengths, responsibility, repair, reconciliation and action). The incarcerated individual and all participants are invited to list his/her achievements and strengths, to reflect on the people harmed by the offence (even if not present in the room) and to propose a concrete action plan to prepare to leave the prison. Similar practices have also been designed based on John Braithwaite's **Reintegrative Shaming Theory** (Braithwaite, 1989), where the community of care expresses disapproval and suffering for the act and still respect and affection for the person who did it. Another restorative-oriented tool is the **Circles of Support and Accountability** (COSA) model, designed for the reintegration of high-risk sex offenders into their communities.<sup>8</sup> This model has been proven useful not only to support the ex-offender but also to prevent the stigmatization of the community, both objectives relevant also for returnees. COSA proposes two different groups, one with volunteers (the social network for those finding their way out of prison) and one with professionals (in case further support is needed). Circles are organised each week until needed, with one leading volunteer getting in touch more often with the ex-offender. In cases involving returnees, it would be important to include in the circle members of the Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

Mentoring interventions involving former offenders have also been integrated in some restorative-oriented processes in the aftermath of extreme violence. For example, politically motivated prisoners in Northern Ireland actively participated in the peacebuilding process of the country; among other restorative-oriented activities, about 80 of them have been trained in restorative justice practices by Ulster University, so that they could use these new skills in their communities, preventing further harm to occur.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, former radicalized individuals became involved in local peacemaking initiatives for preventing young people to radicalize (e.g. Fighters for Peace in Lebanon, Codex Foundation in Poland) (RAN, 2020). Among other guidelines, in 2017 the Radicalisation Awareness Network referred to practices involving right-wing extremists to cooperate with Islamic extremists, and vice-versa, to support each other in the de-radicalisation process (RAN, 2017). For formers, this is an opportunity to show strengths and achievements, build connections, and restore their role as citizens in their community. For others, hearing about these concrete experiences give them the opportunity to image a future self. These mentoring interventions fulfill some of the key principles of restorative justice, such as empowerment, responsibility, solidarity, truth sharing and focus on the future. Because of the recentness of the issue, there are no concrete mentoring initiatives yet involving returnees.

Finally, it is crucial to train exit-workers, and other professionals working with radicalized groups, in restorative-focused skills (see deliverables of the EU-funded project Exit Europe).<sup>10</sup> In practice, exit workers are required to reflect on how to engage with this target group with respect for their human dignity, to hear with an open mind to their different truths and acknowledge other levels of responsibilities (e.g. what societal issues brought them to enter the terrorist group and could have been done to prevent it) and to listen to personal narratives that can challenge their perception as “monsters”. Also, they should be trained in techniques that promote empathy, active listening and behavioral change, such as Motivational Interviewing or Nonviolent Communication models, and must be aware of the existence of restorative justice practices and services that can involve the parties in a dialogue (e.g. mediations, circles), if needed.

These restorative-oriented tools for the reintegration of returnees in societies are to be integrated with an important work at the community level. Indeed, among other potential benefits, restorative justice programmes may lead to more effective crime prevention strategies (UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020). This is because the participatory process can help to identify underlying causes of crime and deviance and prepare tailor-made responses to prevent crime. Moreover, the process allows communities to be heard and share their concerns in the aftermath of crime and violence, advancing their active participation in the justice process and giving them a concrete role in supporting the parties directly affected. Through a series of recent, local, bottom-up initiatives, restorative practices are also used at

<sup>8</sup> For more information, please consult <https://www.circleseurope.eu>.

<sup>9</sup> For more information, please consult <http://www.alternativeproject.eu/?s=northern+ireland>.

<sup>10</sup> For more information, please consult <https://cultures-interactive.de/en/exit-europe.html>.

community level to reduce conflict, improve relationships and support marginalised individuals in being part of the community (Mannozi, 2019). The aim is to promote a community model focused on the well-being of its members, a vision extending beyond their mere inclusion and participation in community life. Indeed, focusing on the reintegration and rehabilitation of those who are socially excluded and marginalised (e.g. returnees) may not be sufficient, or even beneficial, for them and for the community's social cohesion. Instead, focusing on well-being means integrating individual beliefs and collective reactions in terms of one's life and capabilities (Lepri, Lodi, & Patrizi, 2019). This is significant for preventing isolation and disconnection, triggers for extremist and hate-focused thoughts.

### Alternative costs of “no repatriation”

According to a survey conducted by Pew Research Center in Spring 2017, ISIS was named as the top threat in a total of 18 countries among the total of 38 countries surveyed. The survey that asked about eight possible threats showed divergent level and focus of concern by region and country. Yet, ISIS (62%) and closely following climate change (61%) were the most frequently cited security risks by the interviewees (Pouchter & Manevich, 2017). This explains the reason for public aversion to the repatriations. However, for the member states, leaving their citizens in Syria is fraught with multiple risks too.

First of all, camps and overcrowded prisons serve as pressure cooker where newer versions of terrorist organizations are cooked. Abu Ahmed (a pseudonym for an IS leader) says: *“Without Camp Bucca, IS would never have existed. It was the factory that shaped us. We already had the time in the world to sit together and make plans”*. The prison was operated between 2003 and 2009 by US forces to detain Al Qaeda terrorists. Of the 25 most important ISIS leaders, at least 17 were detained in Iraq between 2004 and 2011 – and Camp Bucca had the greatest share among all others. (Vliedren, 2016). The prisons in South and East of Syria have potential to serve as a forum where new plans are made, international networks are built, and the basis of next terrorist group(s) is laid. The inmates have contacts with the terrorist organizations they belong to even in prison. For example, when asked about the contact with ISIS cadres hidden within Iraqi population, Tarik Jadaoun replied: *“Yes, it's possible, it's easy, it can be done with the phone, but in different ways too. I share a cell with other Iraqi ISIS members, and some of them have just been released”*, meaning messages are sent outside.

ISIS detainees in prisons governed by SDF forces from time to time riot and escape. In 2020, inmates rioted and wrested control of several parts of the prisons in March (McKernan, 2020) and early May (AP, 2020). Among the 11 escapees, although 8 have been caught and brought back to the prison, 3 are still loose. As regards women and children, escapes do not necessarily require riots. While escapes from Camp Roj are extremely hard and rare, in al-Hawl, escapes take place on weekly basis (Snell, 2020). Those who escape find their ways to Idlib, where other jihadi organizations are in control, or to Turkey. They can easily find their ways back to their home countries with fake papers.

The conditions in the camps and especially in al-Hawl are extremely unhealthy and difficult. The foreign nationals in the camps constantly start petitions to the prison / camp authorities asking their countries to take their care (ICRC, 2019). Miranova reports that \$300-500 a month is barely enough for a mother with several children to survive in the camps. Besides, in the absence of schooling, the children are exposed to ISIS propaganda on continuous basis. There are occasions that unattended children have been smuggled out of the camp to go to Idlib to join other jihadi groups (Miranova, 2020).

Among 13,000 ISIS foreign fighters and family members, **9000 of them are children and nearly half of the children are below 5 years of age**. ICRC President Peter Maurer says: *“Al Hol camp is no place for any child. No mother, or grandmother, should have to try to care for children in conditions like this”* (ICRC, 2019). Their home countries have alongside the above-mentioned security considerations, **ethical responsibility** to repatriate them. When this feeling of abandonment and low education level combines, there is high risk that these individuals will combine forces against their countries of citizenship and create incentives for them to form new ranks of such groups.

The general discourse about returnees and actions towards them, their immediate and wider families

create waves of communication that reach far beyond them. They have brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, friends, people who care for them whatever belief or ideology they subscribe to. This means that whatever actions we take these are spread to wider circles in our societies; this refers to the decision to repatriate or not FTFs and their families, the treatment provided in prison and probation, the public discussion on the media, the type of assistance and support they receive from the state, the possibility to engage in a restorative-oriented process, etc. Any negative and unconstructive action, perceived or experience as an injustice, has the potential to break the bonds between these groups and the state, triggering a new wave of radicalisation and terrorism.

## Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The dire living conditions in the camps in Syria and Iraq, incompatibility / incongruence of judicial processes in both countries, external pressures from especially the US, and internal pressure from families and relatives of foreign fighters has pushed and will continue to push member states to repatriate their citizens. Since early phases in the evolution of the Syrian civil war, member states have made adaptations to their penal code alongside programs to rehabilitate / reintegrate returnees.

There is need to **systematically investigate all interventions** (judicial, penitentiary, post-penitentiary) in member states and beyond, focusing on successful and failed initiatives and offer do-able, evidence-based approaches adapted to the needs of the respective states. The research should fusion of excellent multi-disciplinary research (psychology, communications [as an important vector in informing policy making], criminology and victimology, humanities, sociology, etc.), field experience of law enforcement authorities/agencies and practitioners, and host society representatives to build conditions conducive to rehabilitation of current and future returnees.

Member states should not overlook risks of leaving their citizens in detainee camps and prisons in Syria and Iraq. Instead of abandoning them to an unknown fate, they should think about accelerating efforts to build up systems that will contribute to rehabilitation of those individuals.

Current penal codes, penitentiary and post-penitentiary systems in the member states should be well structured around **rehabilitative philosophy rather than punitive one**, that sees custodial segregation as a means to an end instead of an end by itself. Programs should listen to individual's problems and propose individualised plans for reintegration. These should include a mixture of psychological and religious counselling and educational support as a response to individual needs and interests. Competent personnel that has been well trained and have good communication skills (also in restorative-oriented practices) will certainly be the key for solution.

Defeating terrorist organizations militarily does not directly translate into their total defeat. As can be seen from the case of ISIS, such groups move across the range of "terrorist organization– insurgent group – proto-state". Total defeat only comes with its total bankruptcy in terms of reduced human resources and discredited ideology. This means member states should allocate more resources to **better educate young at-risk groups** so that they do not fall for extremist ideologies. Special attention is needed for supporting juvenile offenders. The prison environment is a guarantee that a young inmate will go to worse; there is risk to fall into these jihadi networks due to either desperation or rebellion / search for protection. Defectors of jihadi groups are currently actively employed by countries like Germany, UK and Canada to warn those on the way of radicalization and the radicalized, to show fallacies of terrorist groups' claims and ideologies and to bring them to their senses on the harms they could give to themselves and to the society.

Member states authorities should be better equipped to evaluate the way Islamic religion is taught in mosques, schools (e.g. countries as the UK fund independent Muslim schools) or Muslim welfare centres. This is a sensitive subject since it can collude with constitutional principles as religious freedoms versus state interference; but past years show how Salafi jihadism and terrorist propaganda has filled this vacuum in European countries. A rigorous, accurate and moderate theology program that will educate imams and teachers on non-politicised Islam and its history should be established. Therefore,

these positions would require a state certificate. “The Islam in Europe is mainly an immigrant’s Islam”, says Frank Hensch, an imam from Verviers, Belgium, a city where many youngsters joined ISIS. He says the Muslim community needs support from the state to dissociate culture and religion so new generations fully adopt the Belgian/western/European culture but continue living according to Islam.

In recent years, **restorative justice** has been proven to be effective within and beyond the criminal justice system, also to address serious and complex crimes and conflicts, such as violent extremism and polarisation. As shown in a literature review conducted by the European Forum for Restorative Justice (2017), participants (victims, offenders, their supporters and community members) are satisfied with the restorative process and its outcomes. The experience of restorative justice in cases of violent extremism cases is quite limited and even less is known concerning its potential with returnees. Still, based on other restorative justice experiences in serious crimes, it is possible to identify some practices (e.g. support circles, mentoring interventions, restorative training for exit workers) that can be useful to address this target group and the communities that will receive them. More (action) research is needed to further develop this area and identify the challenges and opportunities for using restorative justice approaches with foreign fighters returning in Europe.

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## Perspective: Can We Repatriate the ISIS Children?<sup>1</sup>

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Anne Speckhard<sup>2</sup> and Molly Ellenberg<sup>3</sup>

Despite ISIS having been territorially defeated since 2019, the United Nations reported in January of 2020 that 8,000 children of foreign terrorist fighters [FTFs] remain in the custody of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) with 700 to 750 of these children believed to be European. The same report noted that an additional 20,000 Iraqi children are currently being held prisoner in camps in SDF territory in northeast Syria and an unknown number of foreign teenage males are also held in SDF prisons.

ISIS children did not, at least initially, voluntarily join the ISIS Caliphate. They were either brought, or born, into the terrorist group by their parents who served ISIS in various capacities. Some teenagers also traveled to and joined ISIS of their own volition, but even these must be considered for repatriation in terms of their level of maturity and understanding at the time they undertook to do so.

When it comes to the very youngest among ISIS children, none of them can be considered dangerous in any way. They are infants, toddlers and preschoolers who are innocent and should not be held as prisoners on the basis of the crimes and guilt of their ISIS parents. While adolescents and teens pose an additional hazard as some older ISIS children were subject to ideological indoctrination, and some adolescents and teens were forced to become, or voluntarily became ISIS fighters. However, they were still minors and should be subject to a different legal standard as such. Leaving the children of ISIS to languish in camps throughout northeast Syria in dangerous situations facing disease, harsh conditions, Turkish incursions and bombardments, and ISIS enforcers and now the threat of COVID-19 is to risk them becoming a future generation of ideologically indoctrinated militants. To fail to put the health and welfare of these children first is also against international norms and laws of Western democracies which claim to follow standards of human rights.

While the UN urges countries to repatriate their ISIS children, there are numerous complications involved, one being that many of the ISIS wives have children from multiple fathers, meaning their children could claim various citizenships that their mother may not herself hold. Likewise, taking the children home either requires separating them from their mothers with whom they are housed (and also from their imprisoned fathers if they are still alive), something that is often looked upon as not in the best interest of the children and that may also open a legal doorway for adult ISIS members to later demand repatriation based upon a country's family reunification statutes. Many countries adamantly refuse repatriations of adult ISIS members fearing they will not be able to successfully prosecute them once returned due to unavailable and unreliable battlefield evidence, weak terrorism laws, and in the case of the women, having to prove involvement in supporting a terrorist group. Politicians also worry about the possible severe political consequences for government officials who choose to repatriate without being able to successfully prosecute due to strong public opinion against and fear over repatriations. Likewise, they worry that without being able to prosecute, country authorities may be unable to effectively protect the public from a battle-hardened returned terrorist mounting an attack on native soil. While this is a legitimate fear, it should also be noted that many adult ISIS members have returned already to Europe on their own before being captured in Syria.

The children of ISIS parents currently live in harsh and dangerous circumstances having already faced

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<sup>1</sup> This article was first published on 7 July 2020 on the Homeland Security Today, at [https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/perspective-can-we-repatriate-the-isis-children/#\\_ednref15](https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/perspective-can-we-repatriate-the-isis-children/#_ednref15)

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Turkish and Turkish-based rebels bombardments on prisons and camps alike, with continued threats of further violent incursions into the region. Disease, violence and difficult conditions are a daily reality for these children who should be offered the protection of the countries they either came from or from which they have a right to claim citizenship.

This article examines the complications, challenges, barriers, failures and success stories relating to the repatriation of ISIS children currently living in northeastern Syrian camps. It also discusses the factors contributing to countries' decisions regarding their repatriation as well as advises on prudent steps to take following repatriation of this extremely vulnerable and at-risk population.<sup>4</sup>

### **Who and Where are the ISIS Children in SDF Territory?**

The foreign children of ISIS fall between the ages of infants up to 18 years old and thus display a wide range in terms of potential repatriation risks. While infants, toddlers and preschoolers cannot under any conceivable rubric be considered dangerous, it is well known that children from the age of 6 and up were kidnapped, forced, lured, and placed by their parents in ISIS Cubs of the Caliphate training camps. There, the youngest children were trained to spy for ISIS, to preach ISIS's distorted version of Islam and to execute suicide missions in vehicles and by carrying bomb-filled backpacks to enemy checkpoints. Older children were weapons trained, forced to behead and otherwise execute ISIS prisoners, sent to perform guard duty (i.e. ribat), to fight battles and were also enrolled to become suicide terrorists. While the numbers of ISIS teens currently imprisoned (rather than housed in camps with their mothers) in SDF territory are not publicly available, these are likely the children of ISIS who were trained in weapons and who engaged as ISIS fighters and guards. Given ISIS's proclivity to indoctrinate, train and use children for violent actions, it is likely most useful to categorize ISIS children as those old enough to have really taken on the ISIS ideology and be weapons trained to an extent that they could be truly dangerous versus those who are too young to truly understand how to operate a weapon, or what an enemy of ISIS is, among other basic ideological tenets. Divided in this manner, one might see children up to age 11 as unlikely to be dangerous—and this goes without question for those under age five or six—whereas children from ages 12 to 18 may be so brainwashed and weapons trained as to be truly dangerous.

Likewise, a third category of ISIS children emerges based on the parents' lack of involvement in the group. ISIS rounded up and kidnapped children, separating them from their parents and forced them into the Cubs of the Caliphate camps. The most victimized group in this category are the Yazidi boys who faced ISIS onslaughts in which they were gathered and held with their family members at gunpoint and told to raise their arms. The adult men and older boys who had armpit hair were taken away to be slaughtered by ISIS, the women were forced into sexual slavery and the younger boys were placed in the Cubs of the Caliphate camps. Of the 240 in-depth interviews that the first author has made of ISIS defectors, returnees and prisoners, many Syrian ISIS members told about their observations of how once the captured Yazidi boys had become totally indoctrinated by ISIS, they repudiated their faith, took on ISIS's warped version of Islam and became fierce fighters and frequently volunteered for suicide missions. Given these boys had witnessed extensive traumas and were totally separated from anyone who loved them, it is not surprising they would long to exit this life and cling to promises made by ISIS trainers of Paradise in the hereafter. Similarly, it is not uncommon for kidnapped children to become completely aligned with their abductors as a means of psychological survival, displaying a serious form of Stockholm syndrome. Unfortunately, these Yazidi boys, who are among the most victimized ISIS children, may be, due to their deep psychic pain, isolation from family members, and heavy indoctrination and weapons training, the most dangerous among all of the ISIS children. Nadia Murad, the Yazidi Nobel Peace Prize winner, has spoken about how her own nephew was so indoctrinated by ISIS that when she is able to talk to him by phone while he still resides with ISIS. According to Murad, he insists he doesn't want to return and would murder her if he ever meets her

<sup>4</sup> Speckhard, A., & Yayla, A. S. (2016). *ISIS defectors: Inside stories of the terrorist caliphate*. Advances Press, LLC.

again. Similarly, many raped Yazidi women who were reunited with their heavily indoctrinated sons reported that they were very difficult to control, live with and reintegrate into society due to their aggressiveness, violence and continued repudiation of their Yazidi mothers as unbelievers and Satan worshippers.<sup>5</sup>

Within this third category of children are those born to Yazidi women raped by ISIS men. The children of mothers raped by ISIS members have been systematically rejected by the Yazidi community due to their parentage; the Yazidi religion does not allow for outside blood or mixed parentage and also responds to the Iraqi law officially labeling these children in a patrilineal manner as Muslim by rejecting them as non-Yazidi. Raped mothers are welcomed back to their Yazidi community but forced to make the painful choice to leave their children in orphanages in order to return home. As a result, some Yazidi mothers have opted to stay in Camp al Hol, not making their Yazidi identity and victimhood known, and mixing themselves with the ISIS women in order to keep their children. Others have placed their children in orphanages in Syria and Iraq and returned home. While repatriation for Yazidi children would normally mean returning them to their villages and homes, mostly in Iraq, the Iraqi current policy of classifying them as Muslim based on their father's religion and the Yazidi group's rejection of them makes their repatriation dilemma one of finding third countries to take them in, either as ISIS orphans, or with their mothers who chose to remain with their children rather than repatriate without them.

At present, FTF adult and teenage males are held in SDF prisons, while ISIS wives and Yazidi rape victims (who have not made themselves known to the authorities) are detained with their ISIS children in so-called refugee camps in northeast Syria. While the camps housing ISIS mothers and children are labeled for political purposes as refugee camps, there should be no mistake that they are prisons, as the women and children are not free to come and go, nor to receive visitors except with strict exceptions. The designation of refugee camp, versus prison, is made in order to make it possible for international nongovernmental organizations to be able to support them. The three largest camps in operation in the Fall of 2019 holding ISIS women and their children were Camps Ain Issa, al-Hol and Roj.

**Camp Hol:** The largest of these detainment camps is Camp al-Hol, which according to a UN Report dated April 2019, housed an estimated 75,000 women and children. ICSVE data suggested at that time that at least 60,000 of these were Syrians and Iraqis, many of which have since been released back to their tribes and families in Syria, or repatriated to Iraq. In the Fall of 2019, ICSVE was aware that at least a total 8,000 children and 4,000 wives of FTFs were held in the camp which roughly matches the January 2020 UN figures reporting a total of 8,000 foreign ISIS children detainees in SDF territory.

**Camp Roj:** By the end of 2018, it was reported that Camp Roj held a total of 2,000 women and children, with at least 500 women and 1,200 children based on our personal accounts in late November 2018. That number shrunk to 1,500, as some governments facilitated repatriation of foreign women and children to their respective countries, although Camp Roj continues to receive transfers from al Hol and is also undergoing the building of a new wing onto the camp. In Fall of 2019, ICSVE estimated that Camp Roj housed upwards of 1,500 women and children of FTFs. While the exact numbers of foreigners (both women and children) in Camp Roj remain unavailable, based on our personal accounts as well as some reported in the media, it appears that over 50 percent of the total population in Camp Roj are wives and children of FTFs.

**Camp Ain Issa:** In Fall of 2019 Camp Ain Issa housed a total of 12,000 women and children. Based on ICSVE primary sources on the ground at that time, a total of 1,000 children and 265 women were foreigners (FTF families). Camp Ain Issa was bombarded during the Turkish incursion resulting in over 200 ISIS women and children escaping the camp. Some of these made their way to Turkish held territory to try to reach their consulates and be repatriated, but others disappeared. Since the destruction of Camp Ain Issa during the Turkish attacks, those women and children who were held or recaptured from the camp were transferred to other camps in the region.

<sup>5</sup> Speckhard, A., & Yayla, A. S. (2016). ISIS defectors: Inside stories of the terrorist caliphate. Advances Press, LLC.



It is difficult to determine the exact numbers of women and children in the camps as the situation is constantly changing. Some countries have aggressively begun repatriations while most Western European countries staunchly refuse to repatriate. Russia, Kosovo, Kazakhstan and Macedonia, to name a few, have repatriated both ISIS women and children, sometimes up to 100 at a time, and Sweden, France and Germany have repatriated ISIS orphans, and Belgium has tried to do so as well.

The numbers in Camp Hol also change as ISIS women and children manage to smuggle out of the camp on a weekly basis—some to make it into Turkey and back to their home countries, others to disappear without trace. Germany, Ireland, and Finland have each accepted the rare repatriation of women and children who escaped from Camp Ain Issa and Camp al Hol and then made it to Turkey and requested to come home. Belgium appears about to accept some from this category as well.

As the situation is extremely fluid, and public figures are not always available, the exact numbers of ISIS children currently being held in SDF territory are hard to verify. The January 2020 UN report is likely the most reliable, reporting that 8,000 children of FTFs are currently imprisoned in northeast Syria, with 700 to 750 of these children believed to be European, meaning that these children either entered Syria as EU citizens or were born in Iraq or Syria to at least one EU citizen parent and are therefore EU passport eligible. Other sources corroborate the UN figures. For instance, the New York Times reports that there are approximately 900 children from Western countries, including from the European Union as well as Canada and Australia, in the camps as of May 2020. The Center for Global Policy estimates that there are as many as 750 children who are EU citizens or were born in Iraq or Syria to at least one EU citizen parent. Save the Children also recently reported that around 7,000 of those held in Camps al-Hol and Roj are foreign children, half of whom are under the age of five, meaning that they were likely born into the ISIS Caliphate rather than were brought there by their parents. According to Tanya Mehra and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 75 percent of the foreign ISIS children in Syria and Iraq were born in the conflict zone and are under the age of seven. ISIS orphans are held by friends of their parents in the camps or have been placed in orphanages. While there are no official numbers available, Human Rights Watch reported in 2019 that there were “hundreds” of orphans among the foreign children in these Syrian camps. Many Western countries have repatriated ISIS orphans of whom they are aware, as there are no complications about potentially opening a pathway for their parents to be repatriated as well.

While Iraq continues to accept transfers of their citizens from Camp Hol, the United Nations January 2020 report stated that 20,000 Iraqi children are still being in the northeast Syrian camps. Likewise, an unknown number of teenage males are also being held in the SDF prisons, with some undergoing rehabilitation in newly created centers. The nationalities and numbers of teenage males currently held in SDF prisons is not publicly reported and thus unknown.

The exact numbers of ISIS children born to Yazidi women as a result of mass rapes is unknown. In June of 2019, NPR's Jane Arraf reported that one orphanage in northeastern Syria housed 41 such children, but also stated that the Yazidi group's official estimates of children born to raped Yazidi women could be more than 1,000. Yazidi women also relinquished their children born of rape to orphanages in Mosul, Iraq. The authors are aware of several Yazidi women who hide with their children among ISIS women in camp Hol. How many there are in this category is also unknown.

When it comes to nationalities, Camp Hol and Camp Roj hold women and children from about 60 countries. In addition to a number of Westerners whom the first author was able to interview during the last years in all three camps (that is including Camp Ain Issa), which included women from Belgium, the Netherlands, Ireland, the United States, Germany, and France, the foreigner pool also comprises women from Russia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, Turkey, Algeria, Tunisia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Maldives, Morocco, and Uzbekistan, among others. It is estimated that Camp Roj alone hosts women from 40 countries. All of the aforementioned ethnic backgrounds and nationalities are scattered across the camps, with some of the high-profile Westerners such as American-born Hoda Muthana and British-born Shamima Begum having been moved to Camp Roj for their safety. FTF males held under the custody of the SDF in prisons are often the fathers of many of these ISIS children. They

are also from about 60 countries. In northeast Syria, the first author has interviewed FTF males who are nationals of the United States, Canada, Australia, Trinidad and Tobago, the UK, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Dagestan, Turkey, Denmark, Russia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia, Indonesia, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Libya, Switzerland, Egypt, Luxembourg, and Germany. Many express deep concerns for the welfare of their wives and children and most have little to no contact with them.

### Conditions Faced by ISIS Children

After Turkey's Fall 2019 onslaught in northeast Syria and the Trump administration's withdrawal of American troops supporting the SDF, the situation of ISIS detainees has become even more dire with severe overcrowding in all of the camps and prisons, COVID-19 becoming an impending threat, the possibility of further Turkish incursions and the possibility of Assad gaining control of the ISIS prisoners.

Currently, ISIS women and children reside in United Nations High Commission for Refugees [UNHCR]-provided tents in these detention camps. The tents are hot in the summer, freezing cold during winter, and leak cold rainwater year-round. ISIS children face dusty air contaminated by pollutants from nearby oil fields; conditions that cause some to have chronic bronchial infections and to suffer from asthma. One Belgian mother told the first author that her child frequently struggled to breathe, with his lips turning blue and passing out at times. She was so worried for her child that she agreed he could be repatriated without her. Hoda Muthana's young son also suffers from chronic bronchial infection, has to be elevated at night in order to breathe, and appeared weak and lethargic with a deep wet cough when his mother was interviewed by the first author. All the mothers state that medications and doctor visits are hard to come by and that they struggle to keep their children healthy without good medication, diet and care. ISIS children and their mothers have died of Typhus as well as other diseases, malnutrition and they are now threatened by the specter of COVID-19.

Detainees have also died in tent fires, stabbings and other dangers in the camps. Medical care is poor and while over the past few years vaccinations have been offered, many mothers don't trust them and refrain from having their children vaccinated. They complain that the provided food lacks nutritious fruits and vegetables. While some ISIS women receive money from relatives back home via a prison-run hawala system, and also through other illicit channels, those who do not have money face only the provided diet of dry lentils, rice, spaghetti, cooking oil and little more. The Center for Global Policy reports that 371 children died in the SDF camps of malnutrition and other ailments in 2019, underlining the urgency of the situation. Schools are lacking as well. In addition to all of these dangers, ISIS orphans that remain in the camps have faced dire circumstances with no one formally in charge of them or responsible for their care and welfare.

While some of the ISIS men and women held in SDF territory had become disillusioned of ISIS before even landing in prison, or have since rejected ISIS, some remain highly committed and are extremely dangerous. All of the camps housing women have suffered from ISIS enforcers still dedicated to the group who require the other women to continue to cover themselves and who punish those who speak out against ISIS. ISIS women still highly committed to the group teach their children to throw rocks and otherwise attack those who have become disillusioned. Likewise, these women preach to both children and one another about ISIS's ideology, spreading news about the ISIS leaders' latest speeches and claiming that the ISIS men will soon come to break them out of the camps and that the Caliphate will be rebuilt. ISIS schoolbooks and teaching materials have been found in Camp al Hol. American born Hoda Muthana, UK born Shamima Begum, Canadian American Kimberly Pullman and Irish Lisa Smith, among others who had backed away from ISIS, have been transferred out of Camp al Hol to other camps because the threat to their safety was too high.

ISIS enforcers in the camps have attacked other women, set their tents on fire, stolen their possessions, attacked, bitten, beaten, stabbed and murdered other women, as well as attacked camp guards,

creating a sense of chaos, constant danger and oppression in the camps. Because the women cook for themselves, they are all armed with kitchen knives at their constant disposal as well as fuel oil for their cooking stoves with which they start fires. In 2019 a male guard at Camp al Hol was stabbed in the back by an ISIS woman and numerous murders of inmates also occurred. Likewise, in the last year, a gunfight broke out in Camp al Hol and one woman was said to have gained possession of a pistol. In Camp Roj, these ISIS enforcers keep a “kill list” which lists the female defectors who they say will be killed when the ISIS men come to free them from the camps. Those women who have taken off their niqabs or no longer cover their hair, or otherwise speak out against ISIS, have told the first author that they are terrified of the ISIS enforcers as well as the thought that ISIS men could break the women out of the camps.

### **Legal status of the ISIS Children**

ISIS children by most legal conventions cannot be charged, prosecuted or imprisoned for the crimes of their parents who are in many cases guilty of a manifold of crimes. That said, they are currently imprisoned with their ISIS mothers, or in the case of orphans, on their own. Both foreign men and women held in SDF territory are currently detained without any local charges, although some have been charged and even prosecuted in absentia in their home countries.

As far as the legal status of adults, the SDF has requested a series of solutions, the first of which was to request all foreign countries to repatriate their citizens and legal residents who left from their home soil. This is a stance that the current U.S. administration also supports. While criminals are generally charged, prosecuted and imprisoned in the countries in which they committed their crimes, ISIS prisoners held in northeast Syria represent a special circumstance. First, it should be considered that nearly all FTFs legally transited through or resided in Turkey before illegally entering Syria. Likewise, the central government of Syria lost control of vast areas of the country and still has not gained control. The area in which the SDF battled and took custody of their ISIS detainees is currently governed by the SDF and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria [AANES] independently of Assad's government, although there has been a recent rapprochement between the two. The SDF and AANES are not formally a part of the Syrian government and the SDF is considered a non-state actor. Likewise, it is further considered by Turkey as a terrorist group, indistinguishable from the Kurdistan Workers' Party [PKK], although the U.S. refers to the SDF as our trusted ally in the fight against ISIS. Many European countries also refuse to deal with the SDF due to its alleged and actual ties to the PKK. Thus, the ISIS detainees who are currently held in SDF territory for the most part entered Syria illegally and were arrested and are now detained by a non-state actor that does not have the legal framework to charge or prosecute them.

When most European and many other countries refused repatriation, the SDF began to insist on having an international tribunal held on SDF territory to try the detainees. However, the international bodies that would normally do so, the International Criminal Court in the Hague or the United Nations were unlikely to agree to do so based on many considerations. The most important among them is that SDF territory is controlled by a non-state actor and resides within Syria, meaning that holding an international tribunal on Syrian soil would necessarily also include addressing the war crimes of Assad's government and any attempt by the UN to do so would result in a Russian veto. The second barrier to an international tribunal is the cost of trying so many detainees, thousands of them, given that such courts are usually reserved for trying the leadership versus the entire rank and file of an offending group. Even when they limit their activities to trying the leadership, international tribunals are extremely expensive and also hard to conclude even over many years. Holding an international tribunal in Iraq to try the SDF's detainees might be a possibility if the Iraqi government was amenable to doing so, which they are not. However, the issue then becomes one of European democracies endorsing transferring SDF detainees to a government which uses the death penalty, routinely tortures, and has in the case of ISIS held trials based on membership versus evidence of actual criminality.

The third proposal made by the SDF is to charge and prosecute the foreign ISIS detainees locally, either using local or hybrid courts with international assistance. This proposal fits the desires of many European countries who want their ISIS detainees to remain in Syria rather than be repatriated and tried at home, but it is fraught with legal considerations which are too lengthy to consider within the context of this article.

In the meantime, the foreign ISIS children are held based on their parents suspected, and yet in most cases unproven, criminal actions which is contrary to all international legal standards. Likewise, ISIS adolescents and those who have now become adults since traveling to ISIS, such as Shamima Begum (who traveled to ISIS at age 15 and has since had her UK citizenship stripped) are being held without local charges, although some may be charged or have even been prosecuted in absentia at home.

Anthony Dworkin of the European Council on Foreign Relations acknowledges the special legal status of minors who chose to join ISIS: "If they did [choose to join] when they were young, and were committed to it, even so, they weren't responsible as adults for their decisions." While ISIS children who did not choose to join, and especially those who can in no way be considered guilty of any crimes, require protection from their home countries, these young adults who joined ISIS as minors are also worthy of consideration for repatriation and rehabilitation, the same way young adults can be tried in juvenile court for crimes they committed as minors. It should be noted, however, that the first Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions does not consider children aged 15 to 18 to be child soldiers, and 17-year-olds in the United States can enlist in the armed forces with parental consent. Therefore, older teens and those who are now adults do constitute a special category in terms of repatriation and for the level of responsibility they can be held to for their actions and crimes.

Thus, it can be said that general legal practice in most countries is to not hold children accountable for the crimes of their parents, meaning that they should not be left in prisons and camps when they could be living freely and safely. Moreover, even minors who have committed crimes such as those described previously have protections under the law given their age and developmental level. Even more protections apply to children who have committed crimes under extreme duress or coercion, such as child soldiers. In 1959, the United Nations adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, and in 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child became the most swiftly and widely ratified international human rights treaty in history. The only three UN countries that have not ratified the treaty are Somalia, South Sudan, and the United States. The treaty requires states to place primary emphasis on the best interests of the child in all matters concerning children and to ensure the protection and care of the child. It grants every child the right to live and to develop healthily. The child also has the right to an identity, including a nationality, and should not be separated from their parents unless doing so is necessary for the best interests of the child. Furthermore, the treaty grants the child the right to freedom of expression, thought, conscience and religion. The child has the right to privacy and the right to access information from the mass media, among many other rights. Most importantly, perhaps, Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child holds that child victims of armed conflict have a right to physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration, and that such recovery should take place in an environment that fosters the child's "health, self-respect, and dignity." All of these rights firmly support the repatriation of ISIS children, even if doing so results in the child being separated from their parents, although the treaty would support repatriating mother and child together as the optimal option.

Regarding the right to a nationality, legal barriers exist in regard to establishing citizenship for children who often only have ISIS documents as birth certificates. In ISIS, women were pushed to marry and remarry extremely quickly and were forced to live in squalid guest houses (*madhafas*), when they were unmarried. After one husband was killed, women would often remarry even before the completion of their *iddah*, the period of time required in Islam to ensure that the women had not become pregnant by their previous husband. Therefore, many women in the SDF camps are widows with multiple children by multiple husbands. The different children of one mother may then have claims to citizenship in different countries. If the mother's country will not repatriate her children, or she is a local Syrian, they

may then be separated not only from their mother but from their siblings as well.

Of course, there is a possibility that children may not be granted citizenship at all. Children born under ISIS were granted birth certificates by the terrorist group, which the United Nations has urged countries to utilize in giving those children official documents. Establishing a child's identity can also be achieved through DNA testing. Using the results of those tests and ISIS birth certificates, officials can determine a child's true parents (or grandparents in the case of orphans) and therefore their right to citizenship. However, there is the added complication that countries have stripped some ISIS members of their citizenships. Hoda Muthana was born in the United States, for instance, and believed she was a U.S. citizen based on having two U.S. passports issued to her over her lifetime. However, her citizenship was denied by the Trump Administration based on the fact that her father who was no longer a diplomat was still considered in diplomatic status by the U.S. State Department when she was born, a fact that makes her ineligible for her U.S. citizenship claim. Her son was born in Syria before her citizenship was officially challenged, meaning that he also was thought to be eligible for a U.S. passport. However, the Administration claims that Ms. Muthana never actually had a right to American citizenship, suggesting that her son also does not have a right to American citizenship, despite the fact that his naturalized American grandparents are ready and able to take him in. Similarly, Shamima Begum's British citizenship was stripped in 2019, with the government claiming that she could become a Bangladeshi citizen through her father. Ms. Begum gave birth prior to her citizenship being stripped but the U.K. made clear that her son was nevertheless eligible to claim British citizenship. Still, the government did not repatriate him, and he died three weeks after his birth.

### Barriers to Repatriation

The barriers to repatriating ISIS children are many. Foremost among them is the fear by many countries' authorities, particularly in those with weak terrorism laws, that opening the door to repatriate ISIS children will result in the return of their parents as well, many of whom may be unrepentant terrorists. This fear is particularly strong if the government is not confident that the returned ISIS adult has given up terrorism or can be successfully prosecuted. Moreover, many countries like France, for instance, face a serious prison radicalization problem, and thus fear that even with successful prosecutions these unrepentant ISIS returnees may seed themselves in the prisons. Europeans also generally give short sentences and would likely have some legal obligation to count time served while held in SDF territory, so the women in particular, even if successfully prosecuted, might be set free in a very short time. For those held longer, only some countries have good terrorist rehabilitation programs currently running in their prisons and none are 100 percent successful, nor do all terrorist prisoners agree to participate. In Europe, repatriating ISIS children does seem to open the door for their parents to also demand repatriation as European laws allow for families to remain intact. Article 94 of the European constitution would allow an ISIS parent whose child was repatriated to directly appeal to Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights [ECHR], which refers to the right to family life. This means that if children of living ISIS members are repatriated, their parents would most likely be able to also demand repatriation based on human rights laws. This would apply for both ISIS men and women. As a result of such fears, most countries that have repatriated some children have chosen to repatriate only orphans, as doing so poses the fewest moral, legal, and political barriers.

There is also the moral and humanitarian issue of separating a child from his or her mother that stands as a barrier to repatriation if the country does not wish to repatriate both. Most psychologists and human development specialists would argue that to separate a child from his or her mother is not in the best interest of the child. Surely, repatriating both mother and child is ideal, but leaving a child in a highly dangerous environment, even if they are with their mother, also cannot be considered in the child's best interest. Thus, if there are legal and security concerns that preclude repatriating the mother, and she is to remain in the SDF camps, it can be argued that it is in the best interest of the child to be removed from her custody. To do so means that the child can have access to social support,



education, healthcare, safety, psychological treatment and a non-radicalized personal network versus stay in danger in the camps.

In the case of repatriating a woman who will be prosecuted and imprisoned, it should be noted that in general with any imprisonment Western countries routinely separate weaned infants and older children from their mothers when the mother is incarcerated, although frequent visits are allowed, which would not be the case in repatriating children apart from their mothers and fathers left behind in Syria.

In most Western countries, it is also considered best practice for children to remain with their parents unless they are being abused or neglected. When a child is removed from a parent for abuse or neglect, the goal is for the child to eventually be reunified with their parents once authorities are confident that the child will be safe and protected. ISIS parents could conceivably have their parental rights temporarily or permanently severed given it is clearly an act of abuse or neglect for any parent to have knowingly taken their child into ISIS territory if that parent had a clear understanding of what ISIS stood for and the crimes it was committing. That an ISIS child would be separated from his or her mother on this basis is no different than separating any child from a mother who has committed others acts of abuse or neglect. For instance, children in the UK have been separated from parents who attempted to travel to ISIS with them but were apprehended before doing so.

Of course, this moral aspect of repatriation seeps into the legal sphere as well. If a mother refuses to allow her child to be repatriated without her, the case becomes more complicated. In the U.S., laws respect the rights of either parent to travel legally abroad with their children and to have custody over them while abroad. Thus when the first author tried to assist American Samantha el Hassani's sister to repatriate, at Samantha's request, two of her children to live with their aunt in the U.S., the U.S. State Department's stance was that without directly knowing Samantha's wishes they would not interfere and they claimed that they had no way to communicate with her. This posed an interesting conundrum as the first author argued that all four of Samantha's children should receive the full protection of the U.S. government, particularly the eldest two who were born in the U.S. and carried American passports. She argued that since the U.S. government sent their Navy SEALs to attempt to rescue journalist James Foley, who had voluntarily gone into ISIS territory, they should do the same to rescue Samantha's American children who had been taken into ISIS without their knowledge or consent. Moreover, these children were at the time of this discussion not even captives of ISIS, as Foley had been, but were residing in a camp run by our SDF allies with plenty of American soldiers about. While refusing to discuss her specific case due to privacy concerns, the U.S. State Department argued three points: That the children needed to be identified as Samantha's children with genetic testing, that there were no U.S. personnel that could venture into Syria to assist in that matter, despite the U.S. military presence and multiple bases located near the camp, and that Samantha had a right to privacy and to travel unimpeded with her children.

The first author argued that while the last point was normal in a divorce case, El Hassani's case was more akin to that of child abuse or neglect, as Ms. El Hassani had knowingly taken her children not just abroad, but into a war zone with the intent for her family to join and support a terrorist group. She argued that the federal government should have some mechanism for at least temporarily severing or suspending her parental rights so that they could act on behalf of the children to bring them to safety. When the U.S. Department of Justice became involved, they agreed with this argument. Ultimately all four children were repatriated along with their mother who is now imprisoned and facing terrorism charges.

Interestingly, the argument that it is too risky to send any foreign affairs personnel into northeast Syria to assist in repatriating ISIS children has been made not just by the U.S., but by many countries, and has thus served as a significant barrier to repatriation in many dire cases. The UK's Sajid Javid said that he would not risk sending any personnel to save the life of Shamima Begum's son, who was born while she was in Camp Roj. Despite the first author, and likely many others, having written letters warning of this likely inevitability, the child perished not long after he was born. While the argument of sending

officials into danger is legitimate, it must also be balanced by the fact that U.S. and coalition troops are present in northeast Syria and that military escorts could likely be provided. To give an idea on the dangers, the first author has traveled repeatedly to all the camps without armored cars or bodyguards and has offered to help escort any children to be taken home to Western countries. Thus, this argument seems to be constructed because the countries using it do not in fact wish to repatriate.

Western country officials have also been frustrated by the logistics of trying to repatriate children. For instance, a Belgian official told the authors that he had requested a plane from the U.S. military to repatriate Belgian children, but his request was denied. A U.S. State Department representative later explained to the authors that this was based on the insistence of the U.S. government to not provide air transport for any ISIS children from northeast Syria without an ISIS adult also being present. This prerequisite appears to be the current administration's way of pressuring countries that wish to repatriate their ISIS children with U.S. assistance to also repatriate ISIS adults. It should be noted that the U.S. stance is that all countries need to repatriate all of their ISIS members from northeast Syria, parents and children alike. However, placing such a barrier to providing air transport for innocent children seems to fly in the face of humanitarian concerns for the children. Similarly, a Dutch lawyer working on behalf of ISIS mothers and children told the first author that he had come to an agreement with his country to take them back, but that the Dutch government insisted that he arrange for them to get to Erbil in Iraq in order to do so. As a private citizen, he could not arrange this with the SDF. Moreover, German officials have expressed concern to the first author that Iraqis have threatened to arrest any ISIS adults in Erbil whom the Germans might try to transit out of northeast Syria via Iraq. An Albanian CVE official also worked with ICSVE to try to repatriate a young girl brought by her father into ISIS but was told by the AANES that despite his position in the government, the request had to come from the foreign ministry, a stumbling block that the Albanian official could not overcome. Thus, many countries place unnecessary barriers to repatriation for their own political reasons and the SDF is also particular about who may make requests and who may be repatriated. Currently, the SDF's preference is to try the ISIS women in local courts versus have them sent home.

There is also the issue of identifying children. Some ISIS children whose parents were killed were taken in by ISIS women, as were the children of Yazidi mothers raped by ISIS men. The most reliable way to identify a child is through genetic testing, but if there is no trusted official to carry it out or the mother or father refuses to participate, the child may not be able to be identified scientifically, forcing countries to rely on ISIS-issued birth certificates or statements of witnesses.

Countries also claim that repatriating a child while leaving his or her mother in Syria would open the door to allow the mother to claim the right to return home, in the best interest of the child. In terms of child abuse and neglect cases, this would mean that the mother has promised to no longer abuse or neglect her child, in this case by removing herself from the dangerous environment. Thus, courts may consider allowing the mother to return home as being in the best interest of the child, despite fears surrounding the mother's level of radicalization and the justice ministry's ability to prosecute her.

Finally, political considerations color the debate regarding repatriations of children. Given that repatriating a child alone is more palatable to the public than repatriating a child with his or her mother, most repatriations that have occurred have been of orphans due to the aforementioned moral and legal barriers to separating a child from their mother, and father if he is living. Indeed, the political consequences of repatriation are many. In Finland, Minister of Foreign Affairs Pekka Haavisto was investigated for his push to repatriate Finnish women and children and his firing of a ministry director who opposed the efforts. The Finnish security services maintained that both women and children would pose national security risks should they be repatriated. In Norway, the governing coalition was disbanded following the repatriation of a woman and her two children from Syria. Even though the mother was arrested upon arrival in Norway, many thought the children should have been repatriated alone. Shamima Begum's case has been fraught with political indications. From the outset, Ms. Begum was judged far more harshly by the British public than women of European descent who also joined ISIS, with her photo even being used as a target at a shooting range. Her citizenship was stripped, and

the UK government claimed that they were not willing to risk Britons' lives to repatriate her baby, who later died. Ms. Begum's family lawyer, the first author, and many others doubted the sincerity of this statement, volunteering to go to Syria themselves and claiming that it was not too dangerous to rescue a child. If governments were willing to send troops to save a journalist captured by ISIS, surely, they claimed, the government could send troops or officials into SDF camps to retrieve children. Shortly thereafter, the UK repatriated a group of orphaned children, indicating that they were willing to save those who did not garner such a harsh public reaction. This action contradicts previous statements regarding the safety of repatriating children, but there are many other policies that also impact whether a child can be retrieved from Syria.

### Country Policies Concerning Repatriation of ISIS Children

The policies of countries in regard to repatriation are often inconsistent and applied differently when it comes to orphans versus children with living ISIS parents. The following is a brief recap on differing country policies:

Countries in Europe such as Germany and Norway have a policy of repatriating children and occasionally women on a case-by-case basis. Although this has resulted in successful repatriations, the piecemeal approach can be heavily swayed by public opinion. Belgium and the Netherlands, along with Australia, have stated that they will repatriate children only, once again favoring unaccompanied children; either orphans or children whose parents have voluntarily given up custody. Other European countries such as France have allowed FTFs, including women, to be prosecuted in Iraq, where they are likely to receive lengthy sentences. One French ISIS woman with a life sentence interviewed by the first author in Iraq was able to send her young children home from Iraqi prison to live with relatives in France. According to Anthony Dworkin, these European countries have posited that their policy of having FTFs be tried in the country in which they committed their crimes, either Iraq or Syria, as being one of principle. Dworkin argues that this is not so much a matter of principle, however, but one of externalization. France has also repatriated small numbers of orphaned and sickly children but leaving behind those same children's healthier siblings. Most recently, two French mothers gave up custody of their children so that the children could be repatriated along with a group of orphans. Other mothers refuse to give up custody, hesitant to trust a government they feel has abandoned them to care for their children. Tunisia and Trinidad and Tobago also repatriate only children. Morocco and most of the Balkan countries have repatriated many women and children as well as male FTFs. Many other countries, including Bulgaria, Singapore, Sweden, and Canada, will not facilitate return of FTFs or children, but will accept them back into the country if they are able to return on their own. Some ISIS women and their children escaped from Camp Ain Issa when it was bombed and others smuggled themselves out of Camp Hol, and once in Turkey were able to pressure their governments to repatriate them. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Switzerland, Bahrain, Israel, and others have taken steps to revoke citizenship of FTFs, though their preferences regarding where the FTFs are tried (Syria or Iraq versus at home) differ from one another.<sup>6</sup>

Thus far, the most repatriations of children have been by the Russian Federation, Kosovo, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. The Russian Federation's repatriation program is led by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, and by Sevil Novruzova, a Dagestani woman running a rehabilitation and reintegration program, as most Russian FTFs were from the Russian republics of Chechnya and Dagestan.<sup>7</sup> Considering that Kadyrov was sanctioned by the U.S. for violations of human rights, his persistence in repatriations of ISIS children and treating them as blameless is noteworthy, particularly since Russian adults who have joined ISIS often face brutal punishments. Kazakhstan has repatriated more than 400 children and 100 mothers, regarding all of the children as victims even if they have been radicalized. Kazakhstan has also implemented rehabilitation programs that are necessary to ensuring that the children are able to adjust into the society and not conduct violent attacks in the future. Under

<sup>6</sup> HOFFMAN, A., & FURLAN, M. (2020). CHALLENGES POSED BY RETURNING FOREIGN FIGHTERS.

<sup>7</sup> Nicolson, D. (2017). Foreign Terrorist Fighters from the North Caucasus. *Connections*, 16(4), 69-88.

the auspices of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Education, two non-governmental organizations have opened 17 rehabilitation and reintegration centers that employ mental health professionals, religious scholars, lawyers, healthcare professionals, and teachers, all of whom are committed to helping the children and their mothers. In Kosovo, deradicalization programs for returnees involve addressing the individual factors that contributed to the adults' decisions to join ISIS, as well as the structural inadequacies that made some Kosovars feel marginalized and desperate for opportunity – desperate enough to leave Kosovo to join ISIS. This societal aspect of deradicalization that involves listening to and addressing returnees' legitimate grievances is one with which many Western European countries have struggled.

In addition to the FTFs' home countries, the AANES and SDF itself also have a stake in the repatriation of children, as well as the FTFs. Initially, the SDF urged countries to repatriate their FTFs, but then moved to favor an international tribunal to try the ISIS members. One reason that initial efforts to promote repatriation failed is that the AANES is not a recognized state, so it does not have extradition treaties with other countries, provided those countries would be willing to work with a non-state at all. The proposed SDF tribunal is unlikely to be established as previously discussed, as Russia would veto the creation of a system that would likely prosecute its ally, the Syrian Assad regime, alongside ISIS. It is also noteworthy that an international tribunal for crimes committed in Iraq would also not likely be approved by European countries because Iraq uses the death penalty and Iraq itself would also have to agree to holding a tribunal on its soil. It is contradictory, however, that these same European countries have nevertheless allowed their own citizens to be tried in Iraqi courts that did not require European cooperation. Currently, the SDF and AANES have shifted to promote a hybrid system involving repatriations as well as using their own local courts and more permanent prison system. With regard to children, however, the SDF does not have adequate infrastructure to care for the children of FTFs who have been sentenced to prison and are no longer being housed in camps, nor does it have the infrastructure to provide more permanent housing for prisoners with long sentences. Therefore, the SDF requires support from other countries either by repatriating their FTFs and their families or by providing financial and military support to help the SDF maintain control. Furthermore, even if the AANES and SDF were to use the local court system, because it is not a recognized state, the FTFs' lawyers could argue that its legal system is invalid and that the FTFs must be brought to justice in a properly organized legal system, as is required by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2396.

### **What Have the ISIS Children Experienced and What Do They Need to Rehabilitate?**

Fully understanding the experiences of the ISIS children is a critical aspect of repatriating them and providing them with trauma-informed support services upon return. As stated above, many of the younger children were born into ISIS and have never known life outside of the Caliphate and the camps. Many are malnourished and have not had access to adequate healthcare, including vaccinations. In the Caliphate, the children likely witnessed corpses on the road, if not the executions themselves. Many ISIS members interviewed by the first author referenced children playing with the severed heads left in Naim Square in Raqqa, for instance. Given ISIS's propensity for cruel and brutal punishment, children may have seen their parents flogged, arrested or harassed or have been beaten and abused themselves. The American son of Samantha el Hassani was forced by her ISIS husband into threatening U.S. citizens on behalf of ISIS. When his mother tried to stop it from happening, she was badly beaten. In Camp Al-Hol, ISIS enforcers rule with an iron fist. Their children have been subject to indoctrination into the ISIS ideology, with one Instagram account run out of Al-Hol boasting that the still-radicalized women had taught their children to force people to raise their index finger, ISIS's symbol for tawheed, the oneness of God, when they passed through a makeshift checkpoint. The Instagram account claimed that the children were throwing rocks at anyone who refused to do so, thus perpetuating a cycle of violence and a belief system that espouses it. The children of mothers who have been disillusioned by ISIS may still be subject to indoctrination by the camp's more powerful women, and they may be traumatized by seeing their mothers harassed and even assaulted for disobeying the ISIS enforcers. They may also have

been bullied themselves by the enforcers' children. Irish Lisa Smith said her infant child was almost killed by a rock thrown into their tent by an ISIS enforcer.

The children who were not born into ISIS, but rather taken there by their parents pose a different set of risks and considerations. Older ISIS children who were born in the West have already experienced life in a secular, democratic society, though they may have been too young to understand its values. Some have attended secular schools, and most have met and interacted with non-radicalized family members, friends, babysitters, and teachers. However, their age means that they have likely been exposed to even more of the ISIS ideology and violence than the younger children. At the peak of its Caliphate, ISIS operated schools that taught their interpretation of shariah, as well as weapons and other military training. Overall, the goal of ISIS schools was to normalize violence, including by providing parenting materials instructing mothers to teach their children to use violence toward their enemies. Children who attended these schools were imbued with ISIS's warped ideology and sense of morality during their formative years, when their brains were most subject to change. Some children may have even been Cubs of the Caliphate, ISIS's youngest fighters, who were often used as suicide bombers. An ISIS emir interviewed by the first author explained his criteria for determining who could fight with ISIS: "A fully-grown man has to have his semen. This is according to shariah." This definition of a wet dream indicating that a boy is ready to fight in battle or become a suicide bomber allowed ISIS to justify sending boys as young as 12 years old on fatal missions according to this emir.<sup>8</sup> In actuality, even younger immature children were also sent on suicide missions and forced to behead and execute for ISIS.

Many interviewees told the first author about very young children being in the Cubs of the Caliphate camps and ISIS's own propaganda reveals the use of young children as executioners.<sup>9</sup> One young ISIS member recalled to the first author that it took him over a year after escaping from ISIS into Turkey, at his parents' insistence, to overcome their deep ideological training. Likewise, the ISIS emir referenced earlier stated that ISIS children would cry and protest if they were moved back in the line to become suicide bombers and that they were as happy as children at holidays when their turn to suicide came. These children, therefore, may well have committed crimes as Cubs of the Caliphate, albeit without true awareness of the wrongness of their actions or the ability to say no to carrying them out. Many ISIS cubs told the first author they were forced to act on behalf of ISIS and failing to obey orders resulted in beatings and executions. One Iraqi cub told about being called to perform an execution and later throwing up and becoming addicted to alcohol in order to try to deal with his subsequent post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD].

These children, like child soldiers of other conflicts, ought to be treated as victims, not perpetrators. In a study of ISIS child soldiers in Iraq, the child soldiers showed a significantly higher prevalence of PTSD, depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, and somatic disturbances than other Iraqi children. Their self-esteem was also significantly reduced.<sup>10</sup> These psychological issues must be addressed during rehabilitation, as well as the stigma attached to having been a child soldier that may be detrimental to their reintegration. Even those who did not commit crimes but were used in ISIS propaganda will be identifiable to their communities as having been a part of the ISIS machine. Others may have been trained to preach ISIS's ideology in public areas.<sup>11</sup>

As with all deradicalization programs, there is a crucial point of reckoning in which older children realize the depravity of their crimes and must acknowledge their guilt in order to forgive themselves.<sup>12</sup> Even if children were kept home from school by parents who understood the danger of exposing them to ISIS's ideology, they have now spent years in isolation and likely have delays not only in their academic learning, but in their psychosocial development that comes from interactions with same-age

<sup>8</sup> Speckhard, A., & Shajkovi, A. (2017). Confronting an ISIS Emir: ICSVE's Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter-Narrative Videos'. International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), 29th May.

<sup>9</sup> Benotman, N., & Malik, N. (2016). The Children of Islamic State. Quilliam Foundation, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Kizilhan, J. I., & Noll-Hussong, M. (2018). Post-traumatic stress disorder among former Islamic State child soldiers in northern Iraq. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 213(1), 425-429.

<sup>11</sup> Benotman, N., & Malik, N. (2016). The Children of Islamic State. Quilliam Foundation, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Thomason, K. K. (2016). Guilt and child soldiers. *Ethical theory and moral practice*, 19(1), 115-127.

peers. Mothers in the camps complain that there are no toys but the rocks that children pick up and play with. Regardless of their exact experiences, all of the repatriated ISIS children will require support ranging from religious reeducation to psychological counseling to support to understand and reenter normal society.

The aforementioned challenges in dealing with the psychosocial impacts of being raised under ISIS can perhaps be informed by the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration [DDR] programs implemented with child soldiers in Africa and elsewhere. These programs involve psychosocial support, education, healthcare, and vocational training, and there are recent pushes to approach all of these aspects with a gendered perspective. There are also pushes to expand the program to include Rehabilitation – “DDR(R).”<sup>13</sup> Criticisms of DDR programs typically lie in the institutional and structural inadequacies impeding proper implementation, including eligibility rules such as possession of a weapon that prevented many from participating. Therefore, DDR programs may be especially effective among repatriated ISIS children in countries with stronger and more well-established child welfare systems. Another potential improvement to the efficacy of DDR with ISIS children is the lower risk of re-recruitment if the children are taken back to their home countries and out of the environment in which they acted as child soldiers.<sup>14</sup> This is particularly important as the first author has interviewed defected Iraqi and Syrian ISIS youth who were re-contacted by ISIS leaders trying to take them back into the group. Beyond DDR, some experts have recommended drawing from programs designed to help youth leave gangs. Like gang members, ISIS children have been taught a strict set of rules based on a twisted moral code and that their only protection lies within ISIS. They have been desensitized to violence and are at great risk for being rejected by their communities when they try to reintegrate. Therefore, countries with well-established programs for gang intervention may be able to build similarly effective programs for helping ISIS children.<sup>15</sup>

Harvard's Theresa Betancourt's longitudinal study of 260 child soldiers who took part in such programs in Sierra Leone points out that youth with accumulated risk factors, lack of protective factors, and persistent distress need to be identified with provisions for social supports and educational access made in order to rehabilitate them. She also recommends that psychosocial interventions for former child soldiers are likely to be more effective if they account for post-conflict factors such as stigma and community acceptance as well as war exposures, as a child that is actively rejected from society will fail to reintegrate well. Her study also demonstrated that success in school is central to rehabilitation, but that managing trauma-related mental health symptoms is necessary for a child to succeed in school. Thus education, trauma treatment and a wider systems approach involving the community in overcoming stigma and challenges to reintegration are all crucial for rehabilitation of child soldiers. The same is likely for child ISIS returnees.

Stevan Weine and Heidi Ellis of the University of Chicago recently developed the Rehabilitation and Reintegration Intervention Framework (RRIF) as an evidence-based model for working with child returnees. Their model is based on a review of 31 studies in the areas of refugee children, war-impacted children, child criminal gang members, child victims of maltreatment, and child victims of sex trafficking.

According to the authors, “The RRIF defines an approach that considers how five primary goals – promoting individual mental health and well-being, promoting family support, promoting educational success, promoting community support, and improving structural conditions and protecting public safety – can be pursued across five levels of social interaction – individual, family, educational, community, and societal. Achieving these goals at all five levels requires cooperation between national and local governments, civil society, and scholars collaborating across disciplines.” In many ways this model is very similar to other systems approaches to prevention and intervention of violent extremism. For example, the Aarhus prevention model also brings a systems and community approach to dealing

<sup>13</sup> Benotman, N., & Malik, N. (2016). *The Children of Islamic State*. Quilliam Foundation, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Mitra, A. (2019). Child Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Revisiting ‘Reintegration’ through a Psycho-Social Framework. *Allons-y: Journal of Children, Peace and Security*, 3, 48-63.

<sup>15</sup> Benotman, N., & Malik, N. (2016). *The Children of Islamic State*. Quilliam Foundation, 7.



with radicalized individuals.

Weine and Ellis argue that changing beliefs is less important than disengaging children from terrorism and that democracies allow for freedom of thoughts. While the latter is certainly true, the ICSVE stance is that given that ISIS put such emphasis and effort into forcing ideological training on its cadres and enforcing adherence it may be worth also addressing beliefs to truly rehabilitate those who were old enough to take on the ISIS ideology. Children that the first author has interviewed, have stated that it was very hard to shake ISIS's ideological training and adult interviewees have also said they could only deradicalize with ideological support from professionals that helped them to see that ISIS's version of Islam was a distorted and violent interpretation that most Islamic scholars do not support. The first author found the same, that Islamic challenge was useful in rehabilitation programs in Camp Bucca with al Qaeda prisoners who had been highly ideologically trained.

As with all aspects of repatriation and rehabilitation, it is crucial to keep a gender-based perspective. The experiences described previously apply far more to the boys living under ISIS, but girls were also indoctrinated into the ideology, witnessed overwhelming traumas of executions, violence and bombardments and were also taught the ISIS credo of "hear and obey." Girls were required to cover their hair beginning in first grade. ISIS also considered it appropriate for girls to marry as young as nine, suggesting that many of the older girls in the camps have histories of sexual abuse by their forced husbands.<sup>16</sup> Teenage ISIS girls have told the first author that they were essentially raped in marriage and one was very traumatized by her resulting pregnancy, saying she would never be able to love the child she was carrying. Both girls and boys will likely struggle with issues of identity as they get older in societies very different from the ISIS Caliphate and the camps. In some cases it may be necessary to change their names so they can leave the past behind them. Establishing new roles and positive senses of self will also be an important aspect of rehabilitation and reintegration.

### What are the Risks of Repatriation?

Aside from potentially opening the door for their parents to return home, there is no way to know with absolute certainty that repatriated children will not pose a risk to their countries when they return or for those born in ISIS, are brought home for the first time. This is the case in any instance of releasing people from prison or involuntary commitment in a psychiatric hospital, yet countries, especially those in Western Europe, have long promoted a system of short sentences that focuses on rehabilitation. They are able to do so through the use of risk assessment screening tools and proper rehabilitation programs. The ISIS children have almost certainly been traumatized: They may have witnessed or even committed atrocities; they have experienced bombings and all of the other inherently traumatic aspects of living in a war zone.<sup>17</sup> Studies have shown that growing up in a war zone can be a major contributing aspect to the decision of adolescents and young adults to join armed groups.<sup>18</sup> These traumas will need to be addressed through psychological counseling and developmentally appropriate social support. Moreover, the children may also suffer from complicated grief following the death of one or both parents and or siblings. If the children are separated from their mothers or siblings as a requirement for being repatriated, they will also be likely to suffer grief similar to losing a close family member. Studies of early-onset persistent delinquent youth – those who have already exhibited criminal behavior – have shown that early loss and grief contribute to internalizing syndromes such as anxiety and depression in both boys and girls and to externalizing syndromes such as oppositional defiant behavior in boys.<sup>19</sup> Many ISIS children do not have living fathers and those that do will likely

<sup>16</sup> Benotman, N., & Malik, N. (2016). *The Children of Islamic State*. Quilliam Foundation, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Thabet, A. A., A. N. Ibraheem, R. Shivram, E. A. Winter, and P. Vostanis. "Parenting support and PTSD in children of a war zone." *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 55, no. 3 (2009): 226-237.

<sup>18</sup> Brett, R., Specht, I., & Grey, J. (2005). Young soldiers: Why they choose to fight. *International Journal*, 60(4), 1181.

<sup>19</sup> Lansing, A. E., Plante, W. Y., Beck, A. N., & Ellenberg, M. (2018). Loss and grief among persistently delinquent youth: The contribution of adversity indicators and psychopathy-spectrum traits to broadband internalizing and externalizing psychopathology. *Journal of child & adolescent trauma*, 11(3), 375-389.

not have them present in their lives as their fathers will likely be imprisoned for a long time. Thus, the risk of boys acting out after being repatriated is not insignificant, especially if such externalizing symptoms are combined with prior ideological indoctrination that provides them with a target for their anger that is acceptable within their worldview.

These risks are critical to acknowledge, but countries who repatriate their children quickly have an opportunity to treat at-risk children before they develop any major psychosocial or behavioral difficulties. Most of the children are young enough to be especially malleable when given the care and support they need. Even teenagers who have participated in ISIS's crimes are good candidates for rehabilitation programs due to their young age and impressionability, ironically, the same traits that ISIS exploited. It must be emphasized, however, that all of these risks are exacerbated the longer countries take to repatriate the children.

Several case studies have indicated the potential for successful repatriation of ISIS children. While the rehabilitation and reintegration programs implemented in Kazakhstan and Kosovo have not yet produced significant results, there have not been any major security consequences of repatriation in those countries. In Sweden, Beatrice Erikson, founder of Repatriate the Children, assisted Patricio Galv  z in the rescue of his seven orphaned grandchildren. According to Ms. Erikson, the children, who were initially found in an SDF camp in April of 2019, are thriving with long-term foster families, regularly seeing each other as well as their grandfather. Even these simple social supports in addition to good healthcare have led to vast developmental progress. Ms. Erikson says that the youngest child was one and a half years old when he was found, weighing less than three kilograms (6.61 pounds). Now, she says, the child has "started to talk and is running around playing as any other child. If you would see these children now, you wouldn't almost be able to recognize them." Ambassador Peter Galbraith also referenced a mother and child dyad he helped to return to Germany who are both doing well, with the child attending public school and the mother, having totally turned her back on ISIS, now well integrated back into German society. Both Ms. Erikson and Ambassador Galbraith shared these hopeful results with hundreds of online viewers at ICSVE's Zoom panel, "Can We Repatriate the ISIS Children?"

### **What Will Happen If the Children Are Not Repatriated?**

The risks of leaving foreign children in the detention camps in northeast Syria are great. As previously noted, the SDF cannot hold women and children in the camps indefinitely, nor can they keep male FTFs in custody without a proper trial and conviction. Thus, while some countries prefer to maintain the status quo, it is clear that the status quo is unstable. Likewise, Turkey has already incurred into the region and currently threatens the very existence of the SDF. Assad's government who are known for rape and torture of prisoners also wants to regain control of the region and may demand custody of the ISIS FTFs.

If the children are not repatriated, they will not simply continue living as they have in the camps. The most immediate danger is that the children will become sick and die. Disease spreads rapidly in the overcrowded camps, where many children are malnourished and do not have access to adequate healthcare. Mothers are wary about vaccinating their children due to questions about the quality of the vaccinations. Likewise there may also be a fear likely linked not to unfounded conspiracy theories, but to the fact that in 2011 the CIA organized a vaccination campaign in Pakistan in order to obtain DNA samples that would lead to the capture or killing of Osama bin Laden.

The SDF camps also exist in an unprecedented time with regard to disease. The spread of COVID-19 has killed hundreds of thousands of people in the Western world, and although many fatalities have not yet been reported from the camps, the circumstances there make the risk of mass contagion high. Even before the onset of COVID-19, one woman ominously expressed her fear of contagious disease to the first author: "There are a lot of sick people and [my children] are mixing with sick children. Once there was Typhoid; women and children died of this, vomiting blood. They don't give us masks. I said

we need masks.” Hoda Muthana expressed a similar fear for her toddler son, saying, “He has chronic bronchitis, he’s always getting sick from the cold, he is always getting chest infections and that’s what the kids die from here.”

The children are also at risk in the camps, particularly in Camp Al-Hol, from the women who remain loyal to ISIS. As noted above, children of disillusioned mothers may have their tents burned down, witness their mothers beaten or even killed, and be harassed and assaulted themselves by the ISIS women and their children. Children of the women loyal to ISIS are vulnerable to even further radicalization than they may have received while living under the Caliphate. If their fathers are imprisoned, the children are taught that their fathers are being tortured and oppressed by unbelievers; the same people who guard the camps. Those guards are then used as targets by children honing their skills as jihadists. Many of the children have mothers who are widowed. While the disillusioned mothers may teach their children that ISIS either killed their fathers or cynically sent them to die, children of ISIS enforcers are taught that their fathers are “martyrs”. The value of revenge and the distorted concept of Islamic martyrdom through suicide terrorism will be passed to these children, continuing the cycle of violence wherein the children will likely grow up to be jihadists intent on attacking the people and countries they hold responsible for their fathers’ deaths.

Indeed, we have witnessed this phenomenon already. Some local Iraqi ISIS members interviewed by the first author had fathers, older brothers, and cousins who fought with al Qaeda in Iraq and were either killed or imprisoned by the U.S.-led coalition. While some were radicalized into the ideology of ISIS’s precursor by this experience, the lack of opportunity experienced by Sunni Iraqis after the U.S. invasion was also a major contributing factor to their joining ISIS. In the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism [ICSVE]’s study of 220 ISIS defectors, returnees, and imprisoned cadres, FTFs were significantly more motivated to join ISIS by ideological factors like the dream of building a Caliphate and the obligation to fight jihad than were Iraqi and Syrian ISIS members. By contrast the local Iraqi and Syrian ISIS members were motivated to join more by needs for food, money, employment, and family security. The children and their mothers remaining in the camps, as well as the male FTFs, are now essentially all locals. If ISIS is able to regain control in the area, they are apt to rejoin the group out of desperation just as many locals previously did, even if they no longer ascribe to the ideology.

Syrian ISIS defector Abu Musab described to the first author the combination of desperation and anger that pushed him to join ISIS, exemplifying the reasons why children left in the camps are at risk for joining ISIS or other violent extremist groups in the future: “Before ISIS, and the revolution, I was at school. Then the revolution took place. For some time, my father was outside [the home]. Then the regime bombed the area and my father died as a ‘martyr’ in that bombing. I became the provider for my family.” He describes being asked by his teacher to declare his loyalty as a Cub of the Caliphate. Abu Musab explains his motivations clearly, describing how both basic needs and a desire for revenge influenced his decision to join: “My father had been killed as a ‘martyr’ under the regime [...] The offers were very appealing. I was the only provider and life had become very difficult.”

The risk of ISIS regaining control is also connected to the Turkish incursions in the area. When President Trump withdrew U.S. troops from northeast Syria in October of 2019, he greenlit Turkish President Erdogan to attack. SDF troops previously guarding the camps and prisons were pulled away from their posts to fight the Turkish invaders, leaving security gaps and allowing for escapes. When Turkey bombed the area, Camp Ain Issa was hit, sending women and children running for their lives. The SDF says that all of the male FTFs were recaptured, but many of the women were able to make it out of Syria. Irishwoman Lisa Smith, for instance, escaped to Turkey and was repatriated to Ireland, where she is now living in her community on bail with her daughter. Other ISIS women wait upon the ISIS men, some of whom are now fighting as Turkish-backed rebels to come and free them from the camps.

In the future, if the SDF is not able to prosecute and successfully convict the FTFs, the FTFs will be placed in even more horrific situations if they are not repatriated. French FTFs have already been tried and sentenced in Iraq, where the justice system does not grant defendants the same rights that they

would be granted in their home countries, such as the right to a fair trial and the right to be tried by a jury of one's peers. Iraq has imposed harsh and prolonged sentences for ISIS membership, even on minors who attended ISIS training camps for only a few weeks, and on women, many of whom, were imprisoned in their homes throughout their time in ISIS. If FTFs are tried and imprisoned by the Syrian Assad regime, which is still the official government of Syria, they will likely be subject to sham trials, forced confessions, torture, and rape. Surely, a child whose parent undergoes such atrocities at the hands of the Iraqi or Syrian government because their own country refused to repatriate them will be ripe for radicalization and eager to seek revenge on said country.

### **What Are the Next Steps for Repatriation?**

In Western Europe, the repatriation of children has been viewed through a humanitarian lens but has largely been stymied by the refusal to repatriate adult FTFs, thus allowing only orphans and other unaccompanied children to be repatriated and leaving the majority of the children in the camps. Anthony Dworkin argues that a case must be made for repatriation of FTFs and their families in order for repatriation to occur in a successful and systematic manner. This campaign must be aimed at swaying public opinion so that governments do not feel political pressure not to repatriate. According to Dworkin, a campaign for repatriation does not need to be based solely on humanitarian grounds, but from a security perspective as well: Repatriation allows countries to keep track of their FTFs, who could make it home secretly either by escaping as the women did after the Turkish destruction of Camp Ain Issa, by paying to be smuggled out, as is happening frequently in Camp Al-Hol, or by being broken out by ISIS fighters.

Dr. Christophe Paulussen agrees that the issue of repatriation can be advocated from both moral and security standpoints but goes further to argue that FTFs' countries owe it to the SDF to take their people back. The FTFs were largely radicalized in their home countries but mostly did not attack at home. When they were leaving their countries, many security and intelligence services were aware but glad to see them exit. One Belgian police officer referred to the exit of jihadist from his country as Belgium "flushing the toilet." Likewise, while most transited through Turkey legally, they entered Syria illegally. It was the SDF who fought the FTFs on the frontlines, who suffered the most casualties in the fight against ISIS, far more than the countries from whence the ISIS fighters came. Now, these same countries are failing to take responsibility for their own citizens' actions, leaving the SDF to continue to shoulder the burden on their own. Dr. Paulussen also cites former Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Bert Koenders, who explained the hypocrisy of leaving FTFs in Syria: "We keep referring to these people as foreign terrorist fighters. The uncomfortable truth is that they are not foreign at all. They may be foreigners in the countries where they are going to. But in reality, they are our compatriots, our acquaintances, the classmates of our kids, the guys and girls we see in our supermarkets. They are part of our societies. Perhaps the only thing that's foreign to us is their mentality."

The only aspect preventing these countries from adopting a policy of repatriation, attests Dr. Paulussen, is "a lack of political will [...] The prosecutors are ready to prosecute; the child care specialists are ready to treat the children; from an international legal aspect, experts say this is the best thing to do [...] it's only the politicians who are lagging behind." Indeed, ICSVE has been working with many countries, most frequently Germany, in assisting federal prosecutors to be ready to prosecute their ISIS members held in northeast Syria by providing the justice ministries, with the detainees' full permission, the notes of in-depth interviews done with them as well as viewing together our video recording of the interviews and consulting about their cases. Such an approach, according to German justice authorities, is vastly helpful to construct a strong case for successful prosecution which makes it more likely that politicians can agree to repatriate ISIS members.

The evidence presented in this article clearly demonstrates the necessity of repatriating ISIS children in a systematic way, not based only on the public's perception of the specific child or mother. Repatriation of the children in the SDF camps is, from a security perspective, the best way to prevent

these children from becoming the next generation of militant jihadists. From a legal perspective, states are neglecting, if not maltreating, children by leaving them in dire conditions at risk for abuse, disease, and bombardments. From a moral and humanitarian perspective, failure to repatriate these children is a violation of their fundamental rights to be protected and cared for. The experts agree, but fear on a political level appears to take precedence.

# Questioning the Sectarian Discourse: A More Holistic Look into Changing Dynamics of the Syrian Civil War

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Mehmet Mükerrerem Ari<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The main effort in this article is to find out the main causes of the Syrian Civil War via questioning the common discourse that presents sectarian fault lines as the main cause. In this context, this article argues that instead of a reductionist sectarian approach, it is better to understand the changing dynamics of the Syrian civil war in a more comprehensive manner by taking the socio-economic and political factors into account. Syrian civil war is not solely a sectarian civil war but the involvement of actors with ethno-sectarian agendas have resulted in it being perceived as one. Thus, we have to be careful about over emphasized speech act of the actors in an effort to use their own agenda while politicizing the security environment. It can be argued that it is a proxy war battle ground for regional powers where the balance of power politics and superpower competition is played out. Deploying a reductionist approach is dangerous because not only it undermines the actual reasons for the conflict, but it also redefines the positions of the parties by creating new losers and victors of the war.

**Keywords:** Syria, civil war, sectarianism, proxy war, power politics, Middle East

## Introduction

The Middle East and specifically the Levant<sup>1</sup> is a region that shares many similarities but at the same time is very different in terms of its political and social development observed among the states. Despite the very old tradition of civilization, the countries have relatively young state customs. When we look at Iraq, it is the cradle of human civilization, where the old practice of statehood was developed. On the other hand, the creation of a modern administrative and bureaucratic system is a recent phenomenon, and this is not unique to Iraq but can be argued as counterintuitive considering the historic significance of those states.

In addition to this paradox between the old tradition of civilization and the recently created “modern” states, boundaries of all these states in the Levant are drawn up by outsiders in line with the territorial interests of the WWI Allied Powers with little regard to linguistic, ethnic, and religious boundaries. The result of this was artificially imposed borders, which were merely a territorial translation of British and French competition and geostrategic interests. In other words, it was the imposition of the Western based Westphalian nation state system onto the Middle East, which in itself was out of synch with the realities on the ground (Lesch, 2013).

The breakdown of artificial states formed by external entities is assumed to be easy by some scholars (Jenkins, 2014). Arguably, as can be clearly seen from Syria, the distribution of these differences often preludes an easy disentanglement of ethnic and religious groups. However, the real question, is whether it is accurate to explain the current conflict in Syria through the unravelling of different religious and sectarian groups and how this manifest into a sectarian conflict? In short, the response would be “not necessarily”. Instead of a reductionist sectarian approach, it is better to understand the changing dynamics of the Syrian civil war in a more comprehensive manner taking the socio-economic and political factors into account. Of these; shallow political culture, weak institutions and economic motivation remain vital factors.

It is not solely a sectarian civil war but the involvement of actors with ethno-sectarian agendas that

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has caused the war to be perceived as a sectarian one. Considering the artificial characteristic of the nation state building process in which the identity formation is closely tied to religion and ethnicity, exploitation of sectarian identity is a useful tool to delegitimize the counterparts. That is why underpinning sectarian dynamics as the defining root cause of the emerging Middle East seems dangerously misdirected. The unprecedented increase in Sunni-Shiite tensions in recent years is not due to the subtle religious variances attached to 1400 years of Islamic history. The explanation should be the conflict of identity politics rather than the sectarian differences, which happen to be the factor 'on the surface' to blame, but in reality it is just being utilized for political agendas (Lynch, 2013).

What is more striking is the rapidly changing dynamics of the civil war through the emphasis put on sectarian language, that restructures the positions of all the actors directly and indirectly involved within the war. Politicization of sectarian identity formulates new losers and victors of the war.

In order to have a better understanding, this article will first present a historical and statistical overview concerning the ethnic and religious groups in Syrian society, before continuing to present the case that the Syrian civil war is not simply a sectarian conflict. In doing so, it will put emphasis on power politics dressed up in sectarian language and argue that the "alliance dilemma" has politicized ethnic and sectarian divisions to delegitimize the counterparts of the war, and even more seriously, to complicate the situation concerning the factions of the civil war.

### Syria's Deeply Divided Society

The Syrian population, like those of several other Middle Eastern countries, comprises of different ethnic and religious groups. Sectarian differences certainly exist. In addition to the highly diverse ethnic and religious outlook of Syrian society, tribal and familial groupings as well as geographical differences play a significant role on the fractionalization of Syrian society. In order to better understand Syrian society, one must appreciate not only the history of the Levant, but also the nation's demographics.

The Ottoman Empire had controlled the Levant for centuries where different religious groups co-existed under the Ottoman umbrella. This peaceful cohabitation is used to highlight the "tolerant" rule of the Ottoman Empire, which is claimed to have been better than in contemporary societies (Page, 2015). The formal administrative structure of Syrian provinces under Ottoman rule was driven by "locally integrated regions" having a relative political autonomy governed by its local elite, and the boundaries of those Syrian provinces did not necessarily correspond to provincial lines drawn by Istanbul. Damascus, Aleppo, Acre were considerably effective city states where ethno-sectarian pluralism flourished. On the other hand, there were comparatively isolated entities generally dominated by singular or multiple communities as were the cases of Druze-Maronite Jabal ash-Shuf, the Twelver Shia Jabal Amil and the Alawite Jabal Nusayri (Slim; Hugo & Trombetta, 2014).

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the highly controversial Sykes-Picot Agreement drew the borders of these Syrian provinces placing them into a nation state that had never existed before. This was the first time Syria as a nation state existed as an invention of the French and British powers. However, this newly created nation-state paid little attention to administrative configurations which prevailed under Ottoman rule. Syria's highly diverse population was squeezed into a single nation state.

It is also important to note that no Syrian census including a question regarding religion and ethnicity has been collected since the 1960s, making it especially difficult to delineate the various sects of Syrian society. Despite a lack of official data, it is well known that Sunni Muslims constitute the majority of the Syrian population and are traditionally located in the urban parts of Syria. It is estimated that 75% of the population is composed of Sunni Muslims; and Alawites, Christians, Druzes and Ismalis made up the remaining 25% of the overall Syrian population. More specifically, the ethnic division of Sunni Muslims and Sunni Arabs are by far the largest ethno-religious group in Syria, which account for approximately 65 (The Economist Data Team, 2015).

The Kurdish population, on the other hand, is the non-Arab Sunnis and Christians. The Kurds, being the largest ethnic minority in Syria, are thought to constitute somewhere between 10% and 15% of the

total population. The Kurdish population predominantly resides in the north and north-eastern parts of the country. The Syrian Kurds claim that they have been systematically discriminated against by the Syrian regime for decades through denial of their basic social, cultural and political rights. Considering the official name of the state as the Syrian Arab Republic, this claim clearly has some traction. Nevertheless, the relationship between the Kurds and the regime has been constantly evolving during the conflict, and therefore will be discussed in this article.

Apart from the largest ethnic minority population, Alawites, a branch of Shiite Islam, constitute the largest religious minority in Syria. Alawites represent around 8% to 15% of the overall populace. Despite representing a minority, the Alawite sect of Shia Islam controls the state bureaucracy, almost in its entirety (Slattery, 2012). Alawites occupy top positions in the government and military institutions that undoubtedly afford them a degree of power in Syrian society like no other groups. Intriguingly, somewhat paradoxically Alawites are also the most vulnerable group due to their association with President Bashar al-Assad, who is a member of the Alawite community, an issue that will likely arise if the conflict results in a regime change (Abdo, 2013) in a similar way that it did in Iraq post 2003.

Approximately 10% of the Syrian population is composed of Christians, with Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholics making up the largest denominations. Although Christians do not dominate a single community, Damascus, Homs and Latakia have the most Christian residents. It should be noted that Christians were thought to possess a comparatively high degree of religious freedom and relatively privileged economic position thanks to having good relations with the Assad family (Laub, 2016). Many observers speculate that most Christians did not participate in the protests against the government fearing that they would lose the majority of the privileges that they possess. Nevertheless, ISIL's involvement in the conflict put the Christian population's advantaged situation into jeopardy (Hof; Simon, 2013).

On the other hand, Ismailis, which is a branch of Shiite Islam with around 15 million worldwide followers, is a smaller minority group in Syria, which is thought to number around 200,000. There are also approximately 500,000 Druze, which is drawn on Ismailism that adopt a monotheistic religion. Druzes are the second largest branch of Shiite Islam, and they mainly reside in southern Syria (BBC Monitoring, 2011). Yazidis, on the other hand, are mainly Kurds living in and around Mosul, Northern Iraq who amount to an estimated 200,000 to one million. As a result of forced emigration due to the threat of persecution, there are smaller communities in the neighboring countries of Iraq, with an estimated 70,000 in Syria. Yazidis are arguably one of the most adversely affected groups of the civil war, and more specifically by the religious-sectarian narrative of ISIL.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the complex ethnic, religious and sectarian mosaic of Syria, the tribal composition is another crucial marker of Syrian society. This complex societal structure has arguably been exploited by the internal and external actors due to oil, influence and power matters and this has compounded its fragmented societal structure even more. In short, Syria has always been influenced by the deep localism of its many ethnic, religious and sectarian groupings. The extensions of the grand strategies of great powers complicate this, too. Since its re-creation as a nation-state with the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the modern Syrian state has been a focal point of regional and international politics reflecting the balance of power dilemma, which is now clearly visible in the present Syrian conflict.

### **The Story is more than What Has Been Thought: It is Not Merely Sectarian**

This segment of the paper addresses the kind of war that has been conducted in Syria. In short, this is more than a sectarian war. Before proceeding, it is essential to clarify the terms of civil war and sectarianism not only for the matter of definition, but also to be able to address the problem more effectively, and to have a clearer discussion on who has been –or will be– affected by this narrative more severely.

Civil war is a contested term as well as sectarianism. Despite no agreed definition of civil war, Article 3 of the Geneva Convention has a useful definition outlining the responsibilities of the parties “in armed conflict not of an international character” with further explanation provided by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Additionally, most political scientists agree on using the threshold

of 1,000 dead per year for a conflict to be qualified as a civil war. Regarding this classification with the additional remarks indicated, we can argue that peaceful Syrian protests has turned into a civil war long before after the sixth month of the conflict<sup>3</sup>, but officially announced by the International Red Cross in July 2012 that the situation in Syria requires special attention which includes war crimes.<sup>4</sup>

Sectarianism remains a relatively vague and elusive legal term in addition to its contested nature. Broadly speaking, sectarianism can be thought of as the politics of identity consisting of ethnic, religious, sectarian and tribal boundaries. The deployment of sectarianism is a by-product of the modern Arab state, and it is the primary tool to shape the political identity of citizens. The modern Westphalian nation state with its distinction from religion has helped the politicization and deepening of sectarian identity in the region, if not created it (Osman, 2014). Taking these classifications into account, it is clear that Syrian conflict has the elements of civil war that includes various sects. However, this doesn't mean that the root causes of the conflict is a sectarian of historical animosities

If we go back in time and remember how it was when the apathy against the government in Syria began in 2011, it was peaceful and non-sectarian. Nevertheless, the Assad regime labelled its opponents as terrorists with the hope of discrediting them in the eyes of moderate and Western governments, while presenting itself as secular. Despite the label, the demonstrations were largely secular (Council on Foreign Relations, 2016). Arguably, this did not fit the interests and narrative of the Syrian regime that assumed itself as the protector of Syria's diverse ethnic and religious population.

Regardless of the comparatively recent and very well accepted sectarian rhetoric of the Syrian civil war, the reasons for the uprising were more than Sunni-Alawite contention. The acceleration of political repression by the Baathist regime arguably after the consolidation of President Hafez al-Assad's rule opened a new period in Syrian politics. The importance of personal links rather than institutional loyalty has been underneath the nominal structure of the state. The paradox becomes even clearer if the strong reliance on personal links is being understood. Following the death of his father, as a successor, President Bashar al-Assad assumed power in 2000. The Assad regime was unable to respond to the reform hopes. Instead, the regime maintained control and eliminated all possible channels for political opposition (Page, 2015).

Over the last five years before the conflict started, Syria has experienced a gradual economic growth; however, several economic and social challenges remained stagnant in society. The absolute and relative poverty rate remained high in Syria. This led to an apparent increase in social and regional inequalities despite the high annual economic growth rate. Rapid population growth also coincided with a very large movement from rural to urban cities resulting in high level of urbanization and political mobilization. The failure of Arab socialism as an economic and political model created uneven economic conditions. The social pact between the government and its citizens that prevailed in the 1980s and 1990s was no longer available. Syria's economic challenges have fed the population's growing anger giving impetus to the protests.

More specifically, rapid population growth resulted in many job-seekers entering into the labor market. However, both the public sector and the private sector were unable to satisfy the needs of the job-seekers. Official unemployment rate was 10 percent at the time the conflict began. What was even more striking in Syria was the youth unemployment rate, which exceeded 30% in 2011. Syrian youths were stuck in a period of "waithood".<sup>5</sup> Syrian youths are better educated than their parents. However, the Syrian economy was not growing fast enough to absorb the better educated Syrian generation. The Syrian system that made who you know more important than what you know -nepotism- has not provided them with positive future prospects, either. Instead, a combination of these factors has created a high degree of frustration among the Syrian youth. Some scholars<sup>6</sup> depicted this youth challenge as the most critical 21st century economic development barrier observed in the Middle East, and the resentment among youths as the defining feature of the region. Consequently, due to an increasing population with lack of employment prospects, Syria's rapidly growing youth population has become a demographic time bomb waiting to explode.

Compounding the youth unemployment, a persistent drought has devastated farming communities particularly in north-eastern Syria. The drought affected more than a million people in the last 3 years before the conflict. A lack of government support triggered the anger of farmers. The poverty rate in Syria's southern region has more than doubled before the conflict started. Despite the cash transfer program of the government that targeted low-income households to offset the effect of reforms on their living conditions, the impact was rather limited. When Syria tried to address these economic problems, it faced several other challenges. Among those is the regional discrepancy of the distribution of services. Drought and poor infrastructure increased the vulnerability of the eastern and southern regions where economic opportunities were in decline; child labor and deprivation were at stake (Landis, 2011).

Another challenge included the transition to a market driven economy as well as the need to open trade and investment to competition (Yousef, 2004). The Syrian government had to tackle the components preventing the emergence of a private sector; and to diminish corruption; and to increase efficiency through investing in infrastructure. However, a lack of transparency and the cumbersome nature of bureaucracy reproduced a vicious cycle in which the large companies that are on good terms with the regime dominated the private sectors. On the other hand, small companies tended to join the informal sector to avoid administrative barriers. Corruption and arbitrary decision making were the determinants of the administrative structure. This in the end favored families with personal links to Assad and caused the concentration of money in the hands of the few, leaving provincial Syria, where the protests began, hopeless and angry with no other option (Achy, 2011).

Although, Sunni population was disproportionately affected from Syria's economic and environmental problems, Sunni-Alawite tensions were not the primary driving force of the coming conflict. Sunni-Alawite tensions were not the primary driving force. Instead, the lines of this conflict are drawn on a complex mixture of factors including personal history, employment background, geographical location, family situation and past experiences with the regime. We suggest that the toxic mix including a shallow political culture, weak institutions leading to bad policy outcomes, social problems, unchecked ambitions of leaders and ultimately very high levels of violence were the main drivers of the protests.

It is very remarkable to note that, the Daraa and the Hawran area, where the insurrection started, despite being dominated by Sunni Arabs, were very well known for their loyalty to the regime. During the 1976-82 Conflict in Syria, they did not show any support for the Muslim Brotherhood and remained loyal to the regime. Nevertheless, their stance was not the same in the 2011 unrest (Macleod, 2011). Economic reforms being introduced since the 2000s had caused visible social discontent in those towns. Youth arrests lit the Syrian flame. When the local notables approached the government after the arrests, they were faced with the government's humiliating and violent reactions to their concerns. Arguably, this refusal has helped spread the Syrian protests (Wimmen, 2014). Contrarywise, when the conflict started in 2011, there were almost no sectarian marks. Sunnis, which are in a comparatively privileged position, showed their support towards the regime. On the other hand, Alawites that are excluded from the system revealed their discontent with the regime by taking part in the protests. Likewise, there were pro and anti-government demonstrations among Ismailis who are part of Shia community.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the conflict was not a battle to realize a Sunni takeover of the Syrian state (Slim; Hugo & Trombetta, 2014). Instead, the mobilization against the Assad regime was for reasons that are in fact not purely sectarian (Hurault, 2014).

### **Why A Sectarian Narrative Then?**

If there is more to the story than sectarianism alone, why has the conflict in Syria been treated as a sectarian one? Arguably, the deployment of sectarian narrative is to accomplish the desired political ends. History tells us that religion has always been used as an excuse for intervention. As in the case of Ottoman domains, for local minority communities, sectarian conflict was a means to attract external

actors' assistance, and that was favored by the external powers having interest in particular communities. Hence, both sides have gained due to claims of sectarian conflict (Rogan, 2004).

For example, the 1860 events in Damascus where several thousand Christians died and the wholesale destruction of the Christian quarter of the city took place at the hands of a mob, were initially explained in terms of sectarian tensions arising from the 19th Century Ottoman Reform that provided religious minorities with privileges. That reform had objective to equalize their status with the majority Muslim population. However, this sectarian based reductionist approach was unable to explain the whole narrative. In this regard, social conflict in Damascus in 1860 was later interpreted in terms of political and economic matters. Sectarianism can thus be seen as an emission of 19th Century colonial interests on local societies that can also explain why the vast majority of chronicles of the 1860 events in the Levant followed a sectarian narrative having faith in influencing political events to their community's good (Ibid).

Syria has become the center of regional conflicts and competition in the Middle East. The balance of power through proxy wars, competition between superpowers, ideological quarrels and the desire to be a key player in the region has turned the war into a sectarian one (Heydemann, 2013). Thus, it is possible to hold that increasing sectarian violence in the Syrian conflict is driven either by the regime itself, or by elites who cynically exploit the sectarian identity for political purposes. When necessary, both the regime and opposition groups utilized help from actors with ethno-sectarian agendas (Philips, 2015). Politicization of sectarian language has been a willing strategy of the civil war spreading the fears of sectarianism. Therefore, the ideological symbiosis between the West that insists on "clash of civilization" and the political Islamists who insist on the religious and sectarian differences turned this civil war into a sectarian one.

In addition to identity politics played by internal and external actors, what we call the "ISIL effect" should not be underestimated. Arguably, ISIL dramatically influenced sectarianisation of the civil war by radicalizing Salafism. As a non-state actor, ISIL converted this civil war into a sectarian war through its Sunni Wahhabi ideology against other Sunnis, Shias, Christians or any other minority groups that clash with their ideological position.

What we see in the transformation of the Syrian civil war into a sectarian conflict is identity politics dressed up in sectarian rhetoric. The mobilization of sectarian identities by different groups, sides or even countries involved in this conflict is to control the political situation within the region as a matter of strategy. Sectarian language is designed to prevent the mobilization of the opposition aiming to weaken their position. Since religious civil wars tend to be longer and bloodier than other types of clashes, sectarian religious motives stand at the center of international politics to allow parties to make use of its opportunities (Synder, 2011). Consequently, reinforcing a sectarian reading of the conflict through reproducing ethnic maps for Sunni, Alawite, and Kurdish populated areas in Syria signals the message that the country has never been integrated or will never be integrated and moreover present spillover effect to neighboring countries.

### **Alliance Dilemma (Synder, 1984)**

Syrian conflict is a proxy war battle ground fought between regional powers where the balance of power and superpower competition is played out. Every external actor has their own agenda that complicates the dynamics of the civil war. The rivalry between regional powers, the historic competition between superpowers, and what Glenn Snyder calls the "alliance dilemma" make not only the dynamics of the Syrian civil war more complicated, but also the sectarian language more compelling.

Some scholars (Alterman, 2013; Asseburg, Muriel & Wimmen, 2012) tend to approach the Syrian civil war as a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia and other actor that is also visible in Yemen, Bahrain, Iraq and Lebanon as if Iran and Saudi Arabia are the puppet masters of the region's sectarian struggles. The role of these two regional powers on the Syrian civil war is undeniable especially with regards to the politicization of sectarian identity; this does not, however, necessarily mean that the current con-

flict in Syria is a sectarian civil war predestined for the historical competition between these actors due to the ethnic Persian versus Arab divide; or the sectarian Sunni versus the Shiite divide (Wehrey, 2013). The flare-up of the Sunni-Shiite conflict between Tehran and Riyadh has to a certain degree to do with intrinsic religious differences. Indeed, this rivalry should be seen as an outcome of numerous power shifts in the region within the discourse of power politics, which in turn has provoked both state and non-state actors with vested interests in the region to support their interests by capitalizing on religious sentiments. For Riyadh, Syria has been part of the great game of blocking Iranian influence. Thus, not the religion itself, but the interplay between state structures and individual identity is the key point that is mostly overlooked (Ibid).

Similar to the regional balance of power game, Russia and the US competed to launch a new and even more complicated phase in the Syrian civil war. The involvement of Russia created a challenge for the US, which is not about Syria alone, but also about the role of the US in the wider Middle East and about the very concept of leadership. Taking the historical interplay between these two actors, it is not surprising to observe that the two most powerful nations aim to hold the stronger position when pushing for the Syrian peace process. Unlike the Tehran-Riyadh power struggle, it is not easy to clearly indicate that the unresolved rivalry between these two superpowers has fed into the sectarian rhetoric; however, it is clear that this struggle has not eased the peace process, either.

In addition to the already complicated nature of the balance of power dilemma, Syria's relation with these actors is another dimension making things even worse. What Glenn Synder calls alliance dilemma illustrates the importance of this complication. In order to understand Damascus's policies towards regional rivals, one must try to understand the efforts that aim to strengthen the strategic partnerships. However, it is crucial to highlight that the interrelationship between the alliance game and the adversary game is not straightforward. Accordingly, it is better to be cautious when analyzing the interplay within the alliance game. Whenever one ally embraces comparatively moderate hostility toward an adversary, the tendency of the other to engage in initiatives may ambush them in an unwanted situation full of unplanned conflicts. Besides, adopting an extremely welcoming position or to the contrary, assuming an excessively hostile stance toward an adversary can also result in unexpected alliance formation. Subsequently, a strategic partnership with one actor has had a direct and visible impact not only on the alliance formation, but also on the Syrian civil war in general (Lawson, 2006).

Arguably, sectarianism -thanks to its delegitimizing effect- has been used by all the above-mentioned actors of the Syrian civil war as a way to form allies to enhance its security and to preserve the balance of power. In other words, sectarianism can be seen as a resilient parameter for alliance formation that is less likely to entrap the allies in unwanted contention. Making sense of the connection between Damascus's alliance with Tehran and its recent policies toward other internal and external actors requires a reformulation of the alliance dilemma. Thus, framing the war as sectarian is conducive to achieve the endgame of these internal and external players.

### Winners and Losers of the Sectarian Discourse

In this article, we do not buy into the cliché that suggests the Syrian civil war is solely a sectarian one. Instead, we recommend analyzing the conflict from a more comprehensive perspective including socio-economic and political factors. Deploying a reductionist sectarian approach is dangerous because not only does it undermine the reasons for the conflict, but it also redefines the positions of the parties by creating new losers and victors.

Regardless of the sectarian narrative, the Syrian people appear to be the biggest losers of the civil war, while being affected by the sectarian discourse the most. In line with the OCHA estimations, there are 13.1 million people that were affected by the civil war and in need of humanitarian assistance. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis more than 5.6 million people have fled the country to neighboring countries as seeking asylum. Additionally, there are roughly 6.6 million people that are internally displaced and almost 3 million people live in hard-to-reach and besieged areas regarding humanitarian



assistance. Considering the total population size of Syria with 22 million, these numbers confirm how alarming the situation has become. Losing their homes, their families and their hopes undoubtedly put the Syrian people in a worse off position than at the beginning of the conflict (Reliefweb, 2020; UNCHR, 2020).

At least 1 in 10 Syrians has been faced with the physical and psychological effects of the war since the beginning of the conflict. More specifically, although the United Nations stopped counting Syria's death toll early in 2014, according to report (Syrian Centre for Policy Research, 2014) published by the Syrian Center for Policy Research. It is predicted that more than 550,000 people were killed (SyriaHR, 2018) since the beginning of the war, and that 11.5% of the total population has been wounded or killed. Even though the vast majority of deaths were caused by violence, an indirect result of the war such as the collapse of the country's health-care infrastructure, a lack of access to medicine, poor sanitation, the spread of communicable diseases, falling vaccination rates, food scarcity and malnutrition are also thought to increase the death toll.

Apart from the most catastrophic and visible effects of the war, economic and social facets are crucial areas to consider. In the wake of the civil war, approximately 85% of the population is exposed to the threat of extreme poverty and food insecurity, which stood at 11 percent at the start of the war in 2011, was thought to reach 50% by the end of 2015 (Ibid; Reliefweb, 2020). Although there is no official statistical information presenting the complete picture in Syria, arguably, there is no need to comment on the fact that the Syrian people in and outside of Syria are in a worse off position in the ninth year of the civil war than they were in 2011.

More significantly, there has been a sharp decline in the Syrian Christian population especially after the acceleration of the conflict, which coincides with the sectarianization of the war (Chiaromonte, 2013). Even though arguably it is comparatively a lot easier for the Christian population to seek asylum in Europe, it is uncertain as to whether they are on the winning side. Also, the demographic composition of the region will be completely changed once the conflict is over.

In addition to Christians, minorities within minorities have suffered the most. For instance, a report (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015) published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights confirms that the Yazidis have been faced with abuses of international human rights by ISIL and associated terrorist groups. Sexual and gender-based violence; recruitment and use of children; use of prohibited weapons; extrajudicial killings, abductions and torture; forced displacement and preventing access to safe areas are some of the patterns of abuses and violations against the Yazidis. The systematic targeting of members of religious communities in areas seized has gained momentum after the deployment of sectarian narrative, which leaves the Yazidis on the losing side.

On the other hand, the Kurds have been able to use the conflict in an opportunistic manner to improve their own positioning. Having two superpowers, the US and Russia, as allies has placed them in a comparatively advantageous position, especially when compared to other minority groups in Syrian society including the Alawites. Further acceleration of the conflict has helped them to develop their relationship with the regime as well. Considering the changes in Syria's nationality law in the 1960s that made tens of thousands of Kurds stateless, the current Syrian government appears to be mending its past to keep the Kurds on side (Government of United Kingdom Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2013). Regardless of Turkey's political maneuvering to ensure that the role of the Kurdish population in the Syrian peace process that does not translate to an international level of legitimization, the Kurds remain in a strong position when compared to their standing before the conflict. Hence, it could be the sectarian discourse that does overlook the ethnic narrative rewarding the Kurds. However, history reminds us that this better off position is likely not to last forever. They have not always been good friends of all of the regional external actors. Taking the geographical area that they are presently in control of into consideration, the number of Kurds does not seem sufficient enough to hold the territory without external support. Another critical threat is the inclusion of the ethnic narrative into civil war discourse. In other words, sectarian language may be beneficial for the Kurds at the moment.

Nevertheless, the resurgence of ethnic narrative may challenge this position later.

In addition, the sectarian narrative appears to be beneficial for the Syrian regime, which is arguably one of the key strategies of the regime itself, with the objective of taking over as the legitimate sovereign power, and to expose the opposition groups as terrorists. Sectarian narratives surely helped the regime to attract allies. Apart from Iran's obvious support, Russian involvement has changed the entire picture for the regime helping it to consolidate its position. Victory on the ground is believed to bring the victory at the table. Although some would argue that the stalemate has changed after the Russian military involvement in the Syrian civil war, we prefer to indicate that the involvement of Russia has altered the dynamics of the stalemate; however, it is still not a victory especially from the viewpoint of the Syrian regime itself. Overall, as is expected, the deployment of sectarian language appears to work for the regime as it helps the regime to form strong alliances. This does not necessarily mean that a sectarian narrative will remain beneficial for the regime. As we argue that sectarian discourse is nothing more than a dimension of power politics played by the powerful actors of the civil war, any change in this play can challenge the current situation of the regime too.

Apart from the status of internal parties, the roles and the positions of external actors have been very much affected by the sectarian discourse. The involvement of Russia in this civil war undeniably altered the dynamics of the conflict. It confirmed that Russia is still a key player in world politics. The old axiom -Russia is never as strong as she seems and never as weak as she looks- appears to be still valid still apparent. Putin's modified version of this axiom that's states -Russia is never as strong as it wants to be and is never as weak as it is thought to be- appears even more valid. What is of interest here, however, is not whether the exact quote or the modified version is more accurate, but the enduring truth of the notion that Russia is still a key player and will continue to be one.

Correspondingly, Russia's involvement has had a direct influence on the role of the United States in the region as well. Although the US has not been directly involved in the civil war against the regime, the US has been fighting against ISIL since September 2014. In addition to its counter ISIL efforts, the US has been actively involved in the Syrian peace process since the very beginning despite no direct role either against or for the regime. Also, one can argue that the attitude of the US concerning the future of regime has changed with Russian involvement. The US has started to apply a comparatively moderate approach with regard to the future of Assad unlike its preceding standpoint. Intriguingly, Russia as the only legitimate actor being called for help by the sovereign Syrian state makes things even more difficult for the US. This could in a way explain the observable change in US discourse over time. It may not be easy to comment on whether or not a New Cold War is superficially on, who the winning side is; however, it is easy to indicate that Russia being a key player is now also approved by the West.

Apart from superpower competition, regional contention between Iran and Saudi Arabia is another milestone of the civil war that feeds the sectarian discourse as well as being affected by it. Iran seems to be in a better position than where it was when the conflict began. The involvement of Russia, abolition of sanctions on Iran, weakening legitimacy of Wahhabi Islam after the rise of ISIL can be asserted to put Iran in a better off position. The increasing power of Iran, however, has not changed the position of Saudi Arabia. The relationship of Saudi Arabia with the US has always been beneficial to sustain its stronghold position regardless of increasing influence of Iran within the conflict. These two actors are the ones that use sectarian language not only to justify their actions, but also to delegitimize their counterparts. Although sectarian discourse appears to be working for both actors for now, it is not easy to forecast who will be the loser in the long term -if any.

Another key external actor is Turkey whose position has distinctively changed over time. Turkey could have bridged over the differences in the Middle East, as well as been a bridge between Europe and the Middle East. The shooting down of a Russian plane after it violated the very margins of Turkish airspace, and the worsening relationships with the crucial actors of the conflict were challenging enough for Turkey. But for some reason after the so-called coup attempt in Turkey on July 15th, 2016, she started having closer relationship with Russia and distancing herself from western front. Turkey has found itself in a position like no other since WWII that prompted its early entrance into NATO in 1952,

and now Turkey has fallen into Kremlin's limelight. Interestingly enough, Turkey's recently launched Operation Peace Spring on 9th October 2019 has come to a deadlock after the ceasefire with Russia on 5th March 2020 and locked the Turkish troops up in Idlib leaving no exit strategy without Russian escort (CNN Edition, 2020).

Besides, what is even more challenging for Turkey in the long run is the refugee population, which is officially estimated as around 3.6 million according to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Syria Regional Refugee Response, 2020). Negative public perception of refugees in Turkey is highly likely to be a critical problem that may trigger more polarizations in Turkish society despite not being the main concern of any actor. More specifically, despite the lack of media coverage, there is little public appetite for a refugee influx in Turkey similar to Europe, and resentment towards refugees may fuel other national grievances in the long term.

As a non-state actor of the war, ISIL complicates both internal and external dynamics making it more vulnerable to international intervention. As is highlighted, ISIL has played an undeniable role for the sectarianisation of the conflict. Politicization of sectarian identity seems to be beneficial for ISIL as it complicates the dynamics of the civil war and makes who is fighting who even more unclear. Syria's war is intensifying, and the spiraling of the conflict between regime forces and opposition groups works for ISIL whose position has not been weakened until now by the deployment of sectarian narrative. I guess it is fair to say that Russia's active involvement in the Syrian crisis is not due to a fear of terrorism stemmed from ISIL despite the popular rhetoric. In line with this claim, Russia has been targeting anti-Assad groups, which has paradoxically helped ISIL, and complicated the situation both in Iraq and Syria.

With regard to Iraq, some may argue that it is more stable when compared to Syria. It can be argued that Iraq is still a very vulnerable player in the region that can be affected by the sectarian language the most. In addition to the ISIL effect, the Syrian conflict has a Sunni disenfranchisement effect in Iraq. Unlike the boundaries of the countries, sectarianism does not have one, and this is eloquently argued by former Iraqi Prime Minister al-Malaki, sectarianism will be likely to knock on the doors of everyone because the wind of sectarianism does not require a license to move to another country, and there is not only a wind behind it, but also money and plans (BBC News, 2013).

Unlike Iraq, despite not being directly exposed to sectarian discourse, Jordan and Lebanon are on the losing sides where the sectarian language has a tendency to indirectly transform the societal structure of those countries. The Palestinian majority, which was estimated at around 50 to 70 percent of the overall population, has been the largest historical threat for the unity of Jordan. However, this looming threat has been challenged by the influx of Syrian refugees to Jordan. According to official UNHCR data (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Syria Regional Refugee Response, 2020) there are 656,213 Syrian refugees in Jordan although the actual number is predicted to be more than that, which constitutes more or less 11 percent of the its total population. The massive refugee influx has strained Jordan's public resources to the breaking point and is highly likely to impact upon the stability of the kingdom (Carrion, 2015).

On the other hand, the situation in Lebanon can be asserted as even more severe than the case of Jordan. Since the start of the war in Syria, more than a million Syrians have entered Lebanon as refugees, which make up almost a quarter of the overall population. The majority of the refugees are Sunnis whose presence in Lebanon has upended the demographic balance between Sunnis, Shi'ites and Christians. Although it is not possible to present a clear outlook of the medium- and short-term implications of the refugee flows, it is clear that the long-term impacts will be profound considering the lack of a unifying national ethos of these two countries. Hence, sectarian discourse through intensifying refugee influx is doing harm for Jordan and Lebanon, and the situation in these two countries in the long term could even worsen. Since a sectarian narrative proved too successful to heighten the conflict, the politicization of a sectarian identity is likely to continue to dominate the region. Therefore, one of the biggest losers of this civil war will be the region itself; transformed demographic structure will redefine the region in which stability is less likely to remain stagnant and would be conducive atmosphere

for the continuation of proxy war.

As is indicated, these are the expectations for the civil war on its ninth year that arguably has been transformed after the deployment of a distinctly sectarian narrative. Despite these projections, it is essential to remark that anything in this formulation is subject to change. Consequently, one should be cautious when voicing speculative assertions based on past trends. In this regard, as George Friedman<sup>8</sup> puts it very remarkably, it is far more difficult to make predictions about the short term especially when compared to the long term. A century is about events whereas a decade is about people. Therefore it would be much easier to predict the “Next Century” as opposed to the “Next Decade” Hence, we suggest that the winners of the civil war can easily change especially in the short term but in the long term, the biggest losers of this civil war will be the Syrian people and the region itself where the demographic change is likely to provoke more instability than it had before.

## Summary

This article argues that contrary to the prevailing belief and appearance at the surface, Syrian civil war is more than a sectarian war. Instead of a reductionist sectarian approach, it is better to understand the changing dynamics of the Syrian civil war in a more comprehensive manner taking the socio-economic and political factors into account. Of these, shallow political culture, weak institutions and economic motivation remain vital factors, with the perception of a fragmented society as the main driving line of the civil war.

The acceleration of political repression by the Baathist regime arguably after the consolidation of President Hafez al-Assad's rule opened a new period in Syrian politics. The importance of personal links rather than institutional loyalty has been underneath the nominal structure of the state. Syria's economic challenges have fed the population's growing anger giving impetus to the protests. Due to an increasing population with lack of employment prospects, Syria's rapidly growing youth population has become a demographic time bomb waiting to explode. With this respect, minority rule through which the top positions in state institutions and in the security apparatus are in the hands of the Alawites has become an issue for the Sunni Muslim population, not the Alawites per se. Sunni-Alawite tensions were not the primary driving force. Instead the lines of this conflict are drawn on a complex mixture of factors including personal history, employment background, geographical location, family situation and past experiences with the regime.

Nevertheless, the Assad regime labelled its opponents as terrorists with the hope of discrediting them in the eyes of moderate and Western governments, while presenting itself as secular. Considering the artificial characteristic of the nation state building process in which the identity formation is closely tied to religion and ethnicity, exploitation of sectarian identity is a useful tool to delegitimize the counterparts. That is why underpinning sectarian dynamics as the defining root cause of the emerging Middle East seems dangerously misdirected. The sectarian discourse runs the risk of knocking the door of the neighboring countries and flare up the whole region. Syrian civil war is not solely a sectarian civil war but the involvement of actors with ethno-sectarian agendas is successful enough to make the war perceived as one. Syria has become the center of regional conflicts and competition in the Middle East. The explanation, however, should be the power politics rather than the sectarian differences, which happen to be the “on the surface” factor to blame but it is just being utilized for political agendas.

The balance of power through proxy wars, competition between superpowers, ideological quarrels and the desire to be a key player in the region has turned the war into a sectarian war. Politicization of sectarian language and spreading the fears of sectarianism has been used as a strategy to shape the conflict outcome by different actors strategy of the civil war. Therefore, the ideological symbiosis between the West that insist on “clash of civilization” and the political Islamists who insist on the religious and sectarian differences turned this war into a sectarian one. Contrariwise, reinforcing a sectarian reading of the conflict through reproducing ethnic maps for Sunni, Alawite and Kurdish populated areas in

Syria signals the message that the country has never been integrated or will never be integrated and endanger of prolonged civil war in the region similar to thirty years war in the 17th century.

Indeed, Syria is a proxy war battle ground fought between regional powers where the balance of power and superpower competition is played out. Every external actor has their own agenda that complicated the dynamics of the civil war. The rivalry between regional powers, the historic competition between superpowers and the “alliance dilemma” make not only the dynamics of the Syrian civil war more complicated, but also the sectarian language more compelling. Making sense of the connection between Damascus’s alliance with Tehran and its recent policies toward other internal and external actors requires a reformulation of the alliance dilemma.

Above all, deploying a reductionist sectarian approach is dangerous because not only does it undermine the reasons for the conflict, but it also redefines the positions of the parties by creating new losers and victors. This article projected that the winners of the civil war can change especially in the short term, but also in the long term. The biggest losers of this civil war will be the Syrian people<sup>9</sup> and the region itself where the demographic change is likely to provoke more instability than it had before. Most likely the region will be involved in the effluent of Syria’s civil war for some years and the rest of the world will continue to be impacted by the secondary effects such as influx of refugees.

Last but not least, the language we use about a crisis or an issue is of great importance. As indicated in the concept of securitization theory originally devised by Ole Waever, the speech act refers back to the idea that by labeling, saying, and repeating something, the speech act brings something into effect in the course of time (Wæver, 1995). The conflict in Syria and particularly the root causes of the conflict has been a battleground for narratives and securitization. If the past is a good guide, we can expect the future of Syrian conflict narrative to be shaped around interests rather than hard truth.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The Levant is a region composed of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq as well as historical Palestine.
- <sup>2</sup> Yazidi or Yezidi is a Middle Eastern religious community whose beliefs incorporate elements of Zoroastrianism, Sufism, Christianity, Manichaeism, and Judaism.
- <sup>3</sup> According to the regime sources, the combat deaths reached over 500 by August 2011. For more detailed information, please see "Latest Regime Fatalities" (2014) Violations Documentation Centre in Syria [www.vd-c-sy.info/index.php/en/](http://www.vd-c-sy.info/index.php/en/).
- <sup>4</sup> Red Cross Declares Civil War in Syria, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18849362>. Accessed on 04 Jan 2020.
- <sup>5</sup> James Gelvin (2011) in his book *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* Oxford University Press describes "waithood" as a period in which youth wait for (good) jobs, wait for marriage and intimacy, and wait for full participation in their societies.
- <sup>6</sup> There are several scholars considering the implications and opportunities of the youth bulge and the response mechanisms as a key defining feature of the region that will redefine the future of the Middle East such as Navtej Dhillon, Fellow/Director of the Middle East Youth Initiative; Honorable Marwan Muasher, Senior Vice President at the World Bank.
- <sup>7</sup> There have also been reports of pro- and anti-government demonstrations in the city. A state-organised rally in support of the government was reported in November. Anti-government protests were reported to have been staged in the city in June.
- <sup>8</sup> George Friedman's books entitled *The Next Decade* and *The Next 100 Years* that highlight the attempts to predict the major geopolitical events and trends in the respective time periods were referred.
- <sup>9</sup> There are 11.1 million people in need and 4.7 million of them are children. <https://www.unocha.org/syria>. Accessed on 01 May 2020.



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# Life inside Syria's al-Hol camp<sup>1</sup>

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Vera Mironova<sup>2</sup>

After the fall of ISIS in 2019, many relatives of fighters who were detained or killed, including 10,000 families of foreign fighters, were housed in camps in territory controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The biggest camps include Roj and al-Hol. Like any closed society, the foreigners' annex in al-Hol has its own dynamic. To better understand that dynamic, I conducted around 20 in-depth interviews with females in the camp, including those from Europe, the former Soviet Union, former Yugoslavia, and America. Interviews were conducted in English, Russian, and Serbo-Croatian — languages I speak fluently — and I have been in contact with several of the women for nearly a year now and have developed close relationships.

Although al-Hol camp is often portrayed as either a hotbed of radical fanatics dedicated to ISIS or home to a bunch of poor housewives who were just following their husbands, the reality is much more complicated. For example, according to Russian-speaking females there, most camp residents — around 70 percent — feel they were used by ISIS's leadership to realize its political goals and do not believe in the group anymore. By contrast, just 30 percent still support ISIS and think that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was a rightful caliph but the group failed because he was surrounded by untrustworthy people. According to European females in the camp, the percentage of ISIS supporters is even lower, at around 20 percent, and is constantly falling. So just who are these 20-30 percent, why are they still radical, and what does that tell us about how foreign governments should address the issue of what to do with their citizens still held there?

## Who are these ISIS supporters?

There are four main groups of ISIS supporters in al-Hol, all with different motivations. First, there is a very small minority who honestly believe in an Islamic state and think that ISIS was in fact good and fair to its members when in power and its fighters will come to liberate them. Many of them go as far as to claim that “brothers are already in Hasakah waiting for the best time to stage a full-scale attack on the Kurds and overrun the prisons.” This group may be tiny, but it is very dedicated. For example, when Kazakhstan took its female citizens home from Syria in 2019, three of them hid so as not to be taken to the “land of kufr [non-Islam].”

Second, there is a small group of women whose husbands are still alive, free, and fighting with the group. According to one foreign female interviewed, “I have a friend who became anti-ISIS while in the camp with us. She was sure that her husband was killed in Baghouz after she left, so we were all hanging out trying to survive together. But several months ago her husband contacted her. Apparently he was still alive and fighting with the group somewhere near Iraq. She immediately became pro-ISIS, started actively supporting the group again, and stopped hanging out with us.”

Third, there are those who do not want to be deported because their lives will be in greater danger if they return to their home country. In al-Hol, the biggest such group is the Uyghurs, or Turkistanis as they are called there. They are absolutely confident that they will not be repatriated home and “they keep building and rebuilding their tents to make them the most comfortable and permanent. They know that it will be their home for a long time.” Without a country that cares about them, they tend to be strong supporters of ISIS and wish the caliphate would be restored and they could stay in Syria under its rule. By contrast, European females remaining in the camp are considered much less likely to still support the group because “their government cares about them and ISIS is not their only hope for freedom.”

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<sup>1</sup> This article was first published on 9 July 2020 on the Middle East Institute, at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/life-inside-syrias-al-hol-camp>

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The fourth and biggest group of radical females, however, are those whose motivation is strategic—they're in it for the money. Life in the camp is not cheap. According to the women interviewed, \$300-500 a month is barely enough for a mother with several children to survive. Many females are supported by their relatives back home, but some are not, and their lives are very hard. They work in all kinds of capacities to earn money from teachers in homemade tent schools to prostitutes for male camp workers, but it is often not enough. So they've pinned their hopes for survival on the members of ISIS who escaped the final stronghold in Baghouz with significant sums of money as well as its supporters abroad who never made it to Syria but still back the group. According to the foreign females interviewed, ISIS supporters get a substantial amount of money every month, often around \$1,000-2,000 per family, and live a much more comfortable life inside in the camp — they are able to afford good food, new clothes, and fans in the summer. The only requirement to get help from ISIS is to pretend to still be a part of the group, so that is exactly what they do.

### Performing radicalism on social media

The way these women demonstrate their loyalty to ISIS is by portraying themselves to be radical as possible, especially on social media, because their target audience is ISIS's leadership hiding in Idlib and its supporters abroad. They create social media channels with names like "Sisters in Captivity," "Thoughts from Prison," "Caged Birds," and "Modesty," and use them to express their loyalty to the group and to collect donations from ISIS supporters abroad. When al-Baghdadi was killed, for instance, many females in al-Hol posted messages swearing their allegiance to the new caliph.

They also engage in highly visible conflicts on social media about what is and is not acceptable in Islam, again signaling their dedication to the group. For example, one discussion on social media was about a female who was found smoking (an act prohibited by ISIS); this prompted a flurry of criticism, with the other women in effect competitively condemning her. According to one foreign female in the camp, "It is very funny to watch because not only are many females here smoking, including ones I saw participating in that discussion online, but some (particularly Europeans) are even smoking hashish. At the same time online they pretend to be pure Muslims dedicated to the Islamic State. Hilarious ... but I guess ISIS supporters believe this bullshit."

They also often make threats against ISIS women online in an effort to signal to the group's supporters reading their messages that they are still enforcing ISIS values and rules despite the risks involved. Among Russian-speaking females the most frequently posted threat online is that "Sunglasses are not acceptable in Islam and we would take them off women who wear them in public."

But in reality, ever since an incident on Sept. 30, 2019, when radical foreign females threw stones at Kurdish camp guards and tried to burn down a hospital, resulting in several of them being shot, they are afraid to make any real provocations to demonstrate their support for ISIS, so they have to find other ways.

For example, tents in the camp frequently catch fire by accident in the summer months — often caused by exploding cooking gas balloons — so many females use it as a way of increasing their social capital with the ISIS audience by either claiming that they burned the tent to punish a female opposing the group or to show their support for its goals by writing on social media that "the owner of the tent was punished by Allah because she was not a good Muslim and was making fun of religion."

In some closed internal chat groups, this has gone one step further and it is not uncommon to see messages saying, "Sisters, who has videos of something bad happening in the camp? Please send it to me. We have brothers collecting money for us so I want to send it to them."

In other cases, they resort to more blatant lies. For example, in May a video of a small pro-caliphate demonstration was widely shared on the internet by those foreign females, but according to one foreign female who was interviewed, "This demonstration was in the camp for Iraqi females, and not foreign [ones]. Our females would never dare to do something like that, being afraid of Kurdish forces. But now they are sharing it as if they were the ones doing it, claiming that they risked their lives for ISIS."

Women who do not believe in ISIS anymore are also trying to play the system and benefit from the money it distributes, although the group strictly prohibits sending money to those who do not support the organization. According to one foreign female who does not support the group but still gets money from its supporters abroad, “The person who sends me money is a die-hard ISIS supporter, and he was introduced to me by a mutual friend. He kind of never asked if I still support the group, assuming that I do. And under no circumstances would I volunteer the truth to him. I need to feed my four kids.”

### Conflicts in the camp

Internal conflicts are quite common in the camp, but their nature has changed over time. Initially, after Baghouz fell and the majority of females had just arrived to the camp, they frequently settled old scores. Wives of members of ISIS's internal security, known as the Amni, were often badly beaten by those whose husbands had been killed by Amni for betraying the group. The only means of defense for the wife of an Amni member was to have no knowledge of her husband's job. According to a Russian woman who was married to a high-level Amni member, “It was a big problem in the camp. I did not know what my husband was doing in ISIS so no one touched me. I guess I was lucky.” One American female added, “I learned about what my ex-husband did as a member of Amni when I was already in the camp.”

At that time the number of pro-ISIS females was high so they were still trying to enforce ISIS rules. According to one American female, “One and a half years ago I was transferred [from al-Hol] to Roj because I removed my hijab and it was dangerous for me. They threatened to burn my tent, so I had to put hijab back on.”

Things have since changed and norms about following even basic Islamic rules are different. The American woman continues, “It is also risky here to not wear hijab now, but five females do: Two French, one Belgian, and two more.” A Russian woman from al-Hol added, “No one cares if you follow Islam or not anymore. I know several women who do not even pray. They are not hiding it and they are not bothered.”

When asked if pro-ISIS females are dangerous, all non-supporters interviewed said that inside the camp they are not because “they are too scared to do something to prison guards and they do not bother us. They are only brave online posting their pro-ISIS messages.” According to them, “Although from time to time they are still trying to persuade us to support ISIS, it rarely works and we just do not interact.”

According to one female who was once arrested and accused of being an amir of Hizba (the religious police) in the camp, there is no enforcement of ISIS rules. “What ISIS enforcement could we talk about, I feel like we are in Europe here. Many females have sex with male workers of the camp and some girls are even lesbians. Everyone knows about it but no one cares.” In fact, the problem is often the opposite. “We constantly hear about 13-year-old boys having sex with girls or even try to rape other younger boys. I am afraid to let my kids hang out with other kids outside.”

What is more widespread now is simply a division and mutual disrespect between pro-ISIS and anti-ISIS females in the camp. The group's supporters are trying hard to show their contempt for those who are anti-ISIS or even just less pro-ISIS. For example, they condemn women who chat with men at the market or those who bring water to the camp, and they go so far as to put on a niqab (face veil) when meeting them on the street, although even by their own interpretation of Islam there is no need for women to wear the niqab when there are no men around.

Such visible disrespect is not so much a result of a religious disagreement as it is a fight over the distribution of money. Women who are getting money from ISIS have an incentive to accuse as many others as possible of not being religious enough in order to reduce the number of people with whom they have to share resources. As a result, even among the ISIS supporters, there is a constant fight to outbid one another with displays of radical religious sentiment.



In one known case a stepmother kicked out her two stepdaughters, 12 and 14 years old, after living with them for more than seven years. According to their aunt, “She said that they are not Muslims because she is not sure their father is. She could not find out his aqida [religious belief system] because he is in prison in Hasakah. So she does not want to take care of them until they pass a religious exam to prove to her they are Muslims. They have nowhere to go so I took them to live with me.”

### **Fighting over the mundane**

By now everyone is just tired of living in the camp and the conflicts that do break out are all about mundane things, like kids having fights, arguments at the market, and especially in the line to the water and ice distribution. In fact, when summer began this year, one woman even wrote on her Facebook page, “Al Hol girls, ice arrived to the camp. Fighting season starts!” That said, fights over such mundane issues often escalate into what could be seen as ISIS-related conflicts. For example, at the end of June there was a major incident in al-Hol when one pro-ISIS female – Woman #1 from the Ingushetia region of Russia – stabbed an anti-ISIS female – Woman #2 from the Chechnya region of Russia – in the chest and slightly wounded her child. Although it looked like an ISIS-related conflict because Woman #1 accused Woman #2 of being a kafir (disbeliever) and Woman #2 accused Woman #1 of being a member of Amni, the conflict actually started in the line for water and was simply a mundane disagreement.

And even this conflict was settled relatively quickly too. After the incident, Woman #1 tried to hide, but when a large group of anti-ISIS women came searching for her, the pro-ISIS women who were protecting her gave her up. After negotiations it was agreed that Woman #1 would pay compensation to Woman #2 to solve the dispute. The other alternative was to stab her in return and forgive her, but Woman #2 refused to do it as she was afraid that she would miscalculate the force required and kill the woman instead.

Conflicts also break out from time to time over the presence of spies, which the camp leadership places among the general population, although the majority of women say they know who the spies are. According to one interviewee, “When someone is caught for example with a phone she has an option: to work for the guards as an informant or to go to prison. Many chose working for the guards. They collect info on who has cellphones, gets money transfers from outside, and has older boys [that camp leadership would take to the deradicalization centers]. We know all of them and just try to ignore them, but sometimes they get seriously beaten. A year ago we beat one such informant (from Turkey) and put her in the toilet, so now the guards gave her a pistol so she could defend herself.”

### **The world outside the camp**

Although the behavior of the 20-30 percent of foreign females who are radical is not dangerous inside the camp, non-ISIS females are concerned about the problems they cause in relation to the prison guards and world outside al-Hol.

First, pro-ISIS females behave aggressively toward camp guards and the administration, leading them to have a negative attitude and behavior toward all females in the camp. In addition they teach their kids to do the same. According to one anti-ISIS female, “Pro-ISIS kids throw stones at those who bring water to the camp and even pierce the wheels of their cars. No surprise that we are not getting enough water. I absolutely understand the Kurds’ position, but we could not do anything with those kids.”

Second, non-ISIS females want to return home and they are extremely worried about the online behavior of pro-ISIS females and the image they create for the camp and its residents. According to one interviewee, “Those girls are using nicknames online so it is very hard for us to figure out who is who, but we are keeping track of them and eventually we will find them. For example by making fake male profiles and starting conversations with them. Then we usually just talk to them and if they do not peacefully agree to stop spreading pro-ISIS messages or make their pro-ISIS social media account

private, we would have to turn to a less peaceful explanation [beating]. We want to go home and those messages online are very harmful.”

Finally, pro-ISIS females often hide orphans because they do not want them to be taken back to their home countries. The majority of females who decided to fight till the end and were killed in the last ISIS-controlled territory of Baghouz were die-hard supporters, and they left their children with women with similar world views. As a result, at least in the Russian-speaking community, pro-ISIS females take care of the majority of orphans. Often they are not taking the best care of those orphans, but they refuse to give them to women who are not pro-ISIS or repatriate them to their home countries. While there is a small number of females who legitimately believe that a child should not grow up in the land of nonbelievers, the majority are also doing it for the money. The more kids they have under their guardianship, the more money they can collect from ISIS and the orphans' relatives back home. According to one interviewee who no longer supports the group, “We had one such kid who had a grandfather back home. At night, several radical females came to our tent to take him by force. There was a small fight, but in the end we agreed that they would keep him for now, but when Russia takes their orphans, they would give him and not hide him.”

### Escaping from the camp

In June, several Finnish ISIS women and children escaped from al-Hol camp and made it back to their home country. This is not an isolated incident. While escapes from Roj camp are exceptionally rare, escapes from al-Hol happen every week. Usually three to four families leave at once, and since foreign females first arrived there, hundreds of them and their children have escaped.

Inside the al-Hol camp, it is common knowledge whom to talk to and pay to be smuggled out. Escape plans are not kept secret, and when a particular female plans an escape, she informs her close friends so that they can divide up her things when she's gone. Currently, such an escape costs around \$15,000 per family, with the amount varying significantly depending on the woman's nationality and slightly depending on the number of children involved. The only known escape from Roj camp, by contrast, is reported to have cost \$40,000.

Escapes are usually coordinated from Idlib and the contact person depends on the woman in question's ethnicity and the language she speaks. According to a foreign fighter in Idlib who is involved in smuggling, “[If they are] planning to get out, women from al-Hol have to contact a person of their ethnicity. For example, those coordinating escapes of Russian speakers will not help French and the other way around. Prices are different and if they make a deal with Kurds to move a group of Russians but one of them would be French they would lose trust of those Kurds and would not be able to continue working.” There are three main ways in which ISIS females can escape from al-Hol:

- First, the most comfortable (and most expensive) way is by bribing Kurdish security forces, who facilitate the travel themselves.
- Second, the escape could be facilitated by local civilians who work as water tank drivers. According to one female interviewed, this is cheaper (around \$14,000), but is very uncomfortable and dangerous. “Of course, water tank drivers bribe the guards to let us through checkpoints, but there is still the possibility of being caught,” she commented. The initial destination in such cases is a private house in Hasakah where females and their kids are taken from the camp, usually to stay the night, and then they travel on by car to Idlib. The night in Hasakah is considered the most dangerous part of the journey because it is when arrests most frequently take place.
- Third, the cheapest and the most uncomfortable way out of the camp, at around \$12,000, is a six-day walk by foot. Counterintuitively, this is also considered the safest way, and this is the route typically taken by women who have teenage boys. They want to minimize the risks of being caught because if they are arrested, their sons could be considered adults and imprisoned. In fact, this fear is so strong that before this way became available mothers of teenagers who had enough money to pay smugglers chose to remain in the camp and not take the risk that their sons might be imprisoned.

There is a lot of money in the smuggling business and those involved are well known in the local community. There is even a joke that you can easily find a smuggler simply by going to the biggest and fanciest house in the village.

### Footing the bill

Because these escapes are not cheap, the incarcerated women find different ways to pay for them. Their relatives back home might send them the money. In some cases their home governments may even facilitate it, viewing it as easier than negotiating with the SDF or politically safer, given that the population in many countries is opposed to the official return of those who have been affiliated with ISIS.

For those who still support the group, ISIS will foot the bill for their escape. According to females interviewed, “All wives of high-level commanders paid \$35,000 and were smuggled out, even during the battle in Baghouz. They never even made it to al-Hol. Next, females from all the powerful ISIS diasporas, such as Chechens, were gone from the camp. And now ISIS is taking low-level, but dedicated females.”

And even more than for women, ISIS is eager to pay for kids to be smuggled out. For example, older boys are known to be smuggled out to join the fighting. According to one foreign female interviewed in al-Hol, “Last year ISIS helped smuggle a group of Uyghur teenage boys and now they are fighting with the group in the desert near the Iraq border.”

ISIS also pays for younger kids, especially orphans. Since these kids cannot be smuggled out alone, the group pays for the escape of the pro-ISIS females who are taking care of them as well. According to one Russian-speaking woman interviewed, “Last month we had one group of 11 under-8-year-old orphans (both boys and girls) smuggled out and now another group is getting ready. Of course, the kids are saying that they are going to training to become mujaheds, but it is not clear what exactly they are doing in Idlib.” This also gives the women who are taking care of orphans another reason not to hand them over to other women in the camp or the children’s home government and grandparents.

### The ISIS marriage market

Another popular way for women to get the necessary funding to escape is to get married and have their new husband pay for the trip. The husbands are ISIS supporters from Europe, particularly France and Germany, and they typically choose women who speak the same language they do. In one known case, a 30-year-old Chechen woman with two children whose husband died in 2017 fighting for ISIS met a 39-year-old Chechen living in Germany online (through social media) and got married. According to interviewees, potential husbands are usually based in Europe because men in other countries either cannot afford to pay for a smuggler or are afraid of being arrested for doing so.

“We feel like it became a fad now among ISIS supporters to get second, third, or fourth wives from al-Hol,” commented one of the foreign females interviewed. “We have an abundance of proposals.” According to another foreign female, it is very easy to get a husband and “to be popular in this ISIS marriage market. On your social media pages, you just basically have to praise ISIS, complain about conditions in the camp, and remind your readers that it is mandatory for a Muslim to buy a Muslim prisoner from the hands of non-Muslims.”

In fact, the marriage market is so popular that many females who do not have marriage plans complain they have had to put a fake “in a relationship” status on their Facebook accounts so as not to be bothered by those looking for a wife.

One ISIS supporter from Europe that was interviewed not only did not hide that he paid for the travel of a woman from al-Hol to be his second wife, but he was proud of doing so and showed me her pictures (where she was totally covered). “It is my duty as a Muslim to free our sisters [in religion],” he commented. But later in the discussion, he also admitted that before he married her over the phone, he

had been unsuccessfully looking for a second wife in his home country for almost two years. Getting a mail-order bride from al-Hol was his only chance to marry a second time.

Since the women who choose this way to pay for their escape from the camp are often desperate to get married, this growing market for second wives has led to many family conflicts. It is not uncommon to see the wives of men who are considering buying a second wife from the camp or even just communicating with them openly accuse the women in al-Hol of being prostitutes who destroy families.

According to one female former ISIS supporter, who now lives in Idlib and is married to a foreign fighter with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), “Girls from camps write to my husband and try to flirt with him and when he tells them to talk to me instead,” believing that men should not talk to an unrelated woman directly, “they do not want to, or are even cursing me and calling me a disbeliever. I am very pissed at them since they are intentionally trying to break up our family.”

### **After escaping, where do they go?**

After ISIS females escape the camp, their first destination is Idlib Province, currently under the control of HTS. The town of Tell Abyad in neighboring Raqqqa Province is considered an ISIS stronghold. According to one foreign female who escaped ISIS and is currently in Tell Abyad, “First local [Syrian] ISIS females returned to their houses there, and then they were followed by their foreign friends. So with time, it became a big community.” According to foreign fighters with HTS, some members of ISIS may also be traveling to Sweida, home to a large ISIS contingent that is carrying out regular attacks against Syrian regime forces, while others often continue fighting near the border with Iraq. Locals in Idlib Province say it is easy to distinguish between HTS foreign females and those with ISIS coming from the camp: “ISIS women have a very wide hijab and niqab so that you could not see even the shape of [their] head.”

While Idlib Province is currently the main location for foreign ISIS members, HTS, which controls the territory, is not comfortable with this. According to one of its foreign members, HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani has already issued an order that all ISIS-affiliated women and children must leave the territories under the group's control. That could prompt ISIS members to relocate in the future.

Females who do not support ISIS typically do not remain in Idlib for long and prefer to go immediately to Turkey. There they can either surrender to the embassy of their home country or remain in Turkey illegally and risk being arrested. Many home country intelligence services in communication with women in the camp openly advise them to escape to Turkey because it is much easier to repatriate them from there instead of SDF-controlled camps in Syria. In the case of females who are traveling to their new husbands, they generally remain in Turkey as long as they need to buy fake documents before proceeding to Europe or the former Soviet Union. This does not come cheap, however. According to one interviewee, the price for fake documents is currently around \$25,000.

### **Conclusion**

As shown above, for many foreign women in Syria's camps, supporting ISIS is a strategic behavior and how they portray themselves in public and especially online is often only weakly correlated with what they actually believe. As a result, governments should be very careful when assessing the situation in the camps and especially when relying on individuals' online footprint and interviews with prison authorities. Currently, only a very small minority of women in al-Hol still back ISIS, but as long as foreign government fail to intervene, the number who no longer support the group but feel they have no choice but to turn to it for help will only increase. Moreover, it is relatively easy to leave the ISIS camps in Syria, so it should not be assumed that the women there are locked up or have no way out. As a result, if the foreign females still in the camps are not repatriated home soon, they might not only

once again become active members of ISIS, but if they are smuggled out by the group, we could lose their trail and they may disappear forever.

# Book Review: Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts

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James J. Coyle's book "Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts"<sup>2</sup> focuses on four conflicts on the periphery of the former Soviet Union, namely Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Nagorno-Karabagh. Coyle examines origins and execution of Russian military and political activities within these conflicts in his book, and he aims to explain the commonalities and the differences among these conflicts. Additionally, he explores the remaining options for the resolution of these conflicts.

## Looking into the concept of 'Frozen Conflict'

Sticking to the recent mainstream writings of international relations, Coyle's focus is more on the concept of 'frozen conflict' while defining the commonalities of these conflicts. Before reviewing the book, it would be useful to look into the concept itself, its definition, strengths and shortcomings in different contexts

This expression is widely used in the media, in international relations writing and in State practice for these separatist conflicts alongside the Russian borders.<sup>3</sup> While there is no legal definition of 'frozen conflict', it refers to a situation in which active armed conflict has been ended in a stalemate without a peace treaty or another political framework resolving the conflict to the satisfaction of the parties, thus, the conflict can start again at any time, creating an environment of insecurity and instability.<sup>4</sup> Coyle defines it similarly as "a conflict which remains between the stages of stalemate and de-escalation when peacekeeping efforts never result in the resolution of a conflict." He argues that Russia has perfected the tactic of initiating frozen conflicts and keeping them ongoing to increase his regional power and stop other actors to gain power against her.

However, this expression is scarcely used by international organisations and legal organs of international law, since it brings a number of difficulties when a legal view of "frozen conflicts" is taken, such as multiplicity of problems or disputes, tendency to pre-judge the situation, problem of legal fragmentation.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, there are several scholars and analysts criticizing the concept in political context for leading a misunderstanding of the actual situation in the international arena. Socor sees the term "frozen" as a Western mischaracterization of Russia's protracted conflict undertakings.<sup>6</sup> He argues that those conflicts never "froze" in a political sense, and the cessation of hostilities has allowed steady movement toward political solutions favourable to Russia itself and its local protégés.

## Coyle's framework

In his valuable study, Coyle places these four "frozen", untermiated, separatist conflicts in the Post-Soviet Space in a wider political and legal context. Coyle's main theoretical framework of conflict analysis contains the theories of international law, realism and (ethno-) nationalism.

He analyses the conflicts from the position of two-level actors, namely nation-states (systemic level) and the groups of people united by nationalisms (sub-systemic level). He sees the interaction of these

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<sup>2</sup> Coyle, J.J. (2018). *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts*. Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland.

<sup>3</sup> Grant, T.D. (2017). Frozen Conflicts and International Law. *Cornell International Law Journal*, Vol. 50 (361-413).

<sup>4</sup> Bebler, A. (2015). Introduction. In Bebler A. (Ed.), "Frozen conflicts" in Europe (pp. 7-16). Opladen; Berlin; Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich. doi:10.2307/j.ctvdfo0bmg.

<sup>5</sup> Grant, T.D. (2017). Frozen Conflicts and International Law. *Cornell International Law Journal*, Vol. 50 (361-413).

<sup>6</sup> Socor, V. (2020). Conflict Conservation in Ukraine's East Follows the Transnistria Model. *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 17, Issue 119.



actors at the different levels keeping the conflicts alive in a relatively “frozen” state. That is why he looks at these interactions, and especially tries to explain how Russia exploits and manipulates these actors' positions and interactions in the frame of international law, realism and nationalism theories.

Coyle focuses on two schools of nationalism: French nationalism on the one side having an emphasis on the common will of the people, liberty and the rights of the individual and on the other side German nationalism based on the glorification of the nation-state's power. Which brings a more viable state is still an open question, but both has weaknesses to be exploited when a homogenous minority group is present within the population. In those multi-ethnic states, a concept can bring legitimacy to a state's rulers, but it could not be limited to the central government alone. Once the state is perceived to have been seized by a particular ethnic group, alternative nationalisms spring up among the other ethnicities.

Within the realist theory, he highlights Neorealism stating that the anarchic nature of the international system causes conflict; the states concentrate on how to increase its own power; and the search of power among the nation-states in the world brings a security dilemma.

Coyle highlights also two main principles of international law, namely the inadmissibility of acquiring territory by force and the principle of self-determination for people. He argues that these two legal principles of international law often appear to conflict and contradict with one another.

### Application of Coyle's framework in four conflict cases

He discusses the historical background of these conflicts referring to different and diverging Russian and Western perspectives. This gives him way to apply his framework to each frozen conflict case and to analyze them to find out the commonalities and differences among them in terms of three main theories.

The newly emerged nation-states after the collapse of the Soviet Union were formed based on Western nationalism, either one of the aforementioned nationalism schools. Armenia, mostly homogeneous, relied on German school to define itself. All other states part of the discussed conflicts had multi-ethnic political entities, subgroups with different ethnical, religious background or speaking different languages, and applied French school of nationalism. But in contrast, separatist movements within these countries have heavily relied on the German school of nationalism in the time, and they were easily exploited by Russia, which paved the way for conflicts in newly emerged states.

Coyle tries to define the illegal acts of the actors against international law. He focuses on the principle of no right to use force for secessionist movements. In addition, acquisition of territory by force is illegal, and respect for the sovereignty of member states is a requirement for all members of the United Nations. In this respect, Russian annexation of Crimea, an area that she previously recognized as part of Ukraine is illegal. Similarly, Armenian de facto occupation of Karabakh is also illegal. The world similarly didn't accept an independent Abkhazia or South Ossetia as well. Moreover, Russian support for separatist movements in Transneister and the Donbas has no basis in international law.



Figure 1. Four conflicts on the periphery of the former Soviet Union<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> This figure has been taken from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/armenia/opinion/for-russia-some-conflicts-are-colder-than-ever/>

Coyle reads Russian foreign policy towards its near abroad by (neo-)realist theoretical understanding. Gaining a point of entry by these domestic conflicts, Russia follows a realist approach and tries to increase its own power by making allies while weakening the power of her potential rivals at the same time. He argues that Russia intervenes in these conflicts to keep them alive for the protection of her national interests and intends to continue increasing its power regardless of international law.

Coyle's another interesting explanation for the policies of case states' is 'balancing', which means as a phenomenon that each side aims to gain additional power to face its rival by allying with external actors. This explains why new states aligned themselves with a strong ally in order to prevent hostile action by a potential threat. The alignments were with the Western world in the cases of Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia. On the other hand, Armenia sided with Russia, while Azerbaijan tried to find a balance in between.

### **Russia's foreign policy pattern for creating and maintaining frozen conflicts**

Analyzing all four conflicts, Coyle concludes with a pattern of Russian foreign policy towards her near abroad Post-Soviet countries which is explained by (neo-)realism. In short, this pattern can be summarized in four steps:

- Russian support for minority separatist movements leading to conflicts,
- Russian intervention as peacekeepers,
- Russian control over the diplomatic process to prevent resolution of the conflict,
- Continuation of Russian presence in the area.

Central governments of these post-Soviet states had a tendency to reflect the interests of majority population rather than those of the minorities. As a consequence, interethnic conflicts arose, usually over the sharing of resources. The Kremlin encouraged minority groups to separate themselves from the majority population.

Once the Kremlin managed to feed secessionist tendencies, it provided military support in various formats to the rebels. In all cases, Russia claimed a special status, and the right to intervene to protect the peace or the rights of Russian minorities in the country.

It then used its overwhelming regional presence to claim a place in negotiations, diplomatically authoring most of the peace accords, where Moscow used its position actually to prevent any peace from realization.

Not to risk more than limited open military intervention, the Russians executed a new form of warfare, which is called 'hybrid war' by the West. It can be explained as the use of military and non-military forces in regular and irregular ways, staying below the threshold of a war by doing mostly unattributable acts, using proxies and denying actions. It used the presence of its peacekeepers and its diplomatic skill to keep these conflicts in a "no war, no peace" situation that maintains a Russian role in its borderlands. As the frozen conflicts have dragged on, pro-Moscow forces slowly assumed control of the governments on both sides.

Ukraine is the latest manifestation of a recurring pattern. We can assume that Russia would be following the same pattern in Donbas as well. In this respect, any efforts for conflict resolution and an actual peace would be prevented by Russia and it can be expected that Russia would be acting for a dragged frozen conflict in Donbas as well.

By following such a pattern, Russia is mostly the only winner on its border wars and frozen conflicts, increasing and consolidating its regional power. It has already gradually rebuilt its security buffer against NATO and the Western World, which she saw as an expanding threat approaching her backyard from a realist perspective. Politically, all the separatist movements are allied with Moscow. At the same time, pro-Kremlin officials lead the governments of Moldova, Georgia and Armenia. Economically, Russia convinced Armenia and Moldova to give up their association with the EU. All these efforts make

Russia to benefit from such a regional realignment. It is seen that Russian power and influence has grown in the region, while violating international law.

### **How should the West react against Russia?**

While Russia is winning, the losers of the Russian violation of International Law are mainly the people of these countries who have to live in the harsh conditions of the conflicts. In such situations, it becomes necessary for world leaders to mediate diplomatic negotiations to halt the conflicts. When there is a negotiation in good faith, there is higher chance for a resolution. When the international mediators use the peace process to further their own ends at the expense of the belligerent parties, the result is always continuation of conflict. Russia's involvement in these peace processes keeps the conflicts frozen. If negotiations don't work, there is other international tools for conflict resolution, such as military intervention or peace enforcement. But as a member of the UN Security Council, Russia have a right to easily block this kind of efforts.

The West has to find some way to increase the cost for Russia, until it is no longer in the Russian interest to encourage frozen conflicts. Russia should be prevented from continuing to destabilize its borderlands for protecting its interests. Then how should the West react, which foreign policies should they apply? Author gives four policy recommendations for the USA and NATO:

- reassure defence commitment to the allies,
- put no exceptions to this commitment,
- be careful when making promises to these countries,
- oppose Russian actions based on national interest, and not on rhetorical flourishes.

The book provides a good understanding of the frozen conflicts in post-Soviet countries and defines the Russian foreign policy pattern well. In this sense, policy recommendations can be discussed and elaborated into more concrete actions.



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