

Repatriation from Northeast Syria and the Effort to Counter Violent Extremism

by [Ian Moss \(/experts/ian-moss\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Counterterrorism Lecture Series \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/counterterrorism-lecture-series\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/counterterrorism-lecture-series)

or see Part 1: [U.S. Efforts against Terrorism Financing: A View from the Private Sector \(/policy-analysis/us-efforts-against-terrorism-financing-view-private-sector\)](#)

The State Department's deputy counterterrorism coordinator discusses how governments are addressing the challenges of repatriating detainees in Syrian camps and combating racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism.

On April 19, The Washington Institute hosted the latest event in its [Counterterrorism Lecture Series \(/policy-analysis/series/counterterrorism-lecture-series\)](#), featuring State Department counterterrorism official Ian Moss. The following is his statement for the record.

Thank you to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and to Matt Levitt for inviting me to join you today to discuss the progress we've made on the repatriation of ISIS detainees and family members from northeast Syria, and our work to counter violent extremism more broadly. My name is Ian Moss, and I serve as the deputy coordinator for counterterrorism with responsibility for terrorist detention and

countering violent extremism in the Department of State's Bureau of Counterterrorism.

The complex set of challenges presented by the populations in detention and in al-Hawl and al-Roj camps in northeast Syria require the urgent action and support of the international community. This includes stabilization assistance for northeast Syria and support for communities of return in Iraq and northeast Syria, programmatic support for disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration, and, importantly, repatriation.

On repatriation, we have engaged intensively on the diplomatic front and as a result have seen significant progress over the past year. Over 3,000 individuals have been repatriated—more than the prior two years combined—to a number of different countries, including Albania, Barbados, Canada, France, Iraq, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, the Netherlands, Norway, Sudan, Spain, and Slovakia.

This effort continues, and we anticipate that this year at least 25 countries from different regions of the world will conduct at least one repatriation operation. Already in 2023, ten countries have repatriated more than 1,300 of their nationals.

We thank all of our partners for their support, particularly Kuwait, which continues to play an indispensable role in repatriation operations by serving as a transit hub for U.S.-assisted repatriations. Because of these efforts, hundreds of children are out of harm's way and able to live the safer lives that they deserve—lives away from the daily threat of ISIS' violent ideology. Instead, these children finally can live where they have access to education and opportunity to build their lives and pursue their dreams.

Additionally, I would like to note the leadership that two partners have demonstrated—both Kosovo and Iraq repatriated hundreds of fighters in 2022. While repatriation of women and children is important and urgent, the hard truth is that countries must also repatriate men and youths in detention and rehabilitation centers.

Repatriating these individuals ultimately poses a much lower risk than leaving them in northeast Syria. Ten thousand ISIS fighters remain in custody there, which is the largest concentration of detained terrorists anywhere in the world. ISIS continues to look for new opportunities to replenish its ranks by trying to free these detained fighters. If they escape, they will pose a threat not only to northeast Syria and the region, but to our homelands.

The best way to prevent this is to repatriate these individuals so they can be rehabilitated, reintegrated, and, where appropriate, prosecuted. The situation on the ground is tenuous, and jailbreak attempts like the one in Hasaka detention center in January 2022 may very well happen again.

Caring for the displaced persons in camps and managing the detained fighters places a strain on the Syrian Democratic Forces, our local partner in the fight against ISIS. I want to add, reducing the populations in both the camps and detention centers not only makes us more secure but also makes the problem more manageable, including by facilitating access by humanitarian organizations to provide needed services to the individuals awaiting return to their communities of origin.

I also want to address head on the key challenge to repatriations from northeast Syria—it is not technical, it is political. We hear time and time again leaders say their domestic publics are opposed to repatriation. They argue that the fighters, if they are successfully prosecuted, could risk radicalizing prison populations. They also express concern that returnees who are unable to be prosecuted could plan future terrorist attacks or promote violence. They also fail to see fully the humanity in the innocent children who comprise more than half of the total population in the camps, and assert that these kids will pose a security risk to communities if and when they are returned.

The risks of radicalization to violence and recidivism are real. However, these risks must be balanced with the alternative—a possible resurgence of ISIS, which at its height controlled a geographic area larger than the United Kingdom, committed atrocities in areas under its control, and both planned and inspired terrorist attacks around the globe. That's why we must hold perpetrators accountable for any crimes they have committed, and rehabilitate and reintegrate those who cannot be prosecuted into their communities of origin.

This is a collective action problem. If we work together, we can reduce the risk we all face. We have the tools to do this. We can not only mitigate the risk each country faces individually in bringing its nationals home, but also reduce the risk of an ISIS resurgence that threatens us all.

Increasingly we are also seeing successful investigations and prosecutions both in the United States and abroad, that really demonstrate the efficacy of our judicial systems to hold members of ISIS to account for their actions. Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Sweden, among others, are investigating and prosecuting ISIS members. Our European partners often participate in joint investigation teams (JITS) to compile evidence to build stronger cases.

We have seen many examples of successful investigations and prosecutions. The German Federal Court of Justice recently affirmed the sentence of Taha al-Jumailly to life imprisonment in November 2021 for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes committed against Yazidi victims. Germany also convicted his wife, Jennifer Wenisch, who was an ISIS member, for aiding and abetting crimes against humanity for her involvement in the enslavement, abuse, and killing of a five-year-old Yazidi girl as well as the enslavement and abuse of the child's mother. The Higher Regional Court of Munich sentenced her to ten years in prison and is considering adding to the length of the sentence because of the gravity of the offense.

We know our justice systems are up to the task, and we have frameworks to hold people accountable. On January 10, 2023, Spain repatriated

thirteen children and two women from northeast Syria. The women, who were brides of ISIS fighters, were arrested upon their arrival at Torrejon air base outside Madrid. The judge ordered they be held in pre-trial detention without bail on charges of “joining a terror organization,” ISIS. The judge emphasized that the pair participated in activities supporting Daesh before and after moving to the Syrian-Iraqi conflict zone with their husbands in mid-2014.

In February 2023, the Netherlands announced it plans to prosecute a Dutch woman, Hasna Aarab—who was repatriated from Syria in November 2022 along with eleven other women—for membership in a terrorist organization. She will also face charges of crimes against humanity for enslaving a Yazidi woman.

Domestically, the United States continues to prosecute members of ISIS. In the landmark case of the “Beatles” in April 2022, for example, a jury convicted El Shafee Elsheikh of hostage-taking that resulted in the deaths of four U.S. citizens, James Foley, Kayla Mueller, Steven Sotloff, and Peter Kassig, as well as British and Japanese nationals in Syria. He was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Now, turning to our work to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE), I’d like to touch on the strong partnerships the Department of State has developed to advance these efforts, which include engagements with local and national government officials, law enforcement, mental health professionals, social workers, and community and civil society leaders—really, everyone who cares and is invested in keeping us all safe. From the Strong Cities Network to Mother Schools, the programs we support around the world promote whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to P/CVE.

In addition to countering the threat from Islamist terrorist organizations such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates, we have elevated countering white identity terrorism and anti-Semitism—what we refer to as racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism (REMVE)—as a top priority. We have all seen how REMVE incidents can inspire similar movements in other countries. The storming of Brazil’s government offices in January and the arrest of coup plotters in Germany in December are examples of the direct and indirect influence of American movements, whether based in REMVE, anti-government, or conspiracy theorist ideology. This is why we have supported transatlantic dialogues through the Strong Cities Network. Such discussions among local policymakers and practitioners from the United States, Canada, and Europe help us identify transnational trends and best practices for countering REMVE.

Last May, the Department of State and Department of Justice launched the Counterterrorism Law Enforcement Forum (CTLEF), which was co-hosted by the government of Germany in Berlin. This two-day event brought together over 100 law enforcement officials, prosecutors, and other criminal justice practitioners from over forty countries to build an informal global coalition, focusing on locales where REMVE groups, networks, and actors have been active. The Counterterrorism Law Enforcement Forum will meet again in Oslo this summer.

In the summer of 2021, the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law (IJJ) launched a criminal justice practitioner’s guide to address REMVE. To implement the guide, the IJJ is now holding a series of roundtables for criminal justice practitioners and other law enforcement and policymakers. I am participating in one of these roundtables next week in Malta, focused on addressing REMVE in the security sector.

Last September, the United States, in partnership with Norway, produced the Global Counterterrorism Forum [REMVE Toolkit \(https://www.thegctf.org/Resources/Framework-Documents/Policy-Toolkits/The-Toolkit-on-Racially-or-Ethnically-Motivated-Violent-Extremism-REMVE-\)](https://www.thegctf.org/Resources/Framework-Documents/Policy-Toolkits/The-Toolkit-on-Racially-or-Ethnically-Motivated-Violent-Extremism-REMVE-), a useful resource for the international community in addressing challenges associated with REMVE through a whole-of-society approach, and informed by perspectives from governmental authorities, the private sector, civil society, academia, local community leaders, and civic institutions such as schools and places of worship.

Keeping other countries and the United States safe from terrorism requires all of us working together. We recently commemorated the ten-year anniversary of the Boston Marathon attack, which left three dead and hundreds injured. While we remember those whom we lost that day, we also must encourage the resilience of the survivors and the families and friends of the victims.

One of the runners injured that day, Dave Fortier, founded the organization One World Strong to connect survivors of terrorism around the world. We have sent Dave to more than a dozen countries to share his story and expand his network of survivors and practitioners. We also recently partnered with One World Strong and our mission in Canada on a sports diplomacy event that engaged over 2,000 young people from Quebec City. Such engagements highlight the dynamic partnerships we’re building around the world. These examples, and there are many others, really highlight how critical our partnerships, especially with civil society, are in preventing violent extremism.

Thank you, and I look forward to our discussion today.

The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family. ❖

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