

# U.S. Returnees from Syria Reveal Much About the Repatriation Challenge

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**The latest U.S. repatriation is an important model for the international community to follow, but much work still needs to be done on resolving the precarious detainee dilemma before the situation in northeast Syria deteriorates further.**

On May 7, the United States repatriated eleven Americans and one noncitizen from northeast Syria, its largest repatriation of individuals affiliated with the Islamic State (IS) to date. The group included [Brandy Salman \(https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/12/us/politics/syria-family-repatriate.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/12/us/politics/syria-family-repatriate.html) and her nine U.S.-born children (five of whom are now adults), as well as two minor children of [Abdelhamid \(https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/minnesota-man-pleads-guilty-providing-material-support-isis\)](https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/minnesota-man-pleads-guilty-providing-material-support-isis) al-Madioum [\(https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/minnesota-man-pleads-guilty-providing-material-support-isis\)](https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/minnesota-man-pleads-guilty-providing-material-support-isis), who was repatriated in 2020 and pleaded guilty to supporting terrorism a year later. Notably, one of the two Madioum children is a U.S. citizen and the other is not. The move brings the total number of [Americans repatriated \(https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/07/us/politics/americans-repatriated-syria-war-camps.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/07/us/politics/americans-repatriated-syria-war-camps.html) to fifty-one.

Between 2013 and 2019, an estimated 300 Americans joined or attempted to join IS and other jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq—part of a wave of [more than \(https://ctc.westpoint.edu/daesh-diaspora-challenges-posed-women-minors-fall-caliphate/\)](https://ctc.westpoint.edu/daesh-diaspora-challenges-posed-women-minors-fall-caliphate/) 53,000 men, women, and minors from roughly eighty countries who did the same. Since the fall of the IS territorial “caliphate” in March 2019, successive U.S. administrations have [led the charge \(https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-08/NCITE%20final%20with%20alt%20cover.pdf\)](https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-08/NCITE%20final%20with%20alt%20cover.pdf) in encouraging these countries to repatriate their citizens. Although the number of people involved in this week’s repatriation is small, their cases set a potent precedent and illustrate the urgency of accelerating the pace—while also showing why the process has been such a challenge.

# The Perils of Indefinite Detention

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—the military arm of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES, formerly AANES)—remains the global coalition’s main partner on fighting IS elements in that area. In addition to ongoing combat and counterterrorism operations, the SDF and its partners run facilities holding IS-affiliated individuals from Iraq, Syria, and around sixty other countries (known as third-country nationals, or TCNs). In 2019, approximately 83,000 such individuals were held in [prisons \(https://media.defense.gov/2019/Aug/09/2002169448/-1/-1/1/Q3FY2019\\_LEADIG\\_OIR\\_REPORT.PDF\)](https://media.defense.gov/2019/Aug/09/2002169448/-1/-1/1/Q3FY2019_LEADIG_OIR_REPORT.PDF) and [detention camps \(https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-humanitarian-response-al-hol-camp-situation-report-no-4-29-may\)](https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-humanitarian-response-al-hol-camp-situation-report-no-4-29-may) in northeast Syria. Five years later, around 54,600 individuals [\(https://www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/Article/3762667/operation-inherent-resolve-oir/\)](https://www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/Article/3762667/operation-inherent-resolve-oir/) (including roughly 10,850 TCNs) remain in more than [twenty prisons \(https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=S%2F2023%2F568&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False\)](https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=S%2F2023%2F568&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False), two main detention camps (al-Hol and Roj), and two “rehabilitation” [\(https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/aftermath-injustice-torture-and-death-in-detention-in-north-east-syria/\)](https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/aftermath-injustice-torture-and-death-in-detention-in-north-east-syria/) centers (Houry and Orkesh) for teenage boys.

The consequences of this situation have become increasingly alarming. The sudden population increase and indefinite detention practices at al-Hol [at al-Hol \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/problem-al-hol-future-isis-affiliated-families\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/problem-al-hol-future-isis-affiliated-families) created dire humanitarian circumstances  [\(https://www.msf.org/covid-19-has-devastating-knock-effect-northeast-syria\)](https://www.msf.org/covid-19-has-devastating-knock-effect-northeast-syria) and security concerns  [\(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/detention-facilities-syria-iraq-remain-vulnerable-islamic-state-attacks\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/detention-facilities-syria-iraq-remain-vulnerable-islamic-state-attacks) for camp residents. The smaller Roj camp has “somewhat better  [\(https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/terrorism/sr/statements/EoM-Visit-to-Syria-20230721.pdf\)](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/terrorism/sr/statements/EoM-Visit-to-Syria-20230721.pdf)” conditions, but access to healthcare, water, and education is still limited. The coalition has warned that the problems in both camps make younger residents vulnerable to IS indoctrination. Elsewhere, IS-affiliated men and teenage boys are held in more than twenty prisons fraught with humanitarian and health concerns. International backlash over minors held in these facilities eventually led to the creation of more “rehabilitation” centers for IS-affiliated teenage boys, but some of these boys remain in prisons alongside adult men.

## Detained by a Nonstate Actor: Legal Complications

DAANES gained de facto autonomy in 2012 during Syria’s civil war, but its nonstate status complicates the detention and repatriation situation. For example, NATO ally Turkey views DAANES’s armed forces, the SDF, as a hostile entity linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization. Ankara refuses to work with the SDF on security and humanitarian issues and has periodically attacked the group. Additionally, DAANES has no legal grounds to forcibly remove people from its claimed territory or put non-Syrians on trial for crimes committed under IS, despite [repeatedly threatening \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/future-repatriation-northeast-syria\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/future-repatriation-northeast-syria) to do so. Its nonstate status and closed detention camps also prevent international bodies such as the UN from operating in these facilities, limiting the sources of aid.

Compounding these problems, Washington’s relationship with the SDF has seemingly chilled of late, with [legitimate \(https://media.defense.gov/2024/Feb/09/2003391885/-1/-1/1/OIR\\_Q1\\_DEC2023\\_GOLD\\_508.PDF\)](https://media.defense.gov/2024/Feb/09/2003391885/-1/-1/1/OIR_Q1_DEC2023_GOLD_508.PDF) criticism  [\(https://media.defense.gov/2024/Feb/09/2003391885/-1/-1/1/OIR\\_Q1\\_DEC2023\\_GOLD\\_508.PDF\)](https://media.defense.gov/2024/Feb/09/2003391885/-1/-1/1/OIR_Q1_DEC2023_GOLD_508.PDF) aimed at the group’s use of funds and ability to guard detention facilities. The SDF has also been [accused \(https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/aftermath-injustice-torture-and-death-in-detention-in-north-east-syria/\)](https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/aftermath-injustice-torture-and-death-in-detention-in-north-east-syria/) of separating families, creating inhumane living situations, and torturing certain detainees. Yet the group has denied the worst of these charges and pushed back against the criticism, pointing out that it has been dealing with

an untenable situation for years because countries refuse to repatriate their own citizens.

## Separation, Citizenship, and Other Complexities

When the SDF captured thousands of individuals, including the families repatriated this week, in Baghuz, Syria, in March 2019, it implemented a policy that wound up dividing families. It sent adult men and teenage boys—including [Abdelhamid al-Madioum](https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/Abdelhamid%20Al-Madioum%20Affidavit%20in%20Support%20of%20Criminal%20Complaint.pdf) (https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/Abdelhamid%20Al-Madioum%20Affidavit%20in%20Support%20of%20Criminal%20Complaint.pdf) and one of Brandy Salman's teenage sons—to various prisons, while women and most other minors—including Salman and her remaining family—were sent to the camps at al-Hol and Roj. Some circumstances warranted other options; for example, Madioum's two minor children were transferred to an [orphanage](https://www.npr.org/2024/05/07/1249463072/after-years-in-a-syrian-camp-a-ten-person-american-family-is-back-in-the-u-s) (https://www.npr.org/2024/05/07/1249463072/after-years-in-a-syrian-camp-a-ten-person-american-family-is-back-in-the-u-s).

The multiplicity of facilities and sheer number of people held there have made it difficult to track detained individuals over the years, including U.S. citizens. Salman's family came onto [Washington's radar](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/07/us/politics/americans-repatriated-syria-war-camps.html) (https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/07/us/politics/americans-repatriated-syria-war-camps.html) after one of her sons was taken from al-Hol and put into the Houry “rehabilitation” center in 2020—partly based on a policy that DAANES [claims](https://npasyria.com/en/104515/) (https://npasyria.com/en/104515/) is for security reasons, and also due to reports that teenage boys were being sexually exploited in al-Hol. As noted previously, the SDF used to move these boys to prisons [with adult men](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/terrorism/sr/statements/EoM-Visit-to-Syria-20230721.pdf) (https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/terrorism/sr/statements/EoM-Visit-to-Syria-20230721.pdf), but backlash spurred them to begin placing the boys in “rehabilitation” centers.

In addition, Madioum's situation highlights the complications introduced by citizenship issues. A naturalized U.S. citizen, he joined IS first in Iraq and then Syria, and subsequently married a non-U.S. citizen who had a child from a previous marriage. They then bore a child of their own, but the mother was eventually killed during the war. This [common practice](https://cja.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Margolin_Cook_agencyandrolesofwomen.pdf) (https://cja.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Margolin\_Cook\_agencyandrolesofwomen.pdf) has created a situation in which many detained children have complex nationalities or are being raised by a guardian who may not share their nationality. In Madioum's case, his nine-year-old stepson is not a U.S. citizen, while his seven-year-old biological son is. The United States repatriated both boys under the “[significant public benefit parole](https://www.npr.org/2024/05/07/1249463072/after-years-in-a-syrian-camp-a-ten-person-american-family-is-back-in-the-u-s) (https://www.npr.org/2024/05/07/1249463072/after-years-in-a-syrian-camp-a-ten-person-american-family-is-back-in-the-u-s),” which admits people for “urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit.”

## Policy Implications

Since 2019, around [3,570 TCNs](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/five-years-after-caliphate-too-much-remains-same-northeast-syria) (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/five-years-after-caliphate-too-much-remains-same-northeast-syria) have been returned or repatriated from Syria and Iraq, but the process remains too slow and inappropriately gendered, with women and minors comprising the vast majority of repatriations. The United States and its partners need to pick up the pace of overall repatriations and include more men in the tally. Washington has taken the lead in this respect, bringing several men to stand trial in the United States, in some cases even non-U.S. citizens. Going forward, increased funding, attention, and U.S. coordination are required to make repatriation a success. The alternative—indefinite detention—is both inhumane and a security risk.

Moreover, repatriation is just the first step in a long process of accountability and reintegration. The majority of adults repatriated by the United States have been [prosecuted](https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-08/NCITE%20final%20with%20alt%20cover.pdf) (https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-08/NCITE%20final%20with%20alt%20cover.pdf) for involvement with IS. Only one of this week's returnees has been charged so far; [Halima Salman](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/07/politics/repatriated-american-accused-isis-training/index.html) (https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/07/politics/repatriated-american-accused-isis-training/index.html), Brandy's twenty-five-year-old daughter who traveled to IS territory at seventeen and is

accused of being trained by the IS unit [Katibat Nusayba \(https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/american-woman-who-led-isis-battalion-sentenced-20-years\)](https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/american-woman-who-led-isis-battalion-sentenced-20-years) after she turned eighteen. Although several Americans traveled to IS territory as minors and returned as adults—including [some of Salman’s nine children \(https://apnews.com/article/syria-islamic-state-us-citizen-repatriation-259f6a1813ee1db351f336a5ef437fe6\)](https://apnews.com/article/syria-islamic-state-us-citizen-repatriation-259f6a1813ee1db351f336a5ef437fe6)—Halima is only the second one charged for crimes committed as an adult, and only the third American woman of any age who has faced charges upon repatriation. (Her mother may eventually face prosecution as well; U.S. authorities sometimes wait before filing such charges.) Washington’s accountability-focused approach is a welcome model, but officials should do even more on this front to gain public trust, prevent the issue from becoming politicized, and facilitate the reintegration process for adults.

For minors, the government has focused on resettlement and reintegration. In commenting on this week’s repatriations, State Department counterterrorism official Ian Moss noted that returnees receive a wide range of support, including through “psychosocial professionals and social workers.” He also [emphasized \(https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/07/us/politics/americans-repatriated-syria-war-camps.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/07/us/politics/americans-repatriated-syria-war-camps.html) the importance of resettling entire families: “Inevitably, that means that—just as the United States has done—countries will need to offer resettlement to individuals who are not their nationals.” Indeed, for the reintegration process [to succeed \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reintegration-foreign-terrorist-fighter-families-framework-best-practices-us\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reintegration-foreign-terrorist-fighter-families-framework-best-practices-us), it must frame itself around families, take a gendered approach, and provide trauma-informed care. To encourage the international community to follow the example set this week, Washington should increase the transparency of its repatriation and reintegration programs by publicizing what is involved in each process.

Success also requires coordination and funding across multiple levels of government. In 2022, Senators Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) sponsored a bipartisan bill calling for a new [“senior coordinator for repatriation \(https://www.politico.com/minutes/congress/09-28-2022/shaheen-on-isis-displaced-persons/\).”](https://www.politico.com/minutes/congress/09-28-2022/shaheen-on-isis-displaced-persons/) Today, however, the interagency operation is still being led by the State Department’s Counterterrorism Bureau, working alongside the Defense Department (which manages the transfer of repatriated individuals into U.S. custody), the Justice Department (which leads the accountability effort), the FBI, Customs and Border Protection, Citizenship and Immigration Services, and the Department of Health and Human Services. This [complex process \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reintegration-foreign-terrorist-fighter-families-framework-best-practices-us\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reintegration-foreign-terrorist-fighter-families-framework-best-practices-us) requires immense interagency coordination and resources even for just a small number of repatriated individuals.

This week, Washington acknowledged that approximately two dozen Americans are still being held in Syria. As Moss noted, “Whenever we find Americans, we work as fast as we can to get them out,” but challenges persist at each stage of the process. The previous cases in the U.S. system were essentially the “easy” ones—this week’s repatriations tackled thornier challenges such as families divided across multiple facilities or bearing different nationalities. Future cases may be even more complex, including individuals who may not want to return to America or be held accountable.

While grappling with these challenges, Washington also needs to manage its complicated relationship with the SDF. On one hand, this means coordinating with the group to facilitate repatriations and supporting SDF efforts to maintain detention facilities in the meantime. On the other hand, the SDF’s controversial policies and the dire humanitarian conditions inside its facilities cannot be ignored. The United States needs to hold the group responsible for the treatment of individuals under its care, while simultaneously prodding other countries to alleviate the problem by accelerating their repatriation efforts.

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## RECOMMENDED

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BRIEF ANALYSIS

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Jun 4, 2024



Michael Knights,  
Amir al-Kaabi,  
Hamdi Malik

[\(/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iraq's Missed Development Pathway Highlights the Necessity of Unpopular Economic Reforms](#)

May 8, 2024



Mohammed Hussein

[\(/policy-analysis/iraqs-missed-development-pathway-highlights-necessity-unpopular-economic-reforms\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Will Turkey Cut Ties with Israel?](#)

May 8, 2024



Soner Cagaptay

[\(/policy-analysis/will-turkey-cut-ties-israel\)](#)

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## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)