



The Problem with al-Hol: The Future for ISIS-Affiliated Families

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Between 2013 and 2019, an estimated 53,000 men, women, and children from eighty different countries traveled to the Islamic State's so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq to join the terrorist group and support its activities. Four years after the group's territorial defeat, over 60,000 ISIS-affiliated individuals remain in indefinite detention in northeast Syria, living in substandard facilities. Their fate is the subject of heated international debate.

I'm Dr. Devorah Margolin, the Blumenstein-Rosenbloom Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. While the ISIS physical caliphate has been defeated, it survives as a terrorist group. Affiliates continue to pledge allegiance, and it remains a cohesive organization, despite two successful operations to eliminate its top leaders. With its numbers depleted, ISIS sees the liberation of detention facilities and prisons in northeast Syria as the key to its survival and its success. These facilities are run by America's closest partner in Syria, the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces, or the SDF, which has played a pivotal role in defeating the ISIS caliphate. However, the SDF's nonstate status has complicated global efforts to permanently resolve the status of ISIS-affiliated detainees. Unlike other entities that have administered similar camps, the SDF is not a state actor, and our close NATO ally, Turkey, accuses the SDF of being a terrorist organization due to its links to U.S.-designated terrorist group Kurdistan Workers Party, or the PKK.

Approximately 10,000 men and teenage boys are held in SDF-run prisons, roughly 2,000 of whom are third-country nationals—those who come from countries outside of Syria and Iraq. Meanwhile, women and minors are held in separate SDF-run detention camps. While many of these camps were built as temporary accommodation to provide humanitarian services to civilians displaced by the conflict in Syria and Iraq, that is no longer the case. After the influx of ISIS-affiliated individuals starting in 2018, these facilities have grown increasingly into unsafe and unsanitary open-air detention camps.

The largest of these camps is al-Hol, which at its peak in 2019 held over 70,000 people. Today, the camp holds approximately 50,000 individuals, 90 percent of whom are women and children, including 25,000 Iraqis, 18,000 Syrians, and 7,800 third-country nationals from fifty-seven countries. Twenty-three percent

of all residents are under five years old, while another 42 percent of residents are children between the ages of five and 18. There are also smaller camps like Roj Camp, about sixty miles away, which at one-fifth the size holds roughly 2,500 individuals, 2,100 of whom are third-country nationals.

These facilities suffer from numerous humanitarian challenges, including a lack of food, water, education, and healthcare. Maintaining order in these volatile camps has proven difficult, and they remain vulnerable to outside attacks from ISIS fighters seeking to free their supporters. Some of these individuals have been held for over four years, and the UN has been adamant that the indefinite detention of ISIS-affiliated individuals raises a number of humanitarian and security concerns. In June 2023, U.S. secretary of state Blinken reiterated U.S. policy across two administrations to remind the Global Coalition Against ISIS that returning these detainees to their home countries—repatriation—is the only durable solution.

Sending individuals home is just the beginning. The UN encourages countries to investigate and hold ISIS-affiliated individuals accountable, and then to rehabilitate and reintegrate them into society. But many countries around the world have been reluctant or slow to take such action. In fact, to date, we've only seen about 2,700 third-country nationals and around 6,500 Iraqis return home. The international community is on track to repatriate more such individuals in 2023 than in years past. Countries like Germany, the Netherlands, and Kosovo are setting the pace for repatriating and reintegrating returnees, holding ISIS-affiliated individuals accountable for their actions. But it is simply not enough.

Five factors indicate that the longer the situation continues, the greater the likelihood of danger and disaster. Some of these issues are more imminent than others.

First, the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria recently announced that due to the international community's slow response, they are planning to start putting ISIS-affiliated detainees on trial. While the SDF remains America's closest partner in Syria, the decision to place foreign nationals on trial in the disputed northeast Syrian territory could hurt this relationship. The wider international community is also unlikely to find consensus on this issue.

Second is the recent Syrian normalization. While this will not change the situation on the ground overnight, we cannot discount what it will mean for the disputed territory in northeast Syria and the thousands of men, women, and children currently being detained there by a nonstate entity. For example, if normalization empowers Bashar al-Assad to take over the area, he could take any number of steps with these detainees, from releasing them to roam free, to imprisoning or killing them, to holding them for ransom as negotiating tools with their countries of origin. Moreover, normalization with Syria may change U.S. policy in the region, leading to its eventual withdrawal, ending its advise, assist, and enable mission.

Third is the threat from ISIS itself. This includes the group's ongoing insurgency, its use of gang violence, as well as its threats to the camps themselves. ISIS has made it explicitly clear that they see these populations as the future to their success.

Fourth, a possible Turkish intervention into northeast Syria. If Turkey were to attack the SDF, a group it regards as a terrorist organization, the SDF might shift vital resources away from fighting ISIS and maintaining its prisons and detention centers. A conflict between Turkey and the SDF would not only distract from the ongoing fight against ISIS, but it would put the U.S. in an uncomfortable position between its NATO ally Turkey and its greatest partner on the ground in northeast Syria, the SDF.

Fifth is climate change or a natural disaster. In addition to a water crisis, the recent earthquake that destabilized one prison holding ISIS inmates could foreshadow a bigger calamity, resulting in even greater difficulties getting proper aid to those affected.

Repatriation is not risk free, but there are important ways to mitigate those future risks. For example, the Global Coalition Against ISIS, led by the U.S., is spearheading an effort that brings together a lot of different countries to build consensus, including sharing best practices on gathering evidence, holding responsible parties accountable, adapting risk assessments to the needs of each individual and state, and creating a trauma-informed care approach to those reintegrating. Reintegration will not solve all the problems in northeast Syria, but the alternative—leaving individuals behind—creates a much greater risk to the international community.