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Syria: Dire Conditions for ISIS Suspects' Families

Countries Should Support Citizens' Returns, Increase Aid



A girl stands in the annex of al-Hol camp in northeast Syria, where more than 11,000 women and children from nearly 50 nationalities are confined as family members of Islamic State (also known as ISIS) suspects. The Kurdish-led coalition controlling northern Syria wants home countries to take the women and children back. But most governments have only repatriated small numbers of their citizens.

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(Al-Hol, Northeast Syria) – The Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration for northeast Syria is holding more than 11,000 foreign women and children related to Islamic State (also known as ISIS) suspects in appalling and sometimes deadly conditions in a locked desert camp in northeast Syria, Human Rights Watch said today. At least 7,000 of the children are under 12.

During three visits to the section of al-Hol camp holding foreign women and children in June 2019, Human Rights Watch found overflowing latrines, sewage trickling into tattered tents, and residents drinking wash water from tanks containing worms. Young children with skin rashes, emaciated limbs, and swollen bellies sifted through mounds of stinking garbage under a scorching sun or lay limp on tent floors, their bodies dusted with dirt and flies. Children are dying from acute diarrhea and flu-like infections, aid groups and camp managers said.

“Foreign women and children are indefinitely locked in a dustbowl inferno in northeast Syria while their home countries look the other way,” said Letta Tayler, senior terrorism and counterterrorism researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Governments should be doing what they can to protect their citizens, not abandon them to disease and death in a foreign desert.”

At least 240 children have died en route or upon arrival to al-Hol, according to the United Nations. Authorities from the camp, which is overseen by the Autonomous Administration, do not appear to consistently record deaths, international aid group members said. The groups did not want to be identified for fear of losing access to al-Hol.



Al-Hol camp in northeast Syria has rapidly expanded with the influx of more than 63,000 women and children displaced by the offensive against the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) in Baghouz between December 2018 and April 2019. The area at lower right shows the annex, now housing more than 11,000 non-Iraqi foreigners.

Al-Hol guards do not allow the women and children to leave the camp except when escorted out for emergencies such as surgery not available in camp hospitals.

Officials from the Autonomous Administration told Human Rights Watch they do not intend to prosecute the women and children. Asked about the legal status of the women and children, they said only in a brief written statement that when the women and children left ISIS-held areas, they were “transferred to al-Hol to work on delivering them to their countries given that they are from different nationalities.” The Autonomous Administration has repeatedly called on home countries to take back all foreigners in their custody. “We are overwhelmed,” a camp manager said.

Countries should immediately assist efforts of their citizens held in al-Hol camp to come home if they choose to do so. The Autonomous Administration, as well as home countries, should ensure that detention is only imposed according to law, on an individual basis, and with all basic rights of detainees under international law including judicial review of detention.

Donor governments, the United Nations, and humanitarian agencies should also immediately increase aid to all camp inhabitants, more than 7,000 of them children.

From June 21 to 23, Human Rights Watch interviewed 26 foreign women confined in al-Hol annex from countries including Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, the Netherlands, and Trinidad. The women included mothers who begged camp guards for news of husbands or sons whom US-backed, Kurdish-led troops, called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), had separated from them when they fled ISIS-held areas over the past several months.

“Please, tell me, where are my sons? Please, let me visit them,” pleaded “Aisha,” a pregnant woman from Trinidad. The SDF took her two sons, ages 14 and 15, and their father when the family fled ISIS-held Abu Badran in January, she said.

“First they said they would bring my boys to me in a month. Then they said two more weeks. Then they said they were sick in the hospital,” Aisha said of camp officials. Like other women interviewed, Aisha did not want her real name used. “Then for the past two months, nothing.”



Conditions are dire throughout al-Hol, which holds 62,000 Syrians and Iraqis in the main camp sections, most of them also wives and children of men accused of ISIS membership. However, the worst conditions are in the annex holding the 11,000 non-Iraqi foreigners. The annex receives less aid from donors and annex inhabitants must wait for armed escorts to bring them to the camp market, hospitals, and food distribution center, which Syrian and Iraqi women and children can reach freely, aid workers said.

All but one of the foreign women interviewed by Human Rights Watch said they wanted to go home. One, from Uzbekistan, said she wanted to go to a third country because she feared persecution if repatriated. All said they are not allowed to leave the locked camp. None said she had been taken before a judge to review whether she should be detained or been contacted by a representative of her government.

“We were prisoners under al-Dawla [ISIS] and now we’re prisoners of our liberators,” said “Layla,” a 29-year-old Frenchwoman. “I’ll go to prison again back home if I have to but please, just get me out of here.”

International law allows imposing punishment for crimes only on people responsible for the crimes, after a fair trial to determine individual guilt. Imposing collective punishment on families by preventing them from leaving the camps violates the laws of war.

Unless they are lawful places of detention such as prisons, camps for displaced people should respect the free movement right to leave the camps and return. Movement restrictions are only permissible if they are provided by law and necessary to protect national security, public order, public health or morals, or the rights and freedoms of others. Any restrictions must be nondiscriminatory, proportionate, and necessary to achieve legitimate aims.

Anyone detained, including civilians initially detained in wartime as security threats, should be detained on a clear legal basis, and have the right to challenge the necessity and legality of their captivity before a court. No one should be detained in inhuman or degrading conditions. International law obligates all countries to ensure justice through fair trials for the gravest crimes, such as those by ISIS.

International law also grants everyone the right to return to their home country and obligates countries to fulfill a child's right to acquire a nationality. This duty has been interpreted to extend to children born abroad to a country's citizens who would otherwise be stateless.

"The conditions in al-Hol annex are untenable and unconscionable," Tayler said. "Abandoning citizens to indefinite confinement without charge will only make the problem worse."

More than 7,000 foreign children and 3,000 foreign women from about 50 countries are held in the al-Hol annex according to officials from the Autonomous Administration, which is led by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). Several hundred more foreigners are held in two other camps in northeast Syria, Ain Issa, and Roj. In addition to Westerners, the foreigners include Algerians, Indonesians, Malaysians, Moroccans, Russians, Tunisians, Turks, and Uzbeks, among others. About two-thirds of the foreign children are under age 12 – with most under age 5 – and hundreds are orphans, their parents missing or dead, aid workers said. While most women and children are recent arrivals, some said they had been held at Al-Hol for over a year.

Reluctant Donors, Insufficient Access

Autonomous Administration authorities blamed the conditions in al-Hol annex on insufficient aid from foreign donors. "We feel abandoned by the international community," Abdulkarim Omar, the administration's co-chair for foreign affairs, told Human Rights Watch. "Taking care of these foreigners is a big, big problem for us. Countries should take back their people and rehabilitate them."

The Autonomous Administration and SDF have already made significant sacrifices as part of the international coalition fighting ISIS, Omar said. About 12,000 SDF troops were killed and another 20,000 were injured fighting ISIS, he said, in part "so that people in Europe can sleep calmly at night."

About three dozen aid agencies including the UN Refugee Agency and UNICEF work in al-Hol. But many donor countries are wary of supporting a camp population that may include ISIS members or sympathizers, Autonomous Administration authorities and humanitarian workers said, even though the majority of people in the camp are young children who had no choice but to live with their parents under ISIS.

“We are seeing the stigmatization of a vast section of the camp population that is perceived as affiliated with the Islamic State group,” said Fabrizio Carboni, who heads Near and Middle East operations for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Carboni warned against a “good victim-bad victim” double standard. International standards prohibit denying essential aid, including if the denial is based on ideological or religious affiliation.

Some organizations are also concerned that their assistance could enable indefinite detention of women and children without charge. “It is one thing to assist a refugee camp and another to assist a prison,” one aid worker said.

The three field hospitals in the main camp areas are understaffed and under-resourced, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported in July. Doctors Without Borders runs a health clinic inside the annex and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) runs a mobile clinic there, but their hours are limited due to staff shortages and security concerns.

Two-fold access problems also hinder delivery of services, aid groups said. Humanitarian agencies with agreements to work in Syria must obtain permission to access al-Hol through Damascus because the Autonomous Administration controlling the northern third of Syria, including al-Hol camp, is not an internationally recognized government. Negotiations with the Syrian government on humanitarian access are often difficult, as Human Rights Watch documented in a June report.

But even agencies that receive Syrian government permission, or that work under the radar in al-Hol without it, sometimes face delays in obtaining the Autonomous Administration authorities’ permission to deliver assistance inside the annex, aid workers said. In its July report, OCHA said that humanitarian access to the annex “remains restricted” in ways that “continue to impact and prevent delivery of services.”

Dire Health Conditions

One reason for poor conditions at al-Hol is that the camp population soared from 10,000 people in December 2018 to more than 73,000 by April, camp managers and aid groups said. During that period, a US-led military coalition routed ISIS from its last stand in Baghouz, a town in eastern Deir al-Zour governate. Many new arrivals from Deir al-Zour were severely injured, traumatized, and malnourished. Yet while conditions are dire throughout al-Hol, they are worse in the annex than in the main areas where Syrians and Iraqis are confined, camp officials and aid workers said.

During Human Rights Watch visits, al-Hol annex was filled with the sounds of children wailing and women and children coughing. A funnel-shaped dust whirl blew hot dust and debris into tents.

Many women and children had visible skin sores from leishmaniasis, a sand fly-borne parasite. Some inhabitants have been diagnosed with tuberculosis, camp managers said. Drinking water is

insufficiently chlorinated and remains in short supply, aid workers said. Human Rights Watch saw children drink water from a wash-water tank that had worms coming out of the spout.

In July, OCHA reported a “sharp increase” in acute diarrhea and a “slight increase” in acute malnutrition throughout al-Hol.

Some women, including those with risky pregnancies and pre-natal complications such as anemia or high blood pressure, are giving birth in their tents without a doctor or midwife, aid workers said. One reason is that Asayish – Autonomous Administration security agents who guard the camp –sometimes delay or refuse their requests to go to a hospital, or they arrive at a hospital only to be turned away because the facility is full, they said. In an added disadvantage, women who give birth in a hospital automatically receive post-natal care and essentials such as diapers whereas women who give birth in tents must request such assistance, they said.

Three women said that a young girl had died from kidney failure in the annex the previous week.

Human Rights Watch saw several wounded children in the annex. One was a bone-thin, 12-year-old Russian boy wearing a patch over his left eye. “Shrapnel in Baghouz,” he said, adding that he had lost vision in that eye.

Another boy, a 4-year-old from Uzbekistan, sat with a blank stare as his mother pushed him across the rubble in a stroller, his right leg missing up to his mid-thigh. The boy’s leg was blown off during a US-led coalition strike in the Syrian town of Sousa in late 2018, his mother said, adding: “I have been trying to get him crutches and a prosthetic leg for four months.”

Worse Conditions for Foreigners

In addition to problems accessing essential services in the main camp areas, nearly all the women interviewed in the annex said they had scant if any means to buy fresh food for their children to supplement their rations of lentils, grains, oil, and sugar, or extra diapers. SDF troops and Asayish agents have confiscated women’s cash and other valuables and barred them from selling any possessions that they may have been able to hold onto, camp inhabitants and aid workers said.

Camp administrators allow Syrian and Iraqi women in the main camp areas to make purchases through the *Hawala* alternative money transfer system but the foreigners cannot, aid workers said.

Autonomous Administration authorities also bar women in the annex from using cell phones for fear they may contact ISIS members, although cell phones are allowed in sections holding Syrians and Iraqis, aid workers said. The ICRC has begun helping women send letters to family members, but many have not yet made contact and communications have been irregular for those who have.

On all three visits Human Rights Watch saw dozens of women pounding on the chain-link fence that cordons off the annex, clamoring for escorts to reach supplies or health services. Human

Rights Watch saw some of the women waiting for hours, with no shade, in 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) heat. The temperature at al-Hol has soared as high as 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit) this summer.

“I am going into labor,” shouted a visibly pregnant woman. “What about our human rights?” demanded another. By the time they reach the food distribution point, the rations are sometimes gone and they have to return the next day, the women said.

Living in Fear

Tensions run high in al-Hol, and many women said they were terrified for their safety and that of their children. Women in the camp who adhere to ISIS’ extremist ideology have threatened and set fire to tents of women and children who they consider infidels. Twice, in separate attacks in June and July, a woman stabbed a guard with a knife hidden in her abaya, camp managers and aid workers said.

Guards raid tents at night and frequently shoot in the air to keep order. On July 3, guards shot and wounded two boys, ages 12 and 10, who they said were throwing rocks at them, aid workers said. Twice while at the camp in June, Human Rights Watch heard gunshots fired.

Interviewees also consistently said they feared the Asayish security agents who frequently search tents and take away families in the middle of the night. Camp managers said that the night raids were necessary to remove women or children who were security threats, or to relocate families who feared for their safety to other areas of al-Hol or other camps.

Many women said they also feared tent fires caused by women cooking inside tents; at least one child died in a cooking fire. Others spoke of insects and snakes that crawl onto their sleeping pallets at night.

Piecemeal Repatriations

Repatriations of ISIS suspects and family members from northeast Syria, as well as from neighboring Iraq, have been piecemeal. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Russia, Kosovo, and Turkey have organized the return home of more than 1,250 nationals held in northeast Syria and Iraq, most of them children.

But most countries have ignored the Autonomous Administration’s calls for them to repatriate citizens or have taken back only small numbers, primarily orphans, calling them a security threat and citing complications in verifying citizenship of children lacking documents or born in areas under ISIS control.

Norway in June repatriated 5 orphans from northeast Syria. France in March and June flew home 18 children – 17 from northeast Syria and 1 from Iraq. In June, Sweden brought home 7 children and the Netherlands brought home 2 children from Syria. Germany has flown home fewer than 10 from Iraq. Australia in June brought home 8 children from Syria. The US, which

has criticized Western allies for refusing to repatriate all its nationals, has brought home 16 adult suspects and children since July 2018. Italy in June took back one suspected ISIS fighter.

France has allowed 11 citizens to be prosecuted in Iraq although the defendants were sentenced to death in rushed proceedings tainted by allegations of torture. The UK has stripped citizenship from nationals including Shamima Begum, who joined ISIS abroad, and Denmark in March proposed stripping children of ISIS members of citizenship. Australia in July introduced draconian revisions to Australian law that would ban returns of citizens as young as 14 for two years if they are suspected of being foreign fighters abroad.

Expressions of Regret

All the women interviewed said they realized soon after arriving in Syria that they had made a mistake. They all insisted that during their life under ISIS their roles had been solely those of housewives and mothers. Human Rights Watch is not in a position to judge the veracity of these claims and it is clear that some women in the camp support – and seek to enforce – ISIS ideology. Women who have committed international crimes should be charged and those who do not face criminal charges should be freed. But children brought to or born in ISIS-controlled areas should not be punished for their parents' poor judgment or crimes.

“My children did not choose this life,” said “Fatima,” a 27-year-old Belgian widow held in al-Hol with her four young children. Fatima said her 7-year-old daughter did not even learn to read and write under ISIS. Her 6-year-old daughter has a viral infection; unable to obtain medical care in the annex, she scrounged funds to buy rehydrating fluids and inserted an intravenous drip in her daughter's arm with a friend.

“My children don't even have a working toilet,” Fatima said. “When there is shooting, they cry and remember the fighting. They deserve a second chance.”

Additional Recommendations

As part of measures to assist repatriation efforts, countries should immediately take all possible steps to ensure that their citizens trapped in any areas of al-Hol or in other camps or prisons in northeast Syria have a way to request repatriation and expedite efforts to verify citizenship, particularly of children. Countries that can guarantee fair trials and humane conditions should investigate and, if appropriate, prosecute returnees responsible for international crimes such as war crimes and torture.

Children should be treated first and foremost as victims, including those recruited by ISIS, and decisions about their future should be made based on their best interests. Parents should be brought home with children unless separation is in the child's best interest. Children should face prosecution only in exceptional circumstances.

In the meantime, Autonomous Administration camp administrators, humanitarian organizations and donor governments, including those with nationals confined to camps in northeast Syria, should improve sanitary conditions, access to food and clean water, shelter, and medical and

psychosocial services for all camp inhabitants. The Autonomous Administration should increase annex inhabitants' access to essential services in other camp areas.

The Autonomous Administration and US-led coalition fighting ISIS should facilitate contact between camp inhabitants and their families including relatives held in separate prisons or camps.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres should press and assist UN agencies including the UN Refugees Agency and member states to coordinate a swift global response that upholds international human rights protections and includes repatriations and resettlements.

Statements from Women Confined in al-Hol annex

This is a nightmare I cannot wake up from. As Muslims we wanted to experience the Islamic State like Christians want to visit Jerusalem. It was so easy to get to Syria through Turkey. But then we found there was no way out. Bombs were falling everywhere and we could not afford a smuggler. In the end they [ISIS] even hid food from us. The only people they fed were their fighters. We are so broken. We are not threats to anyone. We just want our children to go to school and to stop stressing about where is the next meal coming from.

- “Ayisha,” 37 weeks pregnant, from Trinidad. Mother of five children including two boys, ages 14 and 15, who were taken with her husband when the family surrendered to SDF forces in January.

From the first day I got to Syria I wanted to go home. They [ISIS] treated us like garbage. There was so much injustice. But my husband kept saying, “Forget going back. If they know we want to leave they will put us in prison or kill us.” Then my husband died two years ago. He just never came home. Since then I have been trying to find a way home. The Prophet...says the Sham [Levant] is a blessed place. But I never saw a blessing.

- “Maria” from Belgium, widow, mother of two children born in Syria.

One day my husband said, “I am going, you are coming with me.” I was thinking, “Why? We are comfortable.” But as a Muslim woman you follow your husband. I just want to go back to Australia. My family says they will take me and the children back. People think we are monsters. Please tell them we are humans, just like them.

- “Radhia” from Australia, widow, mother of three children born in Syria.

I thought, “Now I’ll be able to practice my religion and cover my face without being harassed the way I am at home.” I heard there was bombing and stuff but I didn’t think I’d be living under it. But then I got here [to Syria] and realized how dangerous it was. My husband became disillusioned, too. A year ago, we found a smuggler to take us out. We wanted to start over. But then Kurdish [SDF] forces took us.

- “Miriam” from Canada, mother of two children born in Syria, husband in SDF-controlled prison.

I came to Syria because I was having problems at work and at home. It sounds so cliché. I was 20 when I left. I got the idea while I was conversing online with sisters [ISIS members]. I married two weeks after I arrived. They gave me a paper with three men’s names, ages, and hometowns. I chose the man from my hometown. We met and we liked each other. Then he was killed by a bullet in the head. If I have to go to prison I will. I just want to come home.

- “Hanneke” from the Netherlands, widow.

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