

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Trafficked Britons in Syria Inquiry

Submission of Written Evidence by Save the Children UK

Save the Children is the world's leading independent organization for children, established more than 100 years ago in Britain. Today we operate in 120 countries, including on the frontline in some of the world's most challenging conflict and humanitarian contexts.

Save the Children began working with foreign, or 'third country' children and families in Syria in July 2016, with the first wave of displacement of this population from Raqqa. We are currently responding in both camps where these children live.

Further information on our work in the camps, as well as references for the information presented in this submission, can be found in our report [When Am I Going to Start to Live: When am I Going to Start to Live? The urgent need to repatriate foreign children trapped in Al Hol and Roj Camps](#), published in September 2021.

Introduction

The five-year conflict with ISIS in Syria and Iraq left in its wake a population of foreign nationals with links to ISIS, most of whom are currently in two displacement camps in North East Syria: Roj and Al Hol camps. This population includes thousands of foreign children, who were brought or trafficked into Syria, or born there over the course of the conflict. The parents of these children in some instances may have been groomed and recruited as children themselves.

Currently home to approximately 40,000 children, Al Hol and Roj camps are no place for children to grow up. The camps are overcrowded, with services critically overstretched and shelter inadequate. There are high levels of tension and violence. Children face early and forced marriage, domestic violence and other forms of mental or psychological abuse. Their freedom of movement is severely curtailed, and their access to education is inadequate.

This situation cannot continue. Approximately 7,800 of these children are Third Country Nationals meaning they are not Syrian or Iraqi, but as a result of complex circumstances, they find themselves growing up in desperate conditions, far from home. While accurate demographic data is not available in the camps, we believe there may be more than 50 British children among them. The UK Government must recognise and treat these children primarily as victims of war, and repatriate them without any further delay.

1. Conditions in the Camps

- 1.1. There is very little freedom of movement in Al Hol and Roj camps, and the UN Secretary General and human rights groups have stated that this effectively means that people living there are detained. Most residents can only leave the camp in the event that permissions are secured to allow them to return home and leave the camp permanently, or else in the case of a medical emergency. Freedom of movement is most severely curtailed for Iraqi and Third Country Nationals (TCN) in Al Hol and Roj. This has reduced the world that children inhabit in the Main Camp of Al Hol to just 3.1km², and just 0.5km² in the Annex. In Roj, it is limited to 0.07km² in the Main Camp and 0.09km² in the Extension.
- 1.2. Restrictions on freedom of movement have a significant impact on children's ability to access humanitarian services. Only a limited number of humanitarian actors are granted varying though limited degrees of access. The pervasive violence and insecurity in the camps, and sense of fear that it causes, compounds the existing access

problems caused by bureaucratic restrictions on NGOs, COVID-19 and the lack of available resources.

- 1.3. Al Hol is particularly violent and insecure, despite the fact that it is predominately inhabited by children. Children see and experience violence on a regular basis. They consistently tell Save the Children staff that they feel unsafe when they walk around the camp, when visiting the market or using latrines and bathing facilities. Murders, attempted murders, assaults and deliberate arson are also common.
- 1.4. In 2021 to mid-August, 163 people have died in Al Hol, 62 of them children. 79 of the 163 were murdered, including three children who were shot to death. This includes 58 Iraqis and 21 Syrians living in the Main Camp. There have been ten attempted murders. Three Russian children have been killed by vehicles in Al Hol since November 2020, in separate incidents, including by water tankers that provide the sole source of water in the camp.
- 1.5. The risk of fire, including deliberate arson, is another central risk in children's lives in Al Hol. Fire-related injuries is the most common recorded cause of death for children in Al Hol, leading to the deaths of 13 children from January to September 2021.
- 1.6. Children have also died from preventable diseases, including eight children aged under five who died within five days of each other in Al Hol in 2020 after reduced humanitarian access to the camps over 2020 combined with fears of a COVID-19 outbreak reduced the capacity of health services by 40%. Their deaths were linked to conditions including heart failure, internal bleeding and severe malnutrition and could have been treated. The impacts of children living with treatable or preventable health conditions can last well beyond their childhood. In addition to the increased risk that they will die from their conditions, when treatment is delayed or denied, this can have profound impacts on children's physical and cognitive development and on their life outcomes.
- 1.7. There have been 389 recorded COVID-19 cases in Roj and Al Hol, and 15 recorded COVID related deaths in Al Hol. As of October 2021, only 193 people (including 87 health workers) have received the first dose of the vaccine in Al Hol, while 22 people in Roj camp are fully vaccinated, with a further 28 having received their first dose only. In October 2021, the authorities announced lockdown measures to curb a steep rise in the number of COVID-19 cases. In both Roj (which had earlier seen a limited lockdown in one area of the Main Camp) and Al Hol, non-life saving services- including Save the Children's education and some child protection activities- were suspended. The camps' populations were confined to their tents, though they were allowed to leave to access food, water and hygiene and health services. The restrictions have since ended and activities have resumed. If children need urgent, emergency treatment that is not available in Al Hol or Roj camps, they are referred to hospitals in the vicinity of the camp and permitted to leave with authorisation from the camp authorities. It is often difficult and time-consuming to obtain such authorisation. TCN children have died due to lack of access to hospital care. In 2020, an eight-year old girl from Azerbaijan died as she was not able to obtain regular kidney dialysis from a nearby hospital.
- 1.8. There is also a widespread rubbish and waste management problem in Al Hol, coupled with a lack of access to water and adequate sanitation. In focus group discussions, children regularly highlight the state of latrines, including the lack of lighting and safety measures. Adults surveyed by Save the Children mentioned that quality and quantity

of the water and food in the camp is very poor, and the available water and sanitation infrastructure is inadequate for the number of people in the camp.

- 1.9. There are also a number of barriers limiting children's access to education. These include a prohibition on children receiving a formal education, meaning that education providers can only teach children non-formally and a limited number of subjects. There are too few spaces for children to learn given the population size. Other barriers include bullying and harassment by other students. For some TCN children, language skills are a critical barrier because they do not speak Arabic, which is the main language of instruction in the education facilities. Children who do speak Arabic often end up serving as informal translators for their peers. Only 40% of children between the ages of 3-17 in Al Hol are currently receiving informal education. School attendance in Roj camp is higher at 60%, but child labour remains an acute concern in both camps. In Roj, 55% of households reported that they were aware of child labour among children under the age of 11; in Al Hol, children under 11 are also reported to be working in markets and engaged in domestic labour.
- 1.10. Children in Al Hol and Roj camps have experienced severe levels of violence, displacement and deprivation, including in their everyday lives while living in the camps. They have lived through bombardments, lost loved ones, been denied access to basic services including education, and experienced neglect. This has taken, and continues to impose, a severe psychological toll on them. 47% of caregivers that Save the Children spoke to in Al Hol camp said that their children are always, or usually, upset, and 37% said that their children are always or usually angry. In Roj camp, one in three households report at least one member suffers from psychological distress.
- 1.11. In addition, the insecurity and fear children experience in the camp and the uncertainty about what their future holds is exacerbating their anxiety and depression. This exposes children to prolonged periods of toxic stress. Limited spaces to safely play, the absence of psychosocial support and constant fear multiplies stressors for children, with negative impacts on their wellbeing.
- 1.12. Finally, child protection risks in the camps are rampant. In Al Hol, many adolescent girls are not allowed to leave their tents, despite the fact that their caregivers acknowledge that being locked at home is negatively affecting them and creating barriers to them accessing services. Boys face the risk of separation from their families once they reach adolescence, and detention owing to the perception of security concerns about their gender and age.
- 1.13. Several hundred boys are already understood to be arbitrarily detained, many for prolonged periods of time in very poor conditions in separate detention facilities and prisons in North East Syria, with many held in adult prisons. Some of these boys have been held in detention since they left Baghouz, ISIS's last stronghold in Syria, more than 2 years ago. The vast majority of these children are believed to have family members in Al Hol and Roj camps. The conditions in the facilities are often extremely poor, and the children detained are malnourished, suffering from scabies and other skin diseases, and facing serious health concerns such as HIV as well as tuberculosis.
- 1.14. The Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES, the governance structure in place in North East Syria) has been quoted in local media confirming the detention of male children after they turn 12, with the Co-Chair of the Foreign Relations Department reportedly stating that "Those children are now in temporary centres until rehabilitation and integration centres are prepared for them."

He was further quoted as saying “The solution of the dilemma of those children is, first, to return to them to their homelands.

2. The Case for Repatriation

- 2.1. Since 2017, there have been approximately 65 repatriation operations from Syria, both from Government of Syria held areas as well as repatriations from North East Syria, with approximately 1,200 children repatriated. The vast majority of these were in 2019, with a decrease in 2020 that can be partially attributed to COVID-19 restrictive measures. The majority of repatriations have been of children. 83% of repatriation operations have been to Uzbekistan, Kosovo, Kazakhstan and Russia. Kazakhstan alone accounts for 36% of repatriations, and over three times more than all EU countries, UK, Norway, Canada, Australia and the US combined.
- 2.2. Despite UN guidance and best practice, and despite evidence from other governments that it is possible to repatriate children and their families, many states have either refused or been reluctant to repatriate children out of Al Hol and Roj, despite the conditions in which they live, particularly when these children are still living with their mothers. This is because many states are not willing to support the return of adult citizens, meaning that the majority of returns have been orphaned children, children separated from their caregivers, or in some instances, children whose mothers have agreed to have them return alone.
- 2.3. Yet it’s clear that repatriation, for all the children in the camps, including those with their caregivers, is the only way forward. All children in the camps are first and foremost victims of the conflict. They have lived through war, bombardment and acute deprivation and need specialised help to recover from their experiences and begin to return to a normal life - completely impossible in the camps of North East Syria at this time and unlikely to ever become available at the level that children require. While the absence of knowledge and data regarding children who lived in ISIS-controlled territories pose challenges in developing appropriate rehabilitation and reintegration responses upon their return, a holistic approach, prioritising multi-layered social services that can respond to a child’s individual needs, is proven to be the most effective and humane approach to children who have been subjected to grave violations of their rights.
- 2.4. Studies from other conflict-affected children show that experiences with discrimination, rejection and stigmatization are related to less favourable life outcomes. Better outcomes in terms of transitioning away from life in conflict are generally reached when the child is able to have positive connections to peers, family and the community, where dependable relationships are established.
- 2.5. Recognising the family units that exist in the camps is particularly important because children’s support ecosystems in the camps are extremely limited, and largely confined to caregivers and other close family members, friends and facilitators.
- 2.6. For TCN children, their caregiver relationship is likely to be even more central to their lives because of the lack of fathers or older male relatives. There are no adult males in the Annex, as men were separately detained when families were transferred to the camps, and adolescent boys are also at risk of being removed into detention facilities.
- 2.7. Despite strong legal and moral arguments for the repatriation of children, there continue to be a number of barriers that prevent states to commit to repatriate their citizens – many of which originate from the policies and practices of governments themselves. This includes a lack of transparency on the part of many states on the

extent of their contact with children and families in the camps as well as consular and other assistance they may be providing to ensure children's wellbeing. A number of states have taken the worrying decision to strip their nationals of citizenship while in the camps, a measure that fails to take full consideration of the best interest of the children impacted and increases their risk of being rendered stateless. Other states have made efforts to separate children from their caregivers in the camps, to avoid the repatriation of adults.

- 2.8. There are circumstances in which the best interest of the child would be served by separation from their parents, including if in remaining with their parents, they would be continually denied their basic rights and access to safety. However, in the absence of Best Interest Assessments, it is the refusal of states to repatriate adult caregivers, and not the best interests of the child, that appear to be driving a push for separation, which results in denying children the opportunity to return home, and to enjoy their full range of rights, including their right to family life. Where a child's best interest may not be met by being placed with their caregivers, these issues should be addressed by individual countries upon their return in accordance with laws and child protection policies, with efforts made to maintain familial connections. Removing children from families should only be contemplated as a last resort and where the child's best interests are of paramount concern.
- 2.9. Ultimately, for many states, political considerations and media optics are simply overriding children's rights. While some states have cited logistical complications as the reason for refusal to repatriate, we know that repatriation is logistically feasible, as there have been more than 15 repatriations this year alone, and as the UK Government has itself demonstrated in a number of cases where it made the decision to repatriate a small number of children. To ensure the safe and timely repatriation of their nationals, governments must establish contact with the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES) and arrange for the handover. The AANES has called publicly for the repatriation of people in camps in the region of Syria they control, and have stated that they will support the repatriation of both women and children, where they have not been accused of committing specific crimes in Syria. It's clear there is time to waste. Every day British children remain in camps in North East Syria is a day too many.

Recommendations

- **All countries of origin, including the UK, should safely repatriate children and their families, in line with their obligations set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and United Nations Security Council Resolutions.**
- **The UK Government should take proactive steps to identify, locate, and reunite British children with separated family members or with qualified alternative caregivers, and establish channels for direct communication with nationals in the camp while repatriation is pending.**
- **The UK, as a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS should work with the authorities to immediately establish the identity of child detainees at facilities, including their names, nationalities and ages, the reason for and duration of their detention, as well as details of charges to be brought against any of them. Steps should be immediately taken to release the children from detention and assist them to reunite with their families where possible and appropriate.**
- **The UK Government should develop a comprehensive strategy to ensure that British children trapped in Syria are brought safely from Syria to the UK to recover from their experiences. Key departments across the UK Government –**

the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence - must work together to ensure there is a coordinated and coherent approach to ensure that the best interests of British children sit at the heart of the UK Government's response.

- **The UK Government should also ensure that counter terrorism security policies and laws do not undermine the delivery of life-saving humanitarian assistance to the camps based solely on needs, provided on the basis of humanitarian principles, and with no distinction based on status, ethnic or religious background, and actual or imputed political affiliation.**