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## Written submission for APPG on trafficked Britons to Syria

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There is a patch of land very close to the Iraqi border as the land border juts out like a ledge in the north easterly tip of Syria. This small patch of land houses around 60,000 individuals, roughly 40,000 of those - children, mostly young infants. The occupants originated from a diverse plethora of countries, entering the space of conflict in Syria undesired as members or affiliates of a repugnant militant group, they now stay there unwelcome, yet unable to leave, detained physically and mentally from anything resembling a future. Denied rights that are pronounced as indelible as part of being human beings, their identities are reduced to dehumanized labels.

There is no justice here, there is no accountability for crimes here, there is no humanity here, and there is very little hope of progress here.

If this were mere poetic license to invigorate emotion, it might be cast aside as overblown 'lefty' nonsense conveyed by 'do-gooders'; it should be unthinkable that the UK is one of the leading states maintaining this reality.

We come at this from a position of over seven decades (collectively) of experience in the fields of national and international security, and counter terrorism, and years working on this specific topic, both prior to, during, and after citizens from around the world departed to join ISIS.

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Current circumstances are not a bolt from the blue, an unexpected schism that has left policymakers and practitioners flawed at the speed and unusualness of the situation. We were discussing possible outcomes with states when citizens first started travelling in large numbers. There has been much planning and strategizing on how to effectively deal with returning citizens since 2011; in 2015/2016 it did not take a lot of prescience for us to advise governments the necessity to prepare for the return of many following a military and territorial collapse of ISIS.

Lack of action from the UK government fails to force those UK citizens who have committed crimes to take responsibility for their actions, shows zero accountability (both for UK citizens and regarding international norms), disregards the decades of CT/CVE work led by the UK, and drastically fails all victims of ISIS in Syria and the UK, providing little opportunity for closure or peace.

### *Current situation in the camps*

The situation in al Hol is dire. Occupants of the international annex are lacking basic needs and the security, safety and medical conditions are inadequate. Throughout the camp, there are daily occurrences of criminality, with significant crimes such as sexual assault and murder happening all too often as camp management struggle to deal with the scale of people.

It is difficult to fully convey the grimness of al Hol, and particularly the 'international annex' without having visited and spent time there. Having traveled extensively to North East Syria over the past two and a half years and spent considerable time in the camps of al Hol and al Roj, even we struggle to do justice to the daily vicissitudes experienced. The brutality is not so much in the physical stressors (such as lack of adequate food and water, atrocious hygiene conditions, blistering heat or deadly cold without appropriate shelter, physical threats) but in the psychological torment citizens must undergo daily.

Current conditions have further blurred categories, with some orphans being unidentified as such due to lack of documentation, and the boundaries of the terms 'mother' and 'child' disintegrating under the pernicious ISIS rule that encouraged sexual violence and child rape. The psychological and physical harm being done to the children is difficult to exaggerate. ISIS continues exerting control over the women and children in the international annex (in both ideological and practical senses; *remaining and expanding*), with work desperately needed to repair trauma and understand radicalising factors, to prevent the re-emergence of ISIS. Simply allowing the children to become adults without a solution due to complexity or political concerns is not coherent policy.

The high levels of violence limit access for humanitarian workers which, on top of the makeshift and overcrowded nature of the camp has led to a severe humanitarian situation. 2021 has been the most violent and deadly of years in the camp; an increased use of firearms and in some cases, suppressors, led to deaths skyrocketing, including occupants and aid workers.

Within the annex, a propensity towards violence or disruptive behaviour is driven by: i) an overall control internally by hard-line women who have no compelling reason to comply; ii) restrictions on freedom of movement; iii) uncertainty over the future; iv) lack of security and provisions and v) grievances due to living conditions (and no outlet to vent or solve grievances).

***Ignoring the issue is not a policy; failing to plan is not a strategy; foisting the problem on to others is not a solution.***

The world is a complex, disruptive, and dynamic place and humans are inherently messy, layered, malleable and inconsistent. To take a conflict such as the one involving ISIS in Syria and Iraq and try to explain all the various elements including recruitment, operations, radicalization, ideological underpinnings, and individual reasons for travel in a simple narrative is beyond foolhardy. Yet there has, and continues to be, a great deal of post-hoc analysis applied to those joining ISIS from countries outside Iraq and Syria. Narratives swing from lumping all those joining into one, easy to demonise, homogeneous group ('jihadi brides' for instance) to individual pathologies that are too nefarious or complex to comprehend even.

Neither of these approaches are especially helpful. The first doesn't allow for individual agency, is detrimental to judicial processes and causes categorization that invariably creeps beyond any real use. The second takes the position of the individual to its extreme, categorizing those as almost beyond human. Their crimes so severe that it could not be a person; resultantly, these categories do not deserve the same legal process as humans, their inhumanity is such to even consider the starting point of inalienable rights is unthinkable.

This caricatured thinking has been the predominant lens through which occupants of the camps in North East Syria (NES) have been viewed. Women *may* have known more or joined ISIS more deliberately as part of the exodus of those from over 50 different countries helping set up the ISIS self-declared 'caliphate'. Some have committed crimes that should not be overlooked. But there are also victims and desperate women who were coerced, manipulated, or criminally forced to travel and whilst members of ISIS were forcefully married, emotionally abused, victims of sexual violence and mental torment. There must be a disentanglement using proper legal processes to prosecute those truly guilty and support to rehabilitate those victims; it is important to emphasise the children (the largest number both overall and of UK citizens) are all victims.

### Recruitment

The recruitment methods of ISIS are at this point, well known and extensively researched. They were incredibly targeted in refining their messages for certain audiences and used various incentives (such as financial, but also theological or psychological in nature) to entice individuals and families to join. Like any criminal or militia organization, they liberally used methods fair and foul to bolster their numbers, garner attention and create support within communities. This undoubtedly including trafficking.

From an ideological and strategic viewpoint, ISIS differed from other jihadist extremist groups in that it claimed to have created the conditions for the new caliphate, with Abu

Bakr Baghdadi infamously being declared actual caliph on 29 June 2014.<sup>1</sup> This highly significant act resonated with those already attached to the extremist jihadi mindset and took ISIS beyond other extremist groups (such as Al Qaeda) into the symbolic realm of creating theocratic prophecies as religious warriors. To achieve such proclamations, their leaders and strategists recognized that they would need many foot soldiers, wives, communicators, orators, cleaners, accountants, bureaucrats, etc. The caliphate needed to function and project like a state if it were to have any success.

Whilst ISIS were certainly effective at tailoring their messaging, evidence has begun to show that the more resonating elements of the messaging concerned personal benefits and being part of a community.<sup>2</sup>

This is important when it comes to how the individuals will feel about their current position. Stuck in limbo with no vision of a future, no progress towards answering for their crimes, rehabilitation, or getting support for their trauma. The situation only gets worse every day it continues and as bad as it is for the women, imagine how it is for the children. To disengage from a violent extremist mindset, deradicalize and eventually reintegrate, there needs to be some form of future pathway where different elements can then be added in an individualized and imperfect process.<sup>3</sup> Through failing to take control of the issue of UK citizens, the UK is allowing enhanced radicalization of all those in al Hol, whether they may have conducted criminal acts or not, along with the children.

### ***The problem will not disappear on its own***

Ignoring the problem is complicity in the increasing radicalization of those detained in the camps; with no alleviation the security threats will only rise. Perpetrators and victims are neither separated nor dealt with effectively under the current conditions.

There are a few possible outcomes to the status of refusing to deal with the problem in any significant way. It is worth examining each of these possible scenarios to understand the vacuity of the current approach:

- 1) The conditions in al Hol continue to deteriorate. Donor states are either unwilling or unable provide necessary funding, especially to the 'international annex' due to the contested *nature* of the camp. British citizens will die. Many children will die. ISIS will continue to use the inaction as a propaganda win.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.memri.org/reports/isis-declares-islamic-caliphate-appoints-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-caliph-declares-all-muslims>

<sup>2</sup> <https://magazine.columbia.edu/article/how-isis-really-recruits-its-members>  
<https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/497>

<sup>3</sup> The academic literature is very clear on this, see, for instance:  
[https://eprints.lanacs.ac.uk/id/eprint/88067/1/S\\_Marsden\\_Reintegrating\\_Extremists.pdf](https://eprints.lanacs.ac.uk/id/eprint/88067/1/S_Marsden_Reintegrating_Extremists.pdf) ;  
<https://www.crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/a-systematic-review-of-post-2017-research-on-disengagement-and-deradicalisation/>

- 2) There is a significant attempt to break individuals out of al Hol, prisons in NES, or from inside the camps to take control.<sup>4</sup> All these events would drastically degrade security and push the story back to the front pages. The UK will be considered (as it is now) as one of those in dereliction of their duties on the international stage.<sup>5</sup>
- 3) The Kurdish Administration no longer manages al Hol, or at the very least the international annex.<sup>6</sup> Under these circumstances, occupants could be ousted from the camp unceremoniously and left to their own devices. It is currently only really the willingness of the Kurds to continue handling the problem that prevents this. If they decided they could no longer manage this burden, there would be very little the UK or other states could do to prevent it; this would rapidly become a more significant problem for states with citizens in the camps.<sup>7</sup>

None of these scenarios are pleasant to think of, and all present a larger threat to security for the region (Syria and the Middle East in general) and in the UK and across Europe.

The propaganda wins for ISIS with each of these scenarios is huge, and currently ISIS are using al Hol as propaganda almost daily. The huge amounts of time, effort, and resources spent by the UK government on “countering ISIS’s narrative” is worth naught with this open goal consistently referenced by the group. The problem of *Foreign Fighters* and their families will not disappear on its own, but what are some of the arguments provided for inaction?

#### The security argument

The previous Home Secretary used the classic trope of secret intelligence on certain individuals being so significant that if *you knew what he was forced to know, you would not question stripping citizenship* or, consequentially, that individuals in al Hol were too dangerous to be returned. There are several shortcomings with this argument. Firstly, it undermines the vast number of diligent, competent, and intelligent women and men tasked with protecting the UK from terrorist threats. To suggest that they would not be able to cope with already known individuals is somewhat derogatory, and similar could be said concerning arguments around the legal process.

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<sup>4</sup> A recent foiled attempt to break former comrades out of a prison in NES by ISIS demonstrates this is a very genuine and current threat. The planning was extensive and cache of weapons seized showed a sophisticated operation.

<sup>5</sup> Currently, security is handled by a combination of local security forces controlled by the Kurdish Administration, with support outside the camp militarily in the form of the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh (ISIS). It would not take much for the reduction in external security support (such as either the US or the Coalition to downgrade their presence) to impact overall security of al Hol and this scenario become more likely.

<sup>6</sup> This could be due to various reasons, including a Turkish incursion necessitating moving troops, general lack of resources, or a deal with the Regime handing control of the camp to them.)

<sup>7</sup> The UK and other European states have been panicked by this potential scenario seeming to come to fruition at least twice during the previous eighteen months. Once, when the SDC declared they were releasing Syrian occupants of al Hol, which was misinterpreted as all occupants being dispatched, and once when the AANES suggested they were releasing Swedish and Northern European occupants imminently (which, again, did not occur).

Secondly, this assumes that the threat is current. Prediction, particularly when it comes to terrorist acts, is a poor mistress; so, if the assessment is along the lines of something that ‘might happen if...’ it starts to lose analytic quality. Distinction must be made between actual risks and unknowns when considering a threat profile. Risks are quantifiable and can be controlled; unknowns are often mistaken for actual risks but are more abstract and unable to quantify or control. By taking control of the situation, you are moving the unknowns into the categories of risk.

Finally, if there is evidence concerning criminal acts, follow the legal process to prosecute. The idea that has sometimes been leveled that returning individuals may become operationally or communicatively recruiting sergeants. The reality is that they are being used as such by ISIS currently, and the fact the UK’s position plays into ISIS’s narrative only enhances this messaging. The Prevent strategy requires support from communities and focuses on British values such as “*democracy, rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance...*”.<sup>8</sup>

UK citizens, even those who committed heinous crimes, should be dealt with using clear legal process. Seeming to disregard trafficking or other contributory causes and beyond that, purposely refusing to deal with any case (judicially or otherwise) devalues any community trust in the government. This is not good counter terrorism policy, either in containing current or preventing future threats.

### ***The size and shape of the problem***

Numbers have been challenging to clarify, however, our most considered estimate is that there are approximately 61 British nationals, including those who have had their citizenship deprived) currently detained in NES. These individuals make up 23 family units, including 18 British women, 32 children, 15 of whom are 5 years old or younger, and 11 men. The cause célèbre when talking about the repatriation question in the UK context has always been Shamima Begum, a young woman whose image with two schoolfriends departing the UK jarred so deeply splashed across the media in 2015. The factors of their age (being 15 and 16 at the time), their ‘westernised’ dress, but most of all their smiling and seeming exuberance as they were captured crossing the departure gates at Gatwick to Istanbul were pored over to interpret meaning.

Her statements that she was “young and naïve” and that she wanted to help the people of Syria and “not be the friend left behind”<sup>9</sup> can easily be carped cynically as an attempt to pull the wool over the UK government and the public’s eyes to gain advantage. But they could also speak to elements of truth. Significant research has demonstrated that a values system, community, and being part of something bigger than oneself are substantial reasons for joining violent extremist groups.

Having interviewed large numbers of those joining ISIS at various stages and looking at both research and facts on the ground, there is good evidence to suggest it is rarely a single

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-strategy-2011>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/shamima-begum-latest-isis-syria-b1861136.html>

reason that motivated joining and generally these motivating factors often come from positive traits (wanting to help, desire to be important or more significant than an individual self, protection of a community or ideals, promotion of a values system).

Women can be equally as guilty or dangerous as men and have historically been harder to convict in terrorism cases. The thought of being unable to convict in difficult terrorism cases is a genuine concern, and it would be mightily comforting to know a successful outcome before entering a criminal case, but the law doesn't work that way. Accountability for criminal acts including terrorism offences is important but the agency of individuals, contributing factors and their current state of mind are all factors that need determining.

By continuing to swerve any responsibility, the UK government is not merely contravening their responsibilities, but losing any opportunities of understanding what drove Shamima and others to leave the UK. Like it or not, she was a product of our society and that cannot and should not be ignored.

Preventative elements of counter terrorism strategies have focused more recently on disengagement and deradicalization. Countries have had to adapt to individuals in prison for terrorism offences, returning from conflict zones, or supposedly radicalized online who need support and engagement to change their behaviours and mindset from one wedded to violent extremism.

Having extensive personal knowledge of disengagement and deradicalization, and furthermore Prevent in both theoretical and practical terms, we can say that there can be little qualms as to the ability to deal with a couple of dozen young women. The deradicalization component of Prevent is specifically for radicalized individuals and there are adequate resources and capacity within local authorities to deal with the returning citizens. For Shamima, Tower Hamlets (the local authority she departed from) has significant experience, and local authorities have coped with far more people returning from Syria and Iraq than the numbers currently contained in the camps.

Extremism is a complex, rather than simple problem, categorised by several associated constituent factors with non-linear relationships and fuzzy linkages.<sup>10</sup> Thinking on the causes of, and solutions to extremism must consider both personal and contextual factors and the interaction between them. Social and psychological factors cannot be untangled to present a simplistic understanding of extremism, and as recently proposed by Bouhana (2018) the social ecology (through its ability to support or suppress the emergence, convergence and maintenance of the...cognitive, moral, attachment and social control affordances) and system (moral systems and norms) should be dealt with to understand the exogenous factors driving extremism.<sup>11</sup> Currently, there is no alternative for any occupant in al Hol, due to the repressive

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<sup>10</sup> Devaney, J. and T. Spratt (2009). Child abuse as a complex and wicked problem: Reflecting on policy developments in the United Kingdom in working with children and families with multiple problems. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31(6): 635-641

<sup>11</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/834354/Bouhana-The-moral-ecology-of-extremism.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/834354/Bouhana-The-moral-ecology-of-extremism.pdf)

management of behaviour by hardline factors; it should be no surprise that this social ecology only enhances extremism.

Much of the thinking regarding extremism, and particularly in the case of those in al Hol, avoids the neuroscientific empirical evidence suggesting that the environment has a significant role in the structures of the brain used. Under periods of stress, threat, or anxiety, individuals have been shown to rely on their amygdala, rather than prefrontal cortex sections of the brain, reducing their capacity for goal-oriented, problem-solving, and critical thinking.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, in the current conditions outside the annex, occupants are likely to be unable to make deliberative judgements and are potentially more likely to determine violence (or extremist behaviour) as a more suitable behaviour.<sup>13</sup>

As things stand, if UK citizens remain in the camps, detained without charge, wasting away from malnutrition and lack of health services, becoming further psychologically damaged each day, it is not hard to see the security threats increase, rather than degrade. Not just in any direct threat that those individuals may pose from a hardening of mindset and deepening of radicalisation, but from those attached to their plight who gather resentment and anger towards the UK's wanton inaction. The UK's foreign policy has consistently been cited as a key driver of radicalisation, so much so, it is contained in the Prevent strategy and has increasingly been communicated as a recognised driver in local delivery. Think not only of the communities from whence the individuals came before journeying to Syria but furthermore those communities who see neither punishment nor consideration of those UK citizens who joined. What does this convey about being a UK citizen?

#### 'Too difficult / dangerous' argument

Another all too common argument against repatriation goes something like this: *as the region is controlled by a non-state actor, establishing the consular links, and organizing the logistics becomes too challenging. Or another version: the security risks on the ground make it impossible.* Whilst the intricacies do make repatriations more challenging, they are in no way impossible, and a country with the experience and resources of the UK could easily find ways to successfully carry out repatriations. Indeed, a recent repatriation involving three UK citizens (all young orphans) demonstrate an effective roadmap.<sup>14</sup> Finland, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden of late have shown that logistically it is entirely possible and now most European states see it as necessary. The politics of the region and groups within is also promoted within the 'too difficult' category yet taking responsibility for citizens in the region and removing that problematic could reasonably demonstrate a wiser approach. This is especially true when considering the general consensus that for the women at least, prosecution there is far too challenging.

#### Detrimental effects of the UK policy

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4349396/>

<sup>13</sup> It should also be mentioned that as the PFC does not fully develop until the mid- to late-20's, many of those currently occupying the camps would not have been able to think systematically about this journey.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/25969-UK-repatriates-three-children-from-northeast-Syria:-AANES-official>



Trust of the UK's suitability as a security partner has been eroded considerably due to lackluster policy. The US have consistently attempted to push all European states to take back their citizens from the camps and prisons in NES, promoting all countries with citizens contained in the region to try and prosecute, rehabilitate, and reintegrate as appropriate.<sup>15</sup> American leaders have been bemused and infuriated with the UK's intractability, given its historically fiercely promoted values of human rights, the rule of law and morality.

Many countries that saw nationals go to Syria to join the Islamic State recognise their continued obligations towards them and accept responsibility for their immediate future. Young women and children from other countries cannot stay indefinitely in the care and custody of an ethnic group with limited resources like the Kurds that has no international status, no exclusive control of territory, and runs no internationally recognised government such as a health service or an education system.

Accordingly, some countries with citizens in al Hol or Roj camps have sought solutions to the problem of how to repatriate them safely. Many have managed to do so for small numbers, though the security risks have been assessed as manageable rather than non-existent. The UK is an outlier in this respect. Although central to many international discussions on the whole issue of "Foreign Fighters" and regarded widely as a pragmatic problem solver and leader in the field of counter terrorism, this is one area where the UK offers little beyond over cautious handwringing.

Across Europe, states have started to wake up and tackle their own inactivity, moving to a forward-leaning, proactive policy. Having aided many European and other states thinking in both overall strategy and operational policy in dealing with their citizens a couple of things have become crystal clear:

- 1) States who have grasped the nettle and shown courage to work towards solutions are no less safe or secure, quite the contrary.
- 2) States determinedly ignoring the issue, pushing the SDF to indefinitely secure their citizens and hoping there will be no internal political pressure are not only cowardly and vapid in their policymaking, but forced to operate independently, without support of others, more likely to suffer from any sudden changes, becoming less sighted each day it continues.

States have encountered issues with repatriations that are not often conveyed by the media or the general perspective. The Administration in NES (or at least some parts of it) have been obstreperous, or demanding, with some European states discovering their repatriation attempts falter when they thought all was agreed. However, far from deter those states, this has crystallized their determination to safely return their women and children. We resultantly have been working with a collective of European states to have strength in numbers, presenting an allied front and coordinated 'European' approach to the Administration and allowing European states to collaborate in their strategies.

The UK has been party to many of these conversations, yet the only actor failing to change position despite the evidence. Their position has increasingly looked borne out of either

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<sup>15</sup> <https://npasyria.com/en/35632/>

ignorance, disinterest, or malice, and has projected a policy based purely on parochial political fear, rather than statesmanship or foreign policy.

Of course, the risks of getting it wrong are very real, but they are not limited to the risk that a returnee commits an act of violence. The risks of doing nothing are longer lasting and just as dangerous. No one yet knows how children who grew up in the Islamic State will regard their country of origin, No one can tell what long-term damage any individual child will suffer from growing up surrounded by guns and violence. But understandably, many will have deep psychological problems and face difficulties in reconciling a natural desire to emulate their parents and adopt their behaviour and beliefs with the structures and practices of a developed Western state. Left in the limbo of the Syrian camps or shuffled around as unwelcome refugees, they will not easily be assimilated into mainstream Western society. But unless they are, they will remain problematic, seen by most governments as a group in need of special attention beyond available resources.

In this case, some organisation will have to take a lead. There may be scope for the UN or another international body to step in, but they will still need a great deal of individual government help, both professional and financial. And whatever they may be able to do in terms of reintegration will still need the cultural and geographical underpinning that provides most of the world's population with their sense of identity and values. There is good reason that international law attempts to ensure that no person can be truly stateless.

The logic accepted currently by most countries around the world is that the country with the greatest responsibility towards those foreign fighters, their wives and children who have been washed up with the wreckage of the Islamic State, is the country of origin or the country of most likely nationality. Sometimes this may be difficult to determine in the case of young children, given the fluidity of relationships in the Islamic State and the disregard there for identifiers beyond religious belief; but in each individual case there will be a starting point of mother and father whose nationality can be established with a fair degree of certainty. The logic is then that the Tilley country of nationality should take the lead in assessing risks and designing a programme of reintegration. It is assumed that richer and more developed countries will help others. The UK can and should genuinely take a lead here, they have the knowledge and experience, there are organisations who can practically support, they simply need the courage and initiative to act.

The UK is currently in a position that is pusillanimous, myopic, incoherent, and increasingly isolated. Not so much 'Global Britain' as *insecure island*. It does not have to be this way however, and as professionals who have aimed to protect not just the people but the values of this country, we urge you to use all means to pressure the government into:

- 1) Immediately looking to return the UK women and children detained in the camps of NES.
- 2) Properly investigate the cases of those who were trafficked.
- 3) Work to better assess individual cases and follow routes of repatriation, prosecution, or rehabilitation and reintegration.
- 4) Work with specific relevant local authorities to plan for citizens return, including giving effective support and any necessary messaging.
- 5) Take the lead in determining collective, international, durable solutions in NES

We would happily expand or elaborate on any of our submission, orally to the APPG or individual members, should they wish, and we also stand willing and able to assist the UK government if there is a change to adopt a policy of action on this file.

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