

Children from ISIS families in Camps and Rehabilitation

Centers

(Risks, Problematics, and Containment Approaches)



[رابط المقال الأصلي](#)

"Children from ISIS families are seen as the "new blood" that will nourish the organization, ensure its survival, and expand its influence. Therefore, the continued presence of these children in such an environment raises serious concerns about the revival of ISIS."

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Introduction

The issue of children, who have been evacuated from the areas under ISIS control in Syria, represents a great challenge for the local and international community. It involves numerous humanitarian, legal, security, and political complexities, in addition to the risks posed by their continued presence in camps, where an environment conducive to the spread of extremist ideology and crimes exists.

Despite more than five years passing since the geographical defeat of ISIS, the fate of over 32,000 children, along with their mothers, remains uncertain in the camps of al-Hol and Roj and rehabilitation centers. Their risks continue to grow both locally and regionally, while the children themselves face imminent danger.

Many women affiliated with ISIS, especially "migrants," persist in strategizing to turn the al-Hol camp into a "mini-state" for ISIS. They aim to increase the population through childbirth and indoctrinate children in efforts to revive the organization, using various means, the most dangerous of which is raising a new generation as the "future army of ISIS."

increasing risks on both local and international levels on one hand, and on the children themselves on the other hand.

The problem of the Study

The problem of the study lies in uncovering the dimensions of the risks of the children from ISIS families issue, whose numbers and extremism are increasing within detention camps, where they are exposed to an environment conducive to indoctrination, making them potential time bombs. The research aims to identify the major problematics and complexities of this matter and assess the response of the international community, particularly concerning the repatriation of non-Iraqi and non-Syrian families and children to their countries of origin. Additionally, it seeks to evaluate the level of risks posed by Syrian and Iraqi children from ISIS-affiliated families to the region, amid the lack of attention to their rehabilitation.

As such, the problem of the study can be summarized by the following main question: "What are the risks and issues raised by the matter of Children from ISIS families in camps and rehabilitation centers in North-East Syria?"

To address this problem, the study will explore the significant factors and causes that have exacerbated this issue by answering the following sub-questions:

- What are the factors and causes that contributed to the increased danger of Children from ISIS families?
- To what extent do the conditions in the camps contribute to the risks posed by these children to the region on one hand and to the children themselves, as victims of terrorism, on the other hand?
- Is ISIS attempting to revive the "caliphate" by preparing a new generation of children whose numbers are growing in the camps?
- Does the responsibility of the international coalition in combating ISIS extend beyond military and geographical defeat to addressing the aftermath of ISIS,

particularly the issue of thousands of children in camps and rehabilitation centers?

- Has the failure of the concerned states to take responsibility for repatriating their citizens from ISIS-affiliated families led to the escalation of these risks and complicated their resolution?
- What existing solutions are there to mitigate the risks related to Children from ISIS families, and are they sufficient and effective, or do the risks continue to persist and become more complex day by day?

The Importance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in shedding light on various obscure aspects of the issue of Children from ISIS families, its complexities, and studying the risks from all angles. It also aims to reveal the major problematic aspects of this matter, including "security, social, psychological, and legal" aspects, among others. Additionally, the study seeks to analyze the reasons behind these problematic aspects and their consequences to propose appropriate solutions for this issue.

Objectives

-Investigate the main problematic aspects of the issue of Children from ISIS families in the al-Hol and Roj camps and rehabilitation centers in North-East Syria.

-Identify the risks that these children may pose to local and international communities.

-Identify the prominent risks that these children face as victims of war and terrorism.

-Propose a number of recommendations and possible solutions to address the issue of Children from ISIS families.

Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, which aims to review the most important facts and events, the latest figures, and statistics related to Children from ISIS families in refugee camps and care centers. It analyzes them to assess their contribution to the escalation of risks faced by these children and extract the main problematic aspects of the issue of Children from ISIS families in North-East Syria, and review and analyze temporary solutions to contain the risks associated with Children from ISIS families and determine the extent of their contribution to mitigating or alleviating these risks.

Study Outline

Based on the preceding content, this study will be divided into two consecutive chapters. In the first chapter, we will examine the camps of "detention" and rehabilitation centers, while the second chapter will focus on the main risks and problematic aspects of the issue of Children from ISIS families. The study will follow the following outline:

Chapter One: Children from ISIS families between Camps and Rehabilitation Centers

Part One: Children from ISIS families in the al-Hol and Roj Camps and the Categorization Issue

1. Al-Hol Camp: Between Its Civilian Nature and the issue of its militarization.
2. Roj Camp: One of the Existing Solutions to Mitigate Risks.
3. The Exceptional Nature of the al-Hol and Roj Camps.

Part Two: Children from ISIS families in Rehabilitation and Care Centers

1. Huri and Orkesh Centers.
2. Hilat Center for Children's Rehabilitation and Care.

Chapter Two: Risks and Problematics of the Issue of Children from ISIS families

Part One: Risks related to Children from ISIS families

1. A Slow Repatriation of Children to Their Countries
2. Increase in Births
3. Sexual Exploitation of Children
4. Psychological Risks
5. Neglecting the Rehabilitation of Syrian and Iraqi Children

Part Two: Challenges of the Issue of Children from ISIS families

1. Loss of Sense of Belonging to Their Original Countries
2. Orphaned Children
3. Children with Different Nationalities Born to One Mother
4. Arab Countries' reluctance in Repatriating Their Citizens
5. Children Remaining with Their Radicalized Mothers

Conclusion: Results and Recommendations

Chapter One:

Children from ISIS families Between Camps and Rehabilitation Centers

Although the al-Hol camp was originally established as a refugee camp for Iraqi refugees and Syrian displaced persons fleeing wars and dangers, the fall of ISIS in its last stronghold in Al-Baghuz had a significant impact on the camp's population, as thousands of women and children affiliated with ISIS were transferred to the already overcrowded camp, which was already hosting Syrian displaced persons and Iraqi refugees. Consequently, the camp accommodated both individuals escaping from the terrorist organization and its crimes, as well as families of ISIS members and individuals associated with the group.

In an effort to alleviate the pressure on the al-Hol camp, The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) transferred a section of foreign ISIS families and their children to the Roj camp in the countryside of Derik. The Roj camp also houses several Syrian displaced families and Iraqi refugees.

While the section for Syrian displaced persons and Iraqi refugees retains its civilian and humanitarian character as camp for the internally displaced and refugees, what legal description can be attributed to the section housing families affiliated with ISIS? Hasn't this exceptional nature of these camps led to increased risks for Children from ISIS families?

On the other hand, in order to protect the children themselves and mitigate the risks they pose, the Autonomous Administration also established rehabilitation and care centers for Children from ISIS families as temporary solutions until permanent

solutions for this dilemma are found. But can these centers accommodate and rehabilitate all Children from ISIS families? Have their rehabilitation programs achieved the desired goals?

Based on the above, the first part of the study examines the situation of Children from ISIS families in refugee and internally displaced persons' camps. In the second part, we explore the extent to which rehabilitation and reform programs in the care and rehabilitation centers contribute to mitigating the risks posed by Children from ISIS families.

Part One: Children from ISIS families in the al-Hol and Roj Camps and the Categorization Issue

Children from ISIS families are distributed between two main camps in North-East Syria, namely "al-Hol" and "Roj." Through a simple administrative and security comparison between the two camps, it is evident that the conditions for children in the Roj camp are better than those in the al-Hol camp.

1. Al-Hol Camp: Between Its Civilian Nature and the issue of its militarization.

Originally established to accommodate Iraqi refugees in the early 1991 during the Gulf War, Al-Hol Camp was later reopened to host Iraqi migrants who fled to Syria after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. It was one of three camps on the Syrian-Iraqi border¹.

¹ A report by BBC Arabic titled "Al-Hol Camp: The Last Refuge for Women and Children of the Islamic State" [Link: <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-47319661>]. Last updated on June 12, 2023.



An aerial view of Al-Hol Camp (Picture captured in 2021)

Until the end of 2018, it housed around 10,000 Syrian displaced persons and Iraqi refugees. However, after the geographical defeat of ISIS in its last stronghold, the town of Al-Baghuz, thousands of families of its fighters were relocated to this camp, leading to significant expansion, with the population reaching approximately 74,000 individuals.

Following this expansion, the camp was divided into 7 sections, each referred to as a "sector." Over the past few years, several batches of Syrian displaced persons and Iraqi refugees were evacuated, leading to a redivision of the camp into 6 sectors, including a section specifically for ISIS women "migrants," known as "the Annex" while the other sectors housed Syrians and Iraqis², including families with varying degrees of connection to ISIS.

² An exclusive statement by the Co-Chair of Al-Hol Camp Administration, Gehan Hanan, to Al-Furat Center for Studies on March 29, 2023.



The Co-Chair of Al-Hol Camp Administration, Jehan Hanan

This camp is considered to be one of the most dangerous in the world due to its current population exceeding 51,000 people. The camp has seen a rise in extremism and crime, as it has become a gathering place for the most radical women from around the world. These women have turned the camp into a miniature version of the "ISIS state," making al-Hol Camp an extremely complex security equation. In fact, it can be regarded as a small "Islamic state", where the organization has established ideological, organizational, and social control over its residents.

Consequently, this camp has become a "small Islamic state following the ISIS approach." When one enters it and witnesses thousands of women wearing black veils and children with different facial features and skin colors, coming from over 60 nationalities worldwide, they will feel as if they are within a terrifying and isolated state disconnected from the outside world. It does not resemble the conventional refugee and displacement camps, as its inhabitants try to impose their own laws on

everyone, either through indoctrination and propagating ISIS ideology to children or through force, intimidation, and murder among adults.³

Camps are typically established to protect displaced and refugee populations from wars, and they are meant to have a civilian and humanitarian character according to international laws and norms. However, what can be observed regarding al-Hol Camp is its trend toward "militarization," it is being used by ISIS cells as a suitable environment to perpetuate their alleged "caliphate" and create a second generation for their "caliphate army."

Several factors and reasons contribute to the militarization of al-Hol Camp and its exploitation by ISIS to push its strategic objectives, including:

A. Location of al-Hol Camp: The camp's remote and lawless location presents one of the most significant security challenges. It is situated in a remote desert area that witnessed difficult security conditions in recent years. Covering a vast area with scattered tents, the camp is located close to the Iraqi border, which still experiences security instability caused by the five-year control of ISIS in the region. The sensitive and non-compliant location of the camp with international standards has had a significant impact on weapons smuggling into the camp and the trafficking of people from within it.

B. Camp Size: Studies confirm a correlation between the size and design of camps and the militarization issue. They indicate that camps should not accommodate more than 20,000 people at most. However, the authorities managing the al-Hol camp did not give any importance to these studies. Recent statistics show that the camp houses

³ The previous source – plus Al-Furat Center for Studies team's observation of the camp during a field visit on March 29, 2023.

51,000 people⁴, while its maximum capacity is 40,000 people. The residents are distributed among five sections, including a separate annex for non-Iraqi foreigners. This annex represents the most dangerous part of the camp due to the difficulty of controlling it, attributed to the security conditions and acts of violence carried out by its inhabitants, which pose a threat to the safety of humanitarian workers and result in a lack of care and services.⁵

C. Demographic Composition of the Camp: According to the latest statistics (March 2023) obtained by Al-Furat Center for Studies from the camp administration, the number of camp residents was as follows:

Iraqis	6898 families	25348 individuals	15226 children
Syrians	5015 families	18204 individuals	11808 children
Foreign ISIS Families in the "Migrants" section	2254 families	7652 individuals	5280 children

According to this statistic, the total number of residents in the camp is 51,204 individuals, distributed among 14,167 families, including 32,314 children aged one to 17 years. This means that over 65% of the camp's inhabitants are children, and their numbers are continuously increasing. According to birth data provided by the administration of al-Hol camp, the average number of new births in the camp for Syrian and Iraqi sections is 60 children per month, excluding births deliberately unregistered by their parents with the camps management.

⁴ According to reports from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the population in April 2019 reached 73,393 individuals. The report, titled "OCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Humanitarian Response in Al-Hol Camp, Situation Report No. 3, May 2019, Page 1."

⁵ International Crisis Group, "Women and Children First: Repatriating the Islamic State's International Contingent from Syria," Middle East Report No. 208, 18th November 2019, Page 3.

Consequently, children form a significant proportion of the camp's total population, and some of them are suspected of being involved in terrorist activities or supporting and endorsing them, coming from various nationalities.

Furthermore, women affiliated with the organization and their children still live under the same lifestyle they had during the "caliphate," and the children continue to be exposed to extremist jihadist ideologies, where scenes of violence and killings are normalized for them.⁶ ISIS had a significant focus on recruiting children, referring to them as "Cubs of the Caliphate," considering them the "new blood" that would nourish and ensure the organization's survival and expansion. Hence, the fact that these children remain in such an environment raises serious concerns about the revival of the organization. In August 2022, a joint operation by the Internal Security Forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces resulted in the dismantling of 33 tents used as "indoctrination centers and extrajudicial courts" against camp residents who refused to adhere to ISIS principles.⁷

Due to the problems and pressures arising from al-Hol camp, especially in terms of security and administration, and as a means of easing these issues, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria transferred a portion of foreign ISIS-affiliated families to Roj camp.

⁶ Amid calls to repatriate the families of German ISIS members to their country, the German government declared that the al-Hol camp in North East Syria has transformed into a dangerous terrorist school for ISIS. It added that the women of the organization are grooming children to become the "next generation" of ISIS. The government also pointed out an increase in extremism among children and teenagers, along with a rise in actual and verbal violence. Moreover, it highlighted that the leadership of ISIS seemingly views the children and teenagers in refugee camps and prisons as the "next generation" of the organization. Source: DW News, "German Government: Al-Hol Camp in Syria is a Dangerous Terrorist School," <https://cutt.us/WGQRf>

⁷ Quoted from a statement published on the official website of the Syrian Democratic Forces on August 27, 2022. <https://sdf-press.com/?p=38176>

2. Roj Camp: One of the Existing Solutions to Mitigate Risks

Roj Camp was opened by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria on June 24, 2015, in the countryside of Derik city, to accommodate Iraqi refugees and those displaced from Al-Hasakah city and its countryside during the peak of ISIS attacks and control over vast areas of Iraq and Syria. After the defeat of ISIS, Syrians returned to Al-Hasakah, and most Iraqis returned to Iraq, while some were transferred to al-Hol camp. By late 2017, Roj camp transformed into a camp exclusively for foreign ISIS-affiliated families, with the exception of keeping a few Syrian and Iraqi families there.⁸



A Picture from Inside Roj Camp, the countryside of Derek city, North-East Syria

One of the reasons for opening this camp is to alleviate the pressure on the al-Hol camp, which accommodates a large number of ISIS families along with refugees and internally displaced persons, and the increase in extremism, crime, attempted escapes, especially from the "migrants" section.⁹

⁸

⁹ Repeated.

According to recent data and statistics provided by the co-chair of the camp's administration, Roj Camp houses 707 foreign families from 60 nationalities, comprising 2,602 individuals, including 1,530 children. In addition to that, there are 11 displaced Syrian families and 69 refugee families from Iraq.

Camp System

The system in Roj Camp differs significantly from that of al-Hol and other camps in North-East Syria. Roj Camp is specifically designated for foreign ISIS families, "women migrants and their children." One of the main imposed conditions is the prohibition of wearing all-black attire, although full-face veils are allowed as long as they are not black.¹⁰

The purpose of these conditions, for those who wish to leave al-Hol camp and move to Roj Camp, is "to rehabilitate these women and their children and to disengage them from extremist ideologies," as described by the Co-Chair of the Camp's Administration.¹¹

More Services and Fewer Restrictions

In return for these imposed conditions, the management of Roj Camp provides more services to its residents. In terms of services, "the tents in Roj Camp are not directly placed on the ground like in al-Hol camp but are built on a cement base with one-meter-high walls for easy cleaning, movement, and protection from weather conditions and water leakage. Additionally, electricity is provided to all tents, each

¹⁰ Repeated.

¹⁰ Exclusive statement for Al-Furat Center by the administration of Roj camp on April 20, 2023. Confidential source from the administration of al-Hol camp on April 20, 2023.

family is given a television, and they are allowed to own electrical appliances of their choice. Furthermore, all kitchen utensils are distributed to each family residing in the camp."¹²

Money transferring office

The camp market includes a dedicated office for money transfers, subject to strict supervision by the camp administration in coordination with security agencies and the International Coalition Operations Room¹³. Complex procedures are imposed, allowing families with up to 3 members to receive a monthly sum of 300 US dollars. Families with more than 3 members are allowed to receive 500 dollars per month. These restrictions aim to prevent money accumulation and its use in smuggling operations.¹⁴ Such amounts may be considered significant compared to the living standards in North-East Syria, especially as ISIS families regularly receive food baskets and healthcare from international organizations operating in al-Hol and Roj camps.

¹² Field tour by Al-Furat Center for Studies team in Roj camp on April 20, 2023.

¹³ Report by Al-Sharq Al-Awsat newspaper titled "ISIS Women in Roj Camp under Strict Control... Waiting for Repatriation to Their Countries." <https://aawsat.com/home/article/3145266> Last visit on June 13, 2023.

¹⁴ Exclusive source from the administration of al-Hol camp on April 20, 2023.



ISIS Women in Roj Camp Standing in Front of the Money Transfer Center:

Women are allowed to receive financial amounts sent to them by their relatives, and those without financial support are provided for by the camp administration with the support of some organizations, ensuring their essential needs. Additionally, a small market is opened in the camp for their purchase of necessities.¹⁵

Undoubtedly, transferring some of the ISIS families to Roj Camp has alleviated some pressure on al-Hol Camp in terms of security and administration, reducing the level of crime, and enabling better security control over foreign ISIS families. Therefore, this camp serves as an example for a temporary solution to mitigate the risk posed by ISIS families and their children. However, there are still vulnerabilities that ISIS and its cells can exploit to advance their strategy of raising a "new army of ISIS." Some of these vulnerabilities include the ease of interaction between Children from ISIS families and the children of Iraqi refugees and displaced Syrians in the camp, whether in schools or shared markets within the camp. Moreover, there is easy access to external communication through cell phones connected to the internet, some of which

¹⁵ Statement by the Co-manager of Roj Camp to Al-Furat Center for Studies on April 20, 2023.

have been seized during security sweeps inside the camps, not to mention the freedom to browse websites and engage in social media. It should be noted that ISIS heavily relied on modern means of communication and the internet to widely disseminate its extremist ideology.

3. The Exceptional Nature of al-Hol and Roj Camps:

Usually, camps are established to accommodate internally displaced civilians or refugees from neighboring countries who are forced to leave their homes due to wars, disasters, or any other reason endangering their lives. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of the hosting country, its government, and the international community to provide them with humanitarian care and protection, in accordance with international laws concerning refugees and displaced persons. However, al-Hol and Roj camps represent a unique case in the world, as their residents consist of Syrian internally displaced persons and Iraqi refugees who sought refuge in these camps to escape from the crimes of ISIS and other armed groups. Simultaneously, these camps also harbor families affiliated with ISIS, including women and children. This means that the executioners and victims are coexisting in the same place.

The legal situation for each category differs from the other, giving these two camps a distinctive character and making them exceptional compared to other camps. While the section dedicated to Syrian displaced persons and Iraqi refugees retains its civilian and humanitarian nature, being considered a camp for internally displaced persons and refugees. However, considering that the internally displaced¹⁶ and refugee¹⁷

¹⁶ According to the guidelines related to internal displacement, which establish a framework to ensure the protection and rights of internally displaced persons, IDPs are defined as follows: "Individuals or groups of individuals who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave their habitual residence or places of habitual

definitions do not apply to the families of ISIS members (including women and children) present in al-Hol and Roj camps, it is not possible to categorize them under these legal definitions. Instead, they can be regarded as merely "temporary detention centers" since they did not voluntarily seek refuge in these camps but ended up there involuntarily after the collapse of their self-proclaimed state.

This unique nature of al-Hol and Roj camps, and the coexistence of displaced persons and refugees on one hand and ISIS families on the other, has resulted in numerous security problems and legal complexities. Since their arrival, particularly in al-Hol Camp, individuals with close ties to the organization have started harassing Syrian and Iraqi civilians, and acts of violence have intensified, especially by foreign elements who are usually more radical, notably ISIS "migrant women". Nevertheless, these camps are still being managed similarly to ordinary refugee and internally displaced persons' camps worldwide, providing them with care and protection from all sides, whether by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria or various civil society organizations and international entities, based on humanitarian principles. They receive the same assistance provided to refugee and internally displaced persons' camps without any local, regional, or international efforts made to investigate the cases of women who voluntarily joined the "ISIS caliphate out of conviction and commitment". Even more concerning is that these extremist women are involved in indoctrinating and preparing a new generation filled with ISIS ideology, preparing them to become the nucleus of a new ISIS army, originating from

residence, especially as a result of armed conflict, general violence, human rights violations, natural disasters, or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed internationally recognized state borders".

¹⁷ According to Article 1 of the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is defined as: "Any person who, as a result of events occurring before January 1, 1951, and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country, or any person who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of their former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it."

the camps. These women have undertaken the task of preserving and preparing the ISIS progeny after the military and geographical defeat of the organization.

To mitigate these risks or at least alleviate them, the Autonomous Administration has resorted to temporary solutions, such as establishing centers for the rehabilitation and care of Children from ISIS families.

Part Two: Children from ISIS families in Rehabilitation and Care Centers

The terrorist organization ISIS left behind another type of victims, namely the children whom the organization attempted to exploit and recruit for its own objectives. This has led to a fundamental problem: how to mitigate this danger and address the challenge of reintegrating these children into their communities. There is a possibility of a new generation of extremists emerging, following in the footsteps of their radicalized parents, influenced by the extremist ideas instilled in their minds by their mothers, unless rehabilitation programs are implemented. This is especially concerning as these children have spent a considerable amount of time living under the influence of the self-proclaimed "Caliphate," where they were taught extreme ideologies that drive them to reject those who are different and engage in acts of terrorism to achieve their distorted dream.



Image of a sign at the entrance of Huri Center for Rehabilitating Children from ISIS families in the countryside of Qamishli.

Therefore, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has established rehabilitation centers for Children from ISIS families, seeking to protect them from exploitation and radicalization and thwarting ISIS's strategy of creating a second future army. In these centers, hundreds of Children from ISIS families, whom the organization used to call "cubs of the Caliphate," undergo rehabilitation. The majority of these children are foreigners, with some Syrian and Iraqi children among them.

1 .Huri and Orkish Centers

The "Huri Center for Child Protection and Education" was established in March 2017 on the outskirts of the town of "Tel Marouf," which is part of Qamishli city in North-East Syria. The center is a one-story building with dozens of rooms and a spacious courtyard. It accommodates approximately 160 children of various nationalities, including some Syrian and Iraqi children who were part of what ISIS called the "Cubs of the Caliphate".



A picture of Huri Center's courtyard

On the other hand, the Orkish Center was opened in September 2022 in the countryside of Qamishli city. It consists of a two-story main building with classrooms, dormitory rooms, recreational halls, and a first aid room. Adjacent to the main building are dining rooms and a barbershop salon. The center hosts 87 children, the majority of whom are foreigners aged between 13 and 18 years. However, this center has the capacity to accommodate only 150 children.



Building of Orkish Center for Rehabilitating Children from ISIS families.

These two centers are dedicated to sheltering and rehabilitating children affiliated with ISIS who were involved in committing crimes and acts of violence within the organization. They undergo a rehabilitative program based on the local expertise secured by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

The centers house children from 20 different nationalities, including Arabs, Europeans, Americans, Africans, and Asians. The majority of them had previously undergone military and ideological training within ISIS, or what the organization referred to as "Cubs of the Caliphate." Some of them have been featured in violent footage in ISIS propaganda materials. They were either arrested during battles or while attempting to escape with their families from Syria, especially during Turkish attacks on North-East Syria.¹⁸

¹⁸ Exclusive statement to Al-Furat Center for Studies by the Co-Chairman of the Office of Justice and Reform Affairs, Khalid Ramo, on April 5, 2023.

Additionally, some children, aged twelve and above, were transferred from Al-Hol and Roj camps to these centers to protect them from potential sexual exploitation, particularly by female ISIS members.

Daily Program

As part of the daily program in these centers, the children wake up at six in the morning, engage in physical exercises, and have breakfast at seven. Following that, they participate in rehabilitation sessions delivered by specialists in psychological counseling. They undergo educational courses, both group and individual, using the "emotional discharge" technique, where psychological experiments help them discover their inner selves.¹⁹ The aim is to equip the children with the necessary skills to live a normal childhood away from weapons, violence, and extremist ideologies.

The educational sessions, based on an integration of UNICEF and Autonomous Administration curricula, continue covering various subjects such as ethics, literature, sciences, history, and geography. In other words, the children receive a comprehensive education and are categorized based on their academic performance, ranging from weak to moderate to good. Additionally, there are some children who have never received any education, and they are provided with literacy classes.²⁰

¹⁹ Exclusive statement to Al-Furat Center for Studies by the administrators at Orkish Center on May 10, 2023.

²⁰ Exclusive statement to Al-Furat Center for Studies by the administrators at Orkish Center on May 10, 2023.



Children from ISIS families in Orkesh Center for Rehabilitation play "Baby Foot"

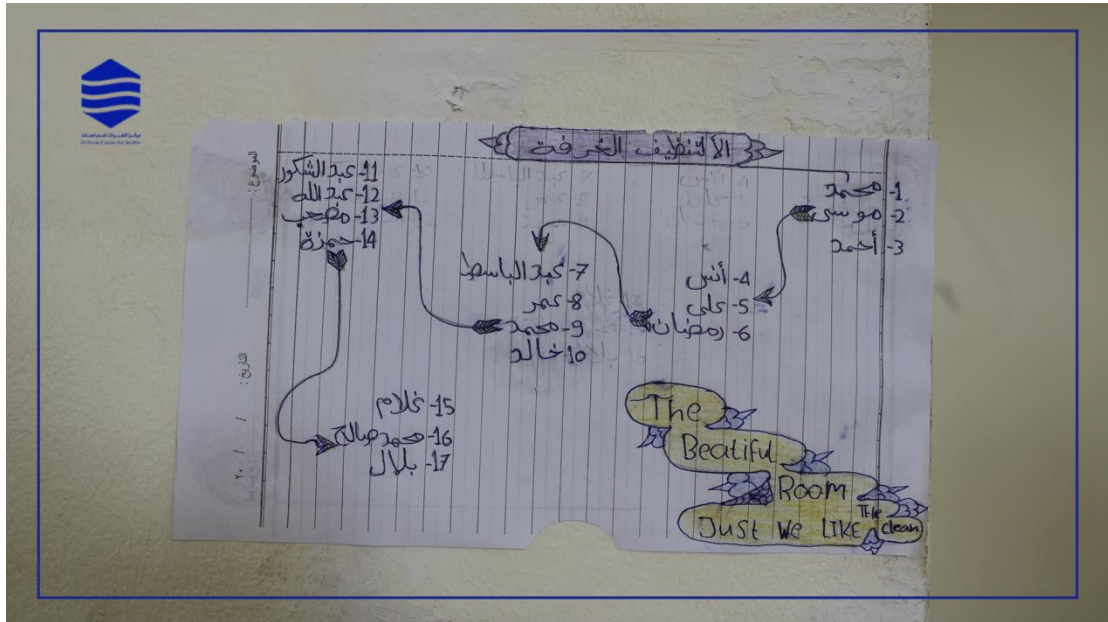
In addition to learning Arabic and English. The lessons continue until 1:30 PM, followed by lunchtime. Afterward, they engage in various activities in equipped halls with TV screens, a small library, pool tables, "Baby Foot" tables, chess, and other games, as well as playing football and volleyball. They also participate in activities such as handicrafts, drawing, and music.²¹

The System of the Two Centers

The two centers have different purposes: Huri Center plays a primary role in rehabilitating children from ISIS families who were involved in combat, terrorism, or underwent "ideological" courses by ISIS. On the other hand, Orkish Center mostly receives children from ISIS families who have recently been evacuated from Al-Hol and Roj camps after reaching a certain age.

²¹ Observations of the Al-Furat Center for Studies team during a field tour of Orkish Center on May 10, 2023.

In Orkish Center, the management organizes the children into small organized groups, forming councils with assigned roles related to cleanliness and services within the center, and they also prepare their own meals in the kitchen.



A picture of a table showing the distribution of room cleaning duties by Children from ISIS families at Orkish Center.

Communication with the Outside World

While the children in the centers do not use mobile phones or the internet, they are provided with the opportunity to communicate with their families, either in Al-Hol or Roj camps, once every two weeks through phone calls or by receiving mail delivered by the International Red Cross. Additionally, mothers are allowed to visit their children in the centers at specified intervals, as coordinated between the center's management and the camps. The administrators in the centers emphasize that their centers are not prisons, and the children spend most of their time outside the rooms, and in the courtyard, engaging in lessons and activities.

The extent of children's response to rehabilitation

According to the supervisors of the rehabilitation program in both centers, the children's responses can be divided into two categories: The first category shows quick interaction, and their behaviors and thoughts have changed. The center works on altering the children's mindset, teaching them to reject extremism, and promoting love for family and others. Initially, some children avoided interacting with their teachers, especially female teachers, and refrained from greeting them. However, later on, their behavior normalized, and they started interacting with teachers, caregivers, and peers.²²

As for the second category, they pretend to have changed, but the administrators in both centers affirm that some of them only feign behavioral changes. Psychological supervisors who meet them weekly can observe that they still hold onto extremist ideologies but hide them. The study of their social, family, and economic backgrounds reveals that many of these children suffered from poverty and lack of education, and their extremist ideologies are not deeply rooted, which makes it possible to rehabilitate them.²³

In response to a question about whether they consider the center to have achieved its rehabilitation goals, the administrators answered, "It is too early to talk about the success of the center, but we see positive results. We have not faced any problems with them, and they are indeed changing. Many of them take the initiative to talk to us, which is evidence of starting to break free from the closed extremist thinking.

²² Exclusive statements to Al-Furat Center for Studies by supervisors of rehabilitation programs at rehabilitation centers on May 25, 2023.

²³ Repeated

Some of them now listen to music, whereas they used to consider it forbidden in the past."²⁴

The fate of children after turning 18

According to the management of the rehabilitation centers, after completing the rehabilitation period, once the children reach the age of 18, they are returned to their families if they are Syrians or Iraqis. However, before returning them, they are presented to the Autonomous administration courts that handle juvenile cases. For Syrian children, the management of the centers has the authority to determine the duration of their rehabilitation and graduation, and they are returned to their families based on a report submitted to the Autonomous Administration.

For foreign children, coordination is done between the Autonomous Administration and their respective countries. If their countries agree to take them back, they are handed over to their representatives. If their countries refuse to accept them, those over 18 years old are placed in detention centers specifically designated for them until a solution to their situation is found.²⁵

2. Halat Center for Rehabilitation and Child Care:

This center was officially opened on October 25, 2021, in Al-Hasakah city, based on a proposal and project presented by the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in cooperation with the International Coalition to Combat the "ISIS" organization. It is supervised by

²⁴ Repeated

²⁵ Exclusive statement to Al-Furat Center for Studies by the Co-Chairman of the Office of Justice and Reform Affairs, Khalid Remo, on April 5, 2023.

the Women's Authority in North-East Syria. The center includes five prefabricated rooms used for education and children's play, surrounded by a spacious playground.²⁶



Halat Center for Rehabilitation and Child Care Sign

This center has its own unique features and conditions that differ significantly from Huri and Orkesh centers. It caters to children between the ages of 3 to 13 years, whose mothers have committed crimes and have been sentenced to varying prison terms. The purpose of establishing this center is to accommodate and rehabilitate these children, so they do not remain in prisons with their mothers throughout the duration of their sentences. Accordingly, the center receives children daily from 8:00 AM until 2:00 PM, after which they return to detention centers where their mothers are present. This complies with Article 9 of the Geneva Convention on the Rights of Children, which prohibits separating children from their families. Therefore, the center provides care for these children during the period of their mothers' detention since the mothers are unable to provide sufficient care for the children in prisons. The center takes on this

²⁶ Exclusive statement to Al-Furat Center for Studies by an administrator at Hulat Center on May 25, 2023.

responsibility²⁷, and this is what is known as "alternative care" as stipulated by Law No. 7 of 2022 issued by the General Council of the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria.

Article 31 of this law states: "The alternative care system aims to provide social, psychological, health, and vocational care for children who cannot be raised with their families due to prevailing circumstances. This is to ensure their proper upbringing and compensate them for what they have lost in terms of affection and care...²⁸".

The children are divided into three age groups:

- Group 1: 3 to 6 years old
- Group 2: 7 to 9 years old
- Group 3: 10 to 13 years old

According to the center's program, developed in collaboration between the Women's Authority and Save the Children organization, the children receive educational lessons, including Arabic, English, mathematics, and science. They also engage in indoor recreational activities such as drawing and music, as well as outdoor games. The center also provides healthcare and nutrition for the children, with Save the Children organization contributing most of the logistical support.

²⁷ Statement from Al-Furat Center for Studies by an administrator at Huri Center on May 25, 2023.

²⁸ Moreover, Syrian law enshrines the principle of alternative care for children of unknown parentage, according to the legislative decree related to the organization of the affairs of children of unknown parentage and their care. [Link to the decree: <http://www.pministry.gov.sy/contents/24336/>]



The drawings of the female children from ISIS families at Huri Center, where they refrain from drawing facial features, claiming it is "forbidden."

When the sentence for the mothers is completed, the children return with their mothers to the camps. Consequently, the period of the child's stay in the center is determined by the duration of the mother's sentence in prison. The number of children at the center varies from 50 to 100, fluctuating with the entry or release of ISIS women to and from prisons.²⁹

Although the step taken by the Autonomous Administration to mitigate the risks related to Children from ISIS families through the establishment of rehabilitation and reform centers, with local and autonomous efforts, is considered positive and has somewhat contributed to reducing these risks, such as distancing them from extremist ideology and preventing their exploitation by the ISIS terrorist organization and its cells in refugee and IDP camps. However, these efforts are insufficient for several reasons, the most significant of which are:

²⁹ Repeated

- The immense number of children (34,091) of both genders in Al-Hol and Roj camps, and the inability of these existing centers to accommodate them.
- Limited local experience in developing rehabilitation and reform programs.
- The financial constraints faced by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, as establishing centers and preparing rehabilitation programs for such a large number of children require the collective efforts of various local and international entities.

Chapter Two

Risks and Problematics of Children from ISIS Families

After the geographical defeat of ISIS and the relocation of thousands of their families to camps, numerous risks and problematics emerged concerning these families in general, and the children in particular. Several factors contribute to these risks and problematics, some of which stem from the presence of these children in unsuitable environments for their upbringing, while others result from the international community's failure to fulfill its responsibilities in finding a comprehensive solution to the "remnants of ISIS." Here, we will examine the most significant risks and problematics related to Children from ISIS families in North and East Syria:

Part One: Risks related to Children from ISIS Families

The detention of Children from ISIS families in refugee and IDP camps increases the risks they face, whether threatening the children themselves, those around them, or the entire community. Even subjecting these children to rehabilitation and reform programs in specialized centers does not entirely eliminate these risks. We will explore the most prominent risks posed by the issue of Children from ISIS families in North and East Syria:

1. Slow Repatriation of Children to Their Countries

The Autonomous Administration has repeatedly called on concerned states to repatriate their citizens, including families and children from ISIS in the camps and

rehabilitation centers. Some countries responded to these appeals and received some of their citizens. However, according to data obtained by Al-Furat Center for Studies from the Foreign Relations Department of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, the number of foreign children officially handed over to their governments between 2019 and 2023³⁰ was only 1,300 children. Meanwhile, more than 5,500 foreign children remain in camps and rehabilitation centers, awaiting repatriation.

These statistics indicate that the number of returnees is very low compared to the number of foreign children present in the camps and rehabilitation centers of North and East Syria. If the repatriation process continues at this slow pace (1,300 children over 5 years), it would take more than 15 years to repatriate all the children (whose total number is 5,500). This presents a significant problem, as these foreign children will grow up spending their entire childhoods in camps infected with extremist and criminal ideologies, increasing their risks and complicating their rehabilitation and reintegration into their original communities.

Moreover, after thousands of these foreign children turn 18, their countries may refuse their repatriation, considering them adults. Alternatively, the adults themselves might decline to return to their home countries out of fear of trial and punishment. Consequently, these children could end up in detention centers, just like their fathers, former fighters in the ISIS organization. In this scenario, there may be a need to establish more new detention centers, which would pose a challenge for the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian Democratic Forces, who already struggle

³⁰ The latest batch was repatriated to their countries on May 22, 2023, where the Foreign Relations Department of the Autonomous Administration handed over 108 families affiliated with the ISIS organization, including 80 Children, to the Tajikistan government.

with securing facilities that comply with international standards for more than 10,000 former ISIS fighters in detention.

Furthermore, combining children with their fathers in the same detention facilities may provide an opportune moment for ISIS to work on consolidating its ranks and preparing a new generation within prisons. This is particularly concerning amid previous attempts to smuggle ISIS members out of detention centers. The ongoing Turkish threats to North and East Syria and recent targeting of areas surrounding some detention centers and camps for ISIS families further exacerbate concerns about potential escapes of these members.

2. The Increase in Births

Data on new births in the camp's sectors, obtained by Al-Furat Center for Studies, indicates a significant rise in birth rates. In the first sector, which includes Syrian and Iraqi families, the recorded births in 2021 and 2022 ranged between 110 and 130 births per year.

Total	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	al-Hol camp-phase 1
923	24	130	110	69	318	272	Natural birth
22	0	0	0	0	0	22	Caesarean birth
945	24	130	110	69	318	294	Total

**The schedule of births in the phase (1) of al-Hol camp from 2018 to mid-2023
(The figures of the schedule are according to the management of al-Hol camp)**

When considering the data from four other sectors for Syrian IDPs and Iraqi refugees³¹, the total number of new births in all five sectors of Al-Hol camp ranges

³¹ Statement from Al-Furat Center for Studies by the Co-President of Al-Hol Camp, Jehan Hannon, on March 29, 2023.

from 550 to 650 births per year. Additionally, there are natural births that go unregistered with the camp administration, occurring in the same IDP and refugee sectors, as well as secret births in the "Migrants" sector.

Consequently, Al-Hol camp, in its current state, provides a conducive environment for the increase of the ISIS offspring and the emergence of new generations raised in a crime-ridden and extremist environment. The longer it takes to find a solution for Al-Hol camp, the larger the generations growing up in it, posing a threat not only to local communities but to the entire world. These generations may become susceptible to joining terrorist organizations, criminal gangs, or extremist groups.

3. Sexual Exploitation of Children

Many press reports have discussed the sexual exploitation by ISIS women in the "Migrants" section of older children (aged between 12 and 17 years). They are forced into marriages with several women from ISIS families with the goal of reproduction and increasing the offspring of ISIS "as part of their strategy of reproduction and continuity." Despite the denial by some ISIS women we encountered in Roj Camp (who recently left Al-Hol Camp), claiming that there are no cases of new marriages or births in the "Migrants" section of Al-Hol Camp³², an administrator from a child care organization operating in Al-Hol Camp confirmed to Al-Furat Center for Studies that "during their work in March 2023, providing awareness and nutrition support to mothers in Al-Hol Camp, they witnessed a 6-month-old baby in a tent within the female Migrants section"!

³² Interview with two ISIS women in Roj Camp, the first being a Russian named "Marita Musa," and the second an Italian of Tunisian origin named "Sonia Al-Khadiri" on April 20, 2023.

On the other hand, administrators at Orkesh Center for the rehabilitation of Children from ISIS families stated³³: "One of the children, named 'Saleh,' of Sudanese nationality, who was transferred to the center from Al-Hol Camp, informed one of the supervisors at the center that he was sexually exploited by ISIS women in the 'female Migrants' section of Al-Hol Camp³⁴." This is a blatant violation of children's rights, according to Article 34 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states: "Governments shall protect Children from sexual exploitation and abuse".

4. Psychological Risks

Considering that the environment, upbringing, and conditions of childhood all play a significant role in shaping the child's structure, personality, thinking process, and psychological and emotional state, the fact that Children from ISIS families spend their childhood in closed camps, within small tents lacking sufficient comfort, care, and cleanliness, and far from a normal civilian life, will undoubtedly impact their psychological well-being.

In addition to the stolen childhood, which will affect them throughout their lives, transferring these children to detention centers and separating them from their families will deepen the psychological effects on them. This could increase their extremism and violence as a retaliatory response to the outside world.

The longer the process of repatriating these children to their home countries takes, the worse their psychological condition becomes, facing difficulties in providing them

³³ Statement from Al-Furat Center for Studies by administrators at Orkesh Center on May 10, 2023.

³⁴ We were unable to meet with the child (Saleh) as he had been repatriated to his country.

with care. Regarding this, Thierry Baubet, Professor of Child Psychiatry at the University of Paris 13, says: "The issue of shock, emotional deprivation, and lack of support for children is not new, and the duration of living in an unorganized environment and the lack of sufficient care and developmental support inversely correlates with the chances of recovery for these children through providing support and creating a suitable environment for them."³⁵

The children are being raised in an environment that is an appropriate ground for increasing violence, extremism and crime inside al-Hol camp. Despite its large size, which is considered larger than some cities of northeastern Syria, it is a closed camp surrounded by fences and security guards, and lacks green playground spaces and means of psychological support.

The environment in which children from ISIS families grow up in Al-Hol camp, despite its large size, which is considered larger than some cities in North-East Syria, is a closed camp surrounded by walls and guards, lacking vast green playgrounds and psychological support. This setting creates a suitable ground for increasing violence, extremism, and criminal behavior among the children³⁶.

The situation is not much different in the rehabilitation and reform centers. Although these few existing centers provide better care and services for the children than in the camps, they still remain confined and feel isolated, facing an uncertain future. This was evident during our meeting with the 17-year-old child, "I.Z.," a French national of Moroccan origin, at the Orkesh center. When asked about his conditions at the center and how they are treated, he said, "The center is comfortable, and the

³⁵ Study titled "Psychological Care for Children of Jihadists: Approaches and Challenges" published in the Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Development on February 16, 2021.

³⁶ Statement to Al-Furat Center for Studies by the Co-Chair of Al-Hol Camp, Jihan Hannon, on March 29, 2023.

supervisors treat us well, but we don't want to stay here. We feel isolated from the world and our families, and we don't know what our destiny is. We have spent all our childhood in camps and centers, and I feel like my life has lost its meaning"³⁷.

What the French child says confirms that even if they are provided with all the comforts in the camps and centers, and regardless of the good services and treatment they receive, it will not change their feeling of frustration due to losing their childhood on one hand and living separated from the family atmosphere on the other. To emphasize this, when asked the same child whether he feels more comfortable in the center or in the camp, he replied, "I prefer the camp despite all its difficult conditions because, at least, I was with my mother and siblings".

Therefore, keeping the children in rehabilitation centers is not enough to make them well-adjusted individuals. Being in a place with its conditions and rules, far from their families, generates new psychological problems for the children. Even if the child responds to rehabilitation programs at the center, renounces extremist ideologies, and dreams of living in a normal society, he is faced with the reality that prevents him from achieving this dream.

³⁷ During a field visit by the team of Al-Furat Center for Studies to Orkesh Rehabilitation Center on May 10, 2023.

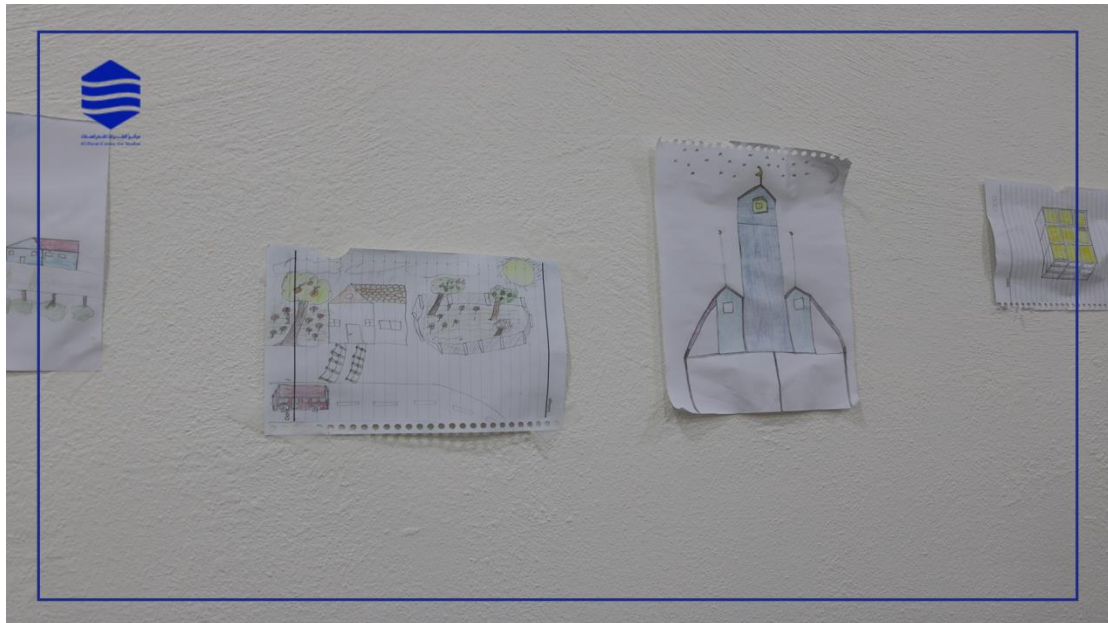


A picture of a French child of Moroccan origin at Orkesh Center.

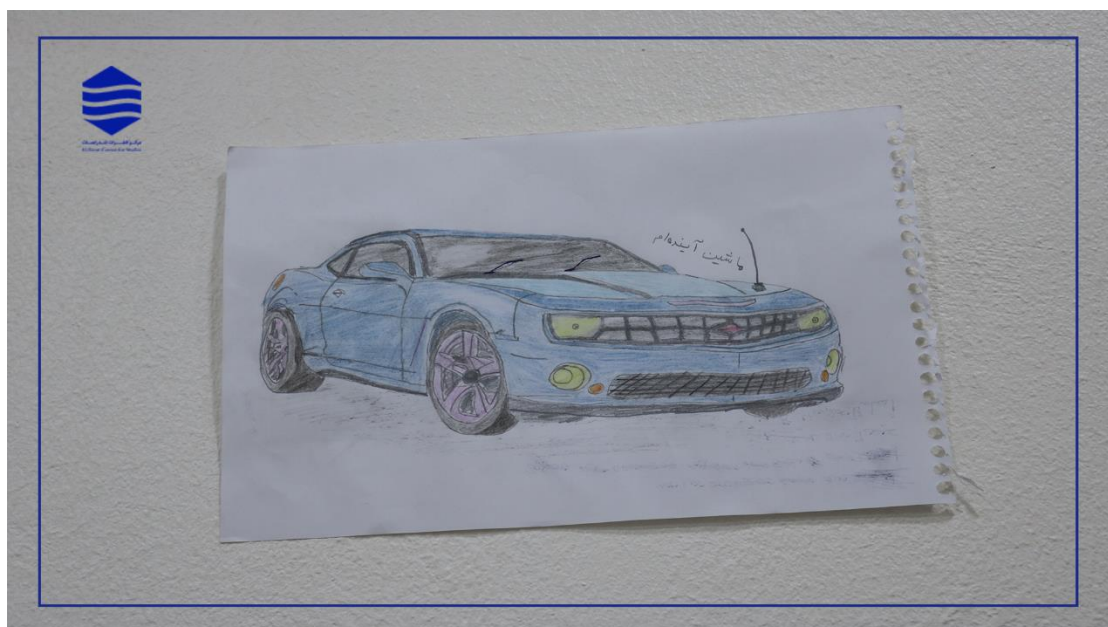
The experiences conducted by experts in the field of "psychological, social, and educational support" on children in the centers support the aforementioned points. For example, during drawing lessons³⁸, they ask the children to express their ideas and memories through drawings. The results showed that children who have abandoned extremist ideas drew trees, houses, football fields, or cars, while those still influenced by extremist ideologies drew mosques and war weapons.³⁹

³⁸ Much of what these children drew has been hung on the walls of the classrooms at Orkesh Rehabilitation Center.

³⁹ Exclusive statements were given by the psychological supervisors at the rehabilitation centers to Al-Furat Center for Studies on May 10, 2023.



Drawings of Children from ISIS families at Orkesh Center, where some of them drew mosques, while others drew houses and gardens.



A drawing of a child in Orkesh center, and wrote in Persian” my future car”

The renowned French psychiatrist and neurologist, Boris Cyrulnik, proposes solutions to the dilemma of keeping Children from ISIS families away from their families and

isolated. He calls on France and all Western governments to repatriate the children with their mothers, explaining, "For these children, their mothers are the only source of security. Returning them alone to French territory without their mothers is an aggression and additional isolation, and they might develop hatred towards the country that caused them this suffering. This could push them to defy the law and make them vulnerable to extremist ideologies. We are risking turning these children into time bombs."⁴⁰

Cyrulnik further explains that bringing back the mothers and children together could activate a process of neural flexibility in the children's brains, enabling them to overcome traumatic experiences. The faster this is done, the easier it becomes, as the lack of brain stimulation leads to an enlargement of the area responsible for impulsive behaviors. Delaying their return would make any change take longer, and the children would have violence as their only means of expression.⁴¹

5. Neglecting the Rehabilitation of Syrian and Iraqi Children

While Children from ISIS families who are foreign nationals are given priority in care and rehabilitation programs, those Syrian and Iraqi children, numbering more than 27,000, in Al-Hol camp alone, are often ignored or neglected.

However, in reality, these Syrian and Iraqi children pose the greatest future danger to the entire region, especially given their continuous increase due to the high birth rates among displaced Syrian and Iraqi populations.

⁴⁰ Title: "Psychological Care for Children of Jihadists: Approaches and Challenges" published in the Early Childhood Development Encyclopedia on February 16, 2021.

⁴¹ Repeated

Rehabilitation centers effectively serve foreign countries by rehabilitating their children for easy reintegration into their original communities, saving them the trouble and costs of rehabilitation. The true danger to the region and its people lies primarily in the category of Syrian and Iraqi children who are growing up in an environment of extremism and crime without undergoing any rehabilitation or reform programs in these centers. They may receive some care and awareness programs from local and international organizations operating in the camps (Al-Hol and Roj), but these programs seem to be weak, especially considering the high rate of crimes committed in Al-Hol camp.

Many of the Syrian and Iraqi children have formed dangerous groups engaged in theft and vandalism within the camp, such as destroying surveillance cameras and solar panels or stealing them. They also attack offices and warehouses of NGOs and steal from them, and they assault camp security personnel with stones, indicating that they pose a threat to the community if they leave the camp and mingle with the local population⁴². In this context, Dr. Assem Abdel Majeed Hegazy, a professor of educational psychology at the Faculty of Graduate Studies for Education, Cairo University, warns that "these children may become time bombs threatening the security and stability of communities and countries, and they may even become active elements in terrorist organizations in the near future"⁴³.

⁴² Exclusive statement to Al-Furat Center for Studies, by an official from the Crime Prevention Department in Al-Hol Camp and Jazeera Region.

⁴³ Report on the Al-Azhar Observatory website titled "Children from ISIS families in the balance of psychological medicine" last visited on June 20, 2023. [Link to the report: <https://www.azhar.eg/observer/%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%A9/ArtMID/14424/ArticleID/59215/>]

Despite the presence of many schools and educational centers in Al-Hol camp, established by international and local organizations, only around 10,000 out of the 32,000 children in the camp attend these schools and educational centers supervised by non-governmental and international organizations. This means that the majority of the children grow up in these camps without education, making them more susceptible to extremism due to exposure to religious courses or receiving extremist ideas from their mothers and extremist women in the camp.⁴⁴

Part Two: Challenges of the issue of Children from ISIS Families

The Children from ISIS families in the camps and rehabilitation centers in North-East Syria raise various legal, social, and political challenges. The longer we delay finding a comprehensive and sustainable solution to this issue, the more complex and intractable these challenges become. Here, we will highlight the most significant of these challenges:

1. Loss of a sense of belonging to their original countries:

The prolonged stay of Children from ISIS families in the camps and centers, far away from their home countries, and their inability to experience their natural childhood stages, naturally leads to a loss of their sense of belonging to their countries. Over time, as their countries neglect them within the camps and centers, it becomes difficult to integrate them back into society upon their return. Especially since they have not formed friendships or relationships and lack memories of their childhood in their communities, which may lead to hostility towards their countries. In other

⁴⁴ Statement to Al-Furat Center for Studies by the Co-President of Al-Hol Camp, Jehan Hannon, on March 29, 2023.

words, their reaction could be vengeful towards their countries, making them easily susceptible to recruitment by jihadist groups and pushing them towards carrying out terrorist operations against their communities.

This was evident during our meeting with the child (A.N.) from Kyrgyzstan at the Orkesh Center. He no longer feels passionate about belonging to his homeland but instead draws a new homeland in his imagination, dreaming of traveling there once he leaves the center. When we asked the 17-year-old child if he wanted to return to his country after leaving Syria, his response was as follows: "My dream is to go to Japan after leaving this place." He explained that during his stay at Al-Hol camp and upon reaching the age of thirteen, his mother did not allow him to leave the tent for fear that the camp authorities would see him and transfer him to the rehabilitation centers. Since he felt confined and bored in the tent, some women in the camp, whom he called "the sisters," allowed him to use a phone with an internet connection. While browsing the internet and trying to learn about countries worldwide through pictures and videos, he found that he was most fascinated by Japan, whether it was the architecture and houses, the advanced technology, or the types of food available there.⁴⁵



Image of a child from Kyrgyzstan present at Orkesh Center.

Regarding the problem of Children from ISIS families losing their sense of belonging to their countries, the French psychiatrist and neurologist, "Boris Cyrulnik," says: "The longer they stay there, the less they love France, but we can reclaim them if we take care of them now." He added, "I believe that the French president fears that the returning children will become terrorists. However, I say no, and my idea is not just a random thought; it is based on scientific observations... If we take care of them at a very young age, they will not become dangerous⁴⁶".

2. Full Orphans

After the fall of ISIS in its last stronghold in the town of "Al-Baghouz," thousands of orphaned children were left behind. These children are the most vulnerable, caught between the dilemma of staying in the camps and the challenge of returning to their countries due to a lack of identification documents. Some of them are claimed by ISIS

⁴⁶ Title: "Psychological Care for the Children of Jihadists: Approaches and Challenges" published in the Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Development on February 16, 2021.

women as their own children, without any substantial proof, with the intention of keeping them in the camp and preventing their repatriation to their countries. These women believe that these children are the "Children of the Caliphate" and should be raised with the ideology of the organization and eventually defend this caliphate⁴⁷.

The segment of children adopted by women from ISIS families undoubtedly faces the risk of being indoctrinated with intense ideology and trained to become the new generation of the future ISIS army. There is a difficulty in ascertaining their origins and nationalities, making it challenging to determine their original countries.

As for the other segment of children who have not found anyone to claim them from ISIS families, they are cared for within four centers for orphaned children inside Al-Hol camp, opened by UNICEF in collaboration with the camp administration. This segment may have better chances of repatriation to their original countries, especially since most countries that accept the return of their citizens prioritize the repatriation of orphaned children. However, they may be more susceptible to exploitation by governments, which could use them in various fields, such as recruiting them as mercenaries or using them in military conflicts or their ease of recruitment by jihadist groups⁴⁸.

The doubts and possibility of such violations against orphaned children who are repatriated by their governments arise because some countries, like the Russian Federation, have repatriated many orphaned children without thoroughly verifying their nationalities or origins. Russia returns such children solely based on the claims of its representatives and the presentation of DNA test documents. However,

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⁴⁸ Statement to Al-Furat Center for Studies by Co-Chair of Al-Hol Camp, Jihan Hannon, on March 29, 2023.

⁴⁸ Special statement to Al-Furat Center for Studies by a member of the Administrative Body in the Department of Foreign Relations - Humanitarian Affairs Division, Khaled Ibrahim, on March 25, 2023.

according to the Foreign Relations Department, the official second party in the process of handing over the children, there is no mechanism to verify or confirm the accuracy of those tests.⁴⁹

And to absolve itself of responsibility and avoid bearing the fate of the children after handing them over to their "governments," the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has prepared an official document specifically for the handover process. This document contains all the information about the children being handed over, and the receiving party pledges to take on the responsibility of caring for the children. The handover document is signed by a representative of the receiving government and a representative from the Foreign Relations Department of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. The completion of the handover procedures is announced in a joint press conference⁵⁰.

⁵⁰ Repeated



Repatriation Document of Foreign Nationals

At the request of the Government of..... , and based on the commitment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) to the principles of human rights, and international conventions that adhere to protect and safeguard human rights;

Taking into consideration the desire of the citizens of , who are charged of joining the terrorist organization of ISIS, and who after investigations, no sufficient evidence was found against them that prove their involvement in acts that violated the laws issued by the AANES, or any terrorist acts in the AANES areas;

The AANES has decided to hand over (names of the citizens to be repatriated) to the Government of

We, as AANES, emphasize that the citizens of have not been subjected to any kind of moral or physical pressure during their presence in the AANES region.

The AANES hopes to keep its communication and coordination with the countries which have repatriated their citizens to follow up with the legal procedures that may be taken against them or the process of their rehabilitation and reintegration.

Representative of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
Mr. His title

Representative of the Government of
Mr. His title

- A copy to:
- The Government of
 - The Foreign Relations Department
 - Women's Protection Units (YPJ)
 - Commission of Women in the AANES

A copy of the document for repatriation of foreign nationals, which is filled out when governments receive children from the Foreign Relations Department of the (AANES)

3. Children with Different Nationalities Born to the Same Mother

Some countries are willing to take back their nationals if there is proof that they are the children of their citizens or hold their nationality. However, there are numerous challenges hindering the return of these children to their countries. One significant problem is when some ISIS women have multiple children, each with different nationalities, due to marrying several foreign fighters during ISIS's control.

This issue creates obstacles in the repatriation process, especially for certain Arab countries, as they might face difficulties in accepting children with multiple nationalities and ethnicities, especially in the absence of any documented proof regarding the identity and nationality of these children. Such countries might be willing to take back the mother but reject receiving her children who have different nationalities from that of the mother.

The second problem lies with Syrian women who married several ISIS fighters of different nationalities and gave birth to children from them. Consequently, if foreign governments wish to repatriate their nationals from these children, they will not accept the Syrian mother along with these children. The children will be distributed to various countries based on their nationalities, leading to the separation of children from their mothers, which would clearly violate international agreements and laws concerning the rights of the child.

It's worth noting that several Western governments, such as Sweden and Germany, sent delegations to the camps in North and East Syria in 2020 to talk to the women

and find out if they wanted to repatriate their children to their home countries. At that time, none of the women the delegations spoke to agreed to the repatriation and preferred to keep their children with them in the camps instead of returning them to their home countries.⁵¹

The refusal of the Syrian mothers to hand over their children to their countries and keep them with them in the camps, will bring the problem of these children acquiring Syrian nationality. Not only may the Syrian government hesitate to grant them citizenship, but Syrian society will also be reluctant to accept these foreign children who are the remnants of the terrorist organization ISIS.

If the Syrian government refuses to grant them citizenship, it means depriving these children of one of their fundamental rights, which is the "right to a personal identity." This right is recognized by Article 8 of the Geneva Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states: "Every child has the right to a name and nationality from birth, and no child shall be deprived of his or her identity. If a child is deprived of his or her identity, the governments must assist them in recovering it promptly".

4. Arab Countries' Reluctance To Repatriate Their Nationals

Many European and Central Asian countries have repatriated some of their orphaned children and some children with their mothers, such as France, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Norway, Finland, Ukraine, Switzerland, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. Russia is also among the countries that have repatriated many of its nationals, especially orphans. However, despite the majority of Arab nationals, especially in the "migrants" section in Al-Hol camp, no Arab country has

⁵¹ Repeated

taken steps to repatriate them, except for Iraq and Sudan, which recently repatriated two women and three children in March 2023.

While Algeria, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia have promised to repatriate their nationals through the international coalition or through a third party mediator to avoid direct dealing with the Autonomous Administration, they have not taken any steps so far.⁵²

The reluctance and hesitation of Arab countries in repatriating their citizens from the refugee camps and rehabilitation centers in North and East Syria can be attributed to two main reasons:

1. Lack of diplomatic relations between some Arab countries and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. The majority of Arab countries are not willing to engage in official dealings with the Autonomous Administration, considering it an unrecognized entity. This hampers the Administration's communication with Arab governments and their negotiations for repatriation.
2. Arab countries' fear of the return of these individuals and their potential impact on Arab societies. The prospect of these individuals returning to their countries raises concerns about potential radicalization and the possibility of them engaging in terrorist activities within their home nations.

5. The Issue of Extremist Women Keeping Their Children with them in the Camps

Amid the increasing extremism and crimes committed within Al-Hol camp, calls, especially from local voices, have emerged to remove children from this place. However, separating the child from their mother has sparked significant controversy and opposition, particularly from international organizations concerned with children's rights.

While experts in mental health and counter-radicalization agree that community and family support are crucial for successful reintegration, some warn that the sophisticated indoctrination techniques employed by ISIS women require equally advanced reintegration programs. Additionally, aside from the risks of ideological indoctrination by ISIS women, a considerable number of female former fighters, associated with factions like the "Al-Khansa Battalion," seek to force children into marriage within the camp to increase the progeny of ISIS.

In fact, the women in the "Migrants" section of the camp are among the most fervent advocates and promoters of ISIS, and they exhibit a high level of violence.. Many of them do not wish to return to their countries because some refuse to live in non-Muslim states, and others still dream of the return of the "ISIS Caliphate." Especially those who left their countries and willingly joined ISIS, marrying fighters and leaders within the organization.

This group of ISIS women is considered the most committed to the dream of the "Caliphate's" return. This was observed during our meeting with the Italian-Tunisian woman, Sonia Al-Khadiri, who had moved from Al-Hol camp to Roj camp in September 2023. When asked about her joining ISIS, she stated that she "was

studying tourism at a college in Italy and met a Tunisian person from ISIS through Facebook who was residing in Turkey. She then left her job in tourism, embraced religion, and wore the veil after getting to know him. She then traveled from Italy to Turkey without her family's knowledge and met him, married him, and moved to Syria, where she gave birth to two children before her husband was killed in one of the battles in northeastern Syria."⁵³

When asked about how she got involved with ISIS, being an educated woman with a background in tourism that necessitates interaction with different cultures, she replied that she "wants to live within the Islamic Caliphate and agreed with her husband to move and live under the rule of the 'Islamic State' in Syria." She also started praising the "Caliphate" and mentioned that "it applied Islamic law." This indicates that she still believes in ISIS ideology and desires to pass on these ideas to her children⁵⁴.

Regarding the reasons for some women refusing to leave the camp, Jo Becker, the Advocacy Director for Children's Rights at Human Rights Watch (HRW), says that there are several reasons for this. Some women "in some cases do not want to live in a non-Muslim country, or perhaps they fear being prosecuted or discriminated against. In other cases, the husband may be in prison, so the wife wants to wait for his release because she does not want to make such a decision without consulting him. In another scenario, it may not necessarily be in the child's best interest"⁵⁵

Arab women with dual nationality prefer to return to the Arab country they belong to rather than going back to the European country where they acquired citizenship. The reason for this is that European laws consider adult women who went with their

⁵³ Special meeting during a field tour of Roj Camp on April 20, 2023..

⁵⁴ Repeated

⁵⁵ Report from the German website DW titled "Al-Hol Camp: Isn't it Time to Remove the Children Even Without Their Mothers?" Last visit on June 20, 2023.

husbands and joined ISIS as equal in guilt, as they see women as independent entities with the freedom to make their own decisions, and they are thus prosecuted accordingly. However, in Arab and Islamic countries, women can evade prosecution by claiming that they were forced by their husbands to go to Syria and Iraq, as these countries consider men as the authority in the family, and this was mentioned in holy Quran's quote "men are in charge of women."⁵⁶ Consequently, men bear greater responsibility, and through this route, women's punishment can be mitigated or even avoided altogether.

These risks posed by women on the children prompted the camp administration to seek to rescue the children from the dangers caused by ISIS women to their own children and the rest of the children in the camp. This was achieved by transferring them to rehabilitation centers. Despite the aim of this separation being to protect the children from extremist ideology and sexual exploitation, a report by the United Nations Human Rights Council in January 2023 described the transfer of children from Al-Hol camp to rehabilitation centers as "kidnapping the children from their families and taking them to unknown places".

In response, the Office of Justice and Reform Affairs in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria refuted these accusations by issuing a statement stating, "We consider these allegations to be completely untrue, as all detention and rehabilitation centers have been and still are open to many organizations. We operate under transparent mechanisms and legal principles that protect the rights of both children and adults. In this context, we invite the Human

⁵⁶ This is what a French child of Tunisian origin stated at the Al-Furat Center in Orkesh, as he heard, according to his account, this conversation from his mother and some Moroccan women in Al-Hol camp.

Rights Council to visit these centers. Additionally, we emphasize that we do not have any undisclosed places to hold or imprison children."⁵⁷

On the other hand, human rights activists argue that separating these children from their mothers does not contradict Article 9 of the Geneva Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that "children should not be separated from their parents unless it is in their best interest and necessary for their well-being (e.g., if the parents harm the child or neglect their care).

Therefore, keeping these children with extremist mothers poses a danger to the child, and thus, according to the Geneva Convention, it is permissible to separate the children from their mothers if they are harming them with their extremist beliefs. Daniel Koehler, the director of the German Institute on Radicalization Studies in Stuttgart, says, "The extremist group has brainwashed the children and filled their minds with teachings that view Western values as evil. They have engaged them in combat training and, in some cases, forced them to carry weapons and commit acts of violence. This has provided an opportunity for the wives of "ISIS" leaders to play an alternative role to United Nations-affiliated teachers in the camps and exert the most dangerous influence on planting terrorist ideas in the minds of children, relying on the repetition of certain terms that incite violence and terrorism, associating them with the concept of jihad and branding anyone who is different in creed and even attire as an infidel⁵⁸".

In order to protect the child and keep him/her away from the dangers of extremist ideology and future recruitment, it was necessary to separate the child from his

⁵⁷Quoted from a statement by the Office of Justice and Reform in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria published on February 18, 2023.

⁵⁸ A report in the London Arab newspaper titled "Children from ISIS: Forgotten Victims Forming the New Generation of Future Terrorists" - Last accessed on June 20, 2023. (Link: <https://alarab.co.uk/>)

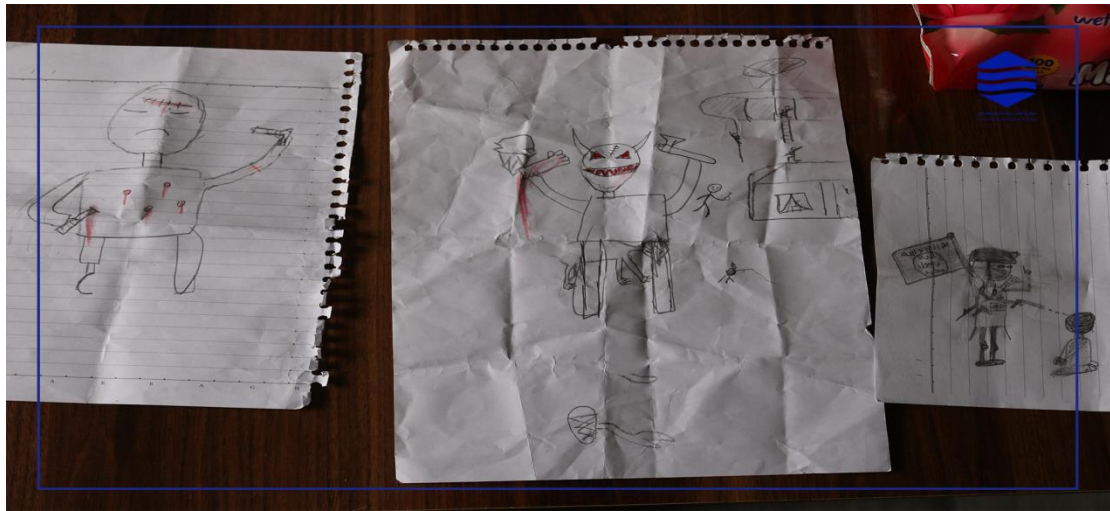
extremist mother. Therefore, the Autonomous Administration has taken on the responsibility of caring for this child and raising him/her. According to Article 9(d) of Law No. 7 of 2022, the Autonomous Administration guarantees the priority of preserving the child's life and providing him with a safe and healthy upbringing away from armed conflicts. It ensures that he/she is not engaged or recruited in military activities and guarantees respect for his rights in cases of emergencies, disasters, wars, and armed conflicts. The Autonomous Administration takes all measures to monitor and punish anyone who commits crimes against the child, including war crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity, forced recruitment, coercion, or terror, all of which constitute a direct attack on the child.

Some children, especially those aged 8 and above, exhibit signs of radicalization and criminal tendencies as a result of indoctrination by their mothers. The supervisors at Al-Hol Center have observed their behavior and expressions through their drawings. When the children first arrive at the center after being separated from their imprisoned mothers, they show hostility towards the supervisors, refuse to listen to songs or music, and consider music as "forbidden" (haram). They also refrain from watching television⁵⁹.

Furthermore, the drawing lessons reveal the most dangerous aspects within these children. Despite the supervisors' efforts to encourage them to draw, the children express their thoughts through drawings. Some draw fighters holding the ISIS flag in one hand and a gun in the other, aiming at a person kneeling before them. Others draw swords and beheaded heads, along with a tent and a helicopter above it, symbolizing the coalition aircraft. Next to the tent, there is a drawing of a monstrous figure with

⁵⁹ A statement to Al-Furat Center for Studies by an administrator at Al-Hol Center for Rehabilitation and Child Care on May 25, 2023.

large teeth and horns, blood dripping from its mouth, representing their view of the forces protecting Al-Hol camp.⁶⁰



Children from ISIS families aged 8 to 13 years old in Halat Child Care Center.

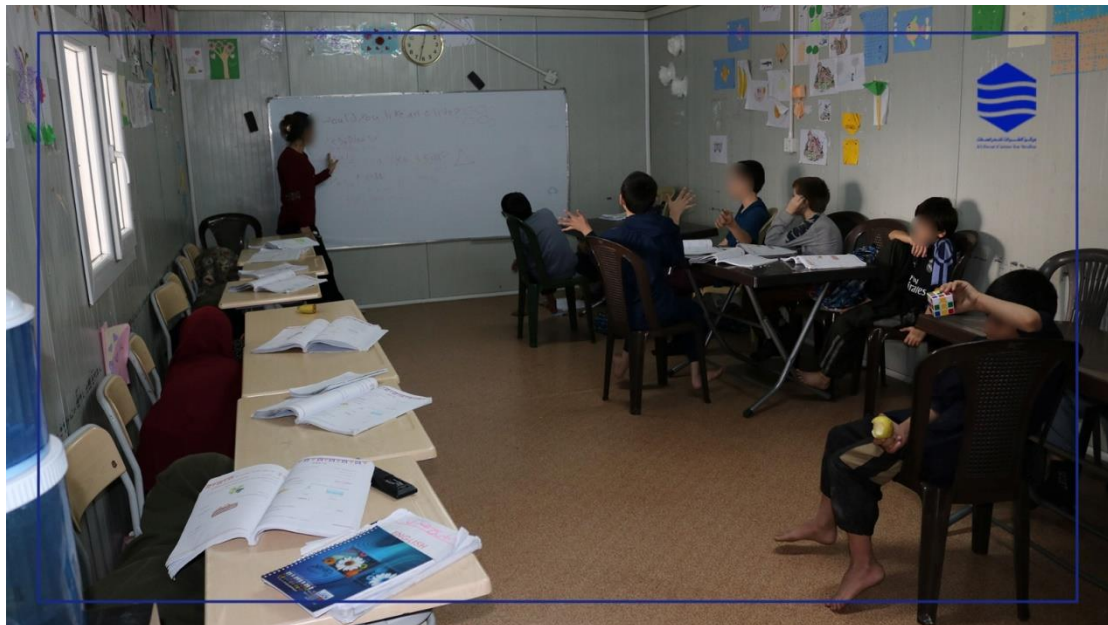
The administrators of Halat Center confirmed that after significant efforts in rehabilitation, they have managed to bring about some changes in the thinking and behavior of these children. The children now enjoy listening to music and watching cartoons on television with enthusiasm. However, it is noticed that when the children return to their mothers, who are detained in prisons in the evening, they exhibit changed behavior the next morning, repeating words like "music is forbidden" and "television and drawing are forbidden," according to the center's management. If anything, this indicates how much these children are influenced by their mothers and what they receive from them.

As observed by the administrators of Halat Center, children between the ages of 3 and 7 are easier to rehabilitate and interact well with the lessons and supervisors. However, for children aged 8 and above, rehabilitation becomes more challenging and requires greater efforts and sophisticated rehabilitation programs. Most importantly,

⁶⁰ Field tour conducted by Al-Furat Center for Studies to Al-Hol Center for Rehabilitation and Childcare on May 25, 2023.

they need to be separated from their extremist mothers until the completion of their rehabilitation, as staying with their mothers creates a conflict for the child between what they learn in the rehabilitation centers and the extremist ideas instilled by their mothers.

The supervisors emphasize that the impact of the mothers is more pronounced on the female children. During our visit as a team from Al-Furat Center for Studies to Halat Center and entering one of the classes housing children aged between 8 and 13 years, as we tried to take pictures of them in the class, the girls quickly hid under the desks, while some of the boys turned their faces away from us, and others said, "Do not photograph the girls." This is evidence of the teachings and ideas transmitted to them by their mothers during our meeting with them.⁶¹



Children from ISIS families at Halat Center, where the girls can be seen hiding under the desks when the picture was taken.

⁶¹ Repeated

Conclusion

In this research, we have examined the issue of children from ISIS families in refugee camps and rehabilitation and care centers, and the social, legal, and political risks and complexities that arise from this issue. We initially discussed the presence of these children with their mothers in refugee and internally displaced persons camps, and the potential for these camps to create an environment conducive to the growth of extremist ideology. We also explored the role of rehabilitation and care centers in mitigating the risks posed by children from ISIS families. Subsequently, we highlighted the key current and future risks and complexities associated with this issue. Based on this study, we have arrived at several conclusions and recommendations.

Results

- It is observed that the Al-Hol and Roj camps in North and East Syria have an exceptional nature that sets them apart from other refugee and internally displaced camps. These camps bring together Iraqi refugees and Syrian internally displaced people who originally fled from the crimes of ISIS and other armed groups, on one hand, and families of ISIS women and children who moved to the Al-Hol camp (and later to Roj) after the fall of ISIS's last stronghold in the town of Al-Baghouz, on the other hand. This unique nature can distance these camps from the civil and humanitarian character of typical refugee camps and bring them closer to the phenomenon of "militarization," as they harbor individuals who remain staunch believers and adherents to the ideology of the ISIS "caliphate," actively working to instill this extremist

ideology in the minds of their children, believing that it is "enduring and expanding."

- Due to its large size and the enormous number of residents in Al-Hol camp, as well as its location in a remote area with a presence of ISIS cells, and the difficulty of managing and securing it (especially the section for foreign women), this camp in particular creates a suitable environment for the growth of extremist ISIS ideology and the passing on of their strategy in creating a new army from their remnants (the Cubs of the Caliphate). In order to alleviate the pressure on Al-Hol camp, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has transferred a section of ISIS women and their children to Roj camp in the far north-east of Syria. While this recent camp is relatively better compared to Al-Hol, both in terms of administration and security control, there still remain weaknesses or vulnerabilities that ISIS and its women could exploit to propagate their extremist ideology and revive the "Caliphate." These vulnerabilities are mainly associated with the ease of interaction between ISIS women, their children, and Iraqi and Syrian families and their children (in schools, shared markets, etc.), as well as the ease of providing internet-connected mobile phones to ISIS women.
- In line with international agreements concerning the protection of children, especially the Geneva Convention, and in compliance with its own Child Rights Law No. 7 of 2022, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has transferred a number of children from ISIS families, aged 12 and above, from Al-Hol and Roj camps to specialized centers named Huri and Orkesh for their rehabilitation and care. However, these centers are facing the challenge of requiring specialized expertise in fields of psychological support,

mental health, education, and upbringing, as well as the need for collaboration from both local and international efforts (organizations and the international community).

It appears that transferring a child to rehabilitation and care centers after they have surpassed the age of 12 is considerably late. By this age, the extremist ideas and teachings of ISIS already deeply implanted in the child's mind by their extremist mother in the camp may be difficult to undo through rehabilitation and care programs. Furthermore, the establishment of Halat Center by the International Coalition to combat ISIS, under the supervision of the Women's Authority, does not fully achieve the intended goal of its foundation. This is because whatever the child learns in this center during the day can be erased by his/her extremist mother in the evening, during his/her meeting with her after attending the center.

- The remnant of ISIS is no less important and dangerous than the ISIS organization itself. Just as the world needed to form an international alliance to combat and eliminate ISIS militarily and geographically, the issue of children also requires the concerted efforts of various local and international parties to find comprehensive and sustainable solutions. This is not only to protect the region and its people but also for the people of the entire world, both now and in the future. The prolonged stay of ISIS children in camps and rehabilitation centers raises many risks and different problematic issues. It aids the ISIS organization in perpetuating its strategy of reviving its new army of children and increases the children's vulnerability to violations, such as sexual exploitation, ideological indoctrination, and the implantation of extremist concepts in their minds, making them susceptible to future recruitment. The

responsibility for these risks and problematic issues surrounding the children lies with their original countries and governments, especially Arab countries that avoid repatriating their citizens from ISIS families.

- The challenges facing countries in repatriating their citizens are numerous, and one of the most significant challenges is the lack of political recognition of the Autonomous Administration and the avoidance of direct dealings with it by certain countries, especially Arab states.

2. Recommendations

- Work to maintain the civilian and humanitarian nature of Al-Hol camp by removing ISIS families from among the Iraqi refugees and Syrian displaced persons. Dismantle the "Migrants" section by relocating them to a separate facility that adheres to international standards, which will aid in administrative and security control and mitigate the risks posed by ISIS women and children. Address the vulnerabilities in Roj camp, which ISIS exploits, by establishing a dedicated school for ISIS children and a separate market for ISIS families to prevent interaction between ISIS children and Iraqi and Syrian civilian refugee families.
- Transfer children from Al-Hol and Roj camps to rehabilitation and care centers from an early age of six to keep them away early from the influence of extremist mothers. This will facilitate their rehabilitation, care, and integration into normal society. Equip rehabilitation and care centers with specialized expertise in fields of psychological support, mental health, education, and training. Develop advanced rehabilitation programs through collaboration

between various local and international entities focusing on children's rights and protection.

- The relentless and continuous call to the international community and organizations to fulfill their responsibilities towards the issue of children from ISIS families and demand that their countries of origin take action to repatriate their citizens, including women and children from ISIS.
- Furthermore, political recognition of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria can bolster its position in advocating for the issue of children from ISIS families regionally and internationally, contributing to the repatriation of these children to their countries of origin.