



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UNDERSTANDING THE LIVES OF THE WOMEN, MEN AND CHILDREN OF AL-HOL CAMP



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ACRONYMS

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
DPO	Department of Peace Operations
DPPA	Department of Peacebuilding and Political Affairs
FSA	Free Syrian Army
IDPs	Internally Displaced People
IICI-Syria	Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic
IIM-Syria	International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism - Syria
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISIL/Da'esh	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
TCNs	Third-Country Nationals
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIDIR	United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research
UNITAD	United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL
UNOCT	United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UNSRCT	United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism (UN Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights)

Sama*, 40, the wife of a dead ISIS fighter who has since remarried, prepares a meal in her tent.

PHOTO: VICTOR J. BLUE



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This study examines gendered experiences of arbitrary detention in Al-Hol and interrogates core assumptions of women's alleged links or family ties to ISIL/Da'esh. The study undertakes this research using an anthropological approach to provide in-depth analysis of the socioeconomic composition of the camp, as well as the specific ways in which the lives of arbitrarily detained women and girls intersected—or not—with ISIL/Da'esh. In line with UN Women's normative and protection mandate, the report examines under-researched forms of gendered experiences in Al-Hol, including cases of extreme violence, insecurity, and criminality, alongside prior experiences during the conflict. The study examines exploitation, agency, and human rights, as well as humanitarian and protection risks in Al-Hol, particularly for women and girls. Analysis further addresses the ways in which these experiences have shaped their daily lives, futures, and prospects for leaving the camp.

Since 2016, Al-Hol has been a site of prolonged arbitrary detention for tens of thousands of Syrians, Iraqis, and third-country nationals (TCNs) who were detained following the fall of ISIL/Da'esh. At its peak in 2019, an estimated 73,000 people were arbitrarily detained, 91 per cent of whom were women and children. In July 2024, camp management estimated the population at 41,032 individuals. Of these, reportedly 44 per cent were Iraqi, 40 per cent were Syrian and 16 per cent were TCNs. The camp remains under the de facto control of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and its military wing, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Movement is highly restricted, and humanitarian operations are severely limited and under-resourced. Conditions in the camp are marked by systematic human rights

violations including enforced disappearance; arbitrary detention; incommunicado detention; lack of family contact; structural discrimination, inaccessibility to and inadequate life-saving and basic services; lack of access to water, food, healthcare and education; insecurity and violence. UN human rights treaty bodies and Special Procedures mechanisms have presented findings to this effect, as well as findings of torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.¹

Following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, the AANES and the new Syrian interim authorities signed an agreement in March 2025 to coordinate politically and integrate the SDF into the Syrian national army. While negotiations remain ongoing, implementation has so far focused on administrative matters, with little progress on the core issues of decentralization and military integration. The future of Al-Hol and other detention sites remains uncertain under this evolving political arrangement.

UN Women launched this study as part of its lead role in implementing Recommendation 4 of the All-of-UN Taskforce on Al-Hol, Roj, and related detention facilities. This tasked the UN to “find concrete ways to recognize and communicate that the women and girls in Al-Hol are not a homogenous group and that any meaningful and effective intervention requires identifying and addressing their varying circumstances and needs in a human rights-based and gender-responsive manner”. The mandate for UN Women to develop this comprehensive gender analysis of the situation in Al-Hol camp derives from implementation of the recommendation. The study generates evidence in support of a human rights-based, gender-responsive policy and programmatic approach to addressing the situation of indefinite, mass arbitrary detention.

¹ Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, [Technical Visit to the Northeast of the Syrian Arab Republic, End of Mission Statement](#), July 2023.

Method

UN Women partnered with the Zomia Center for this research. A mixed-methods approach was used. Quantitatively, Zomia surveyed 1,440 Syrian and Iraqi households (tents) using a stratified cluster sample with 95 per cent confidence. Qualitatively, 121 oral histories (102 women and 19 men) were conducted between 2018–2024², along with 11 in-depth interviews with Iraqi returnees, and 30 stakeholder

consultations. The study followed UN Women's do-no-harm standards, prioritizing confidentiality, voluntary participation, and trauma-informed interviewing. Oral histories consisted of open-ended, chronological storytelling with particular attention to family dynamics, gender-based violence, and return experiences.

Findings

Demographics

The majority of individuals detained in Al-Hol were children under 18, and adult women. An estimated 59 per cent of the combined Syrian and Iraqi populations were children under the age of 18, 29 per cent were adult women aged 18–59, and 11 per cent were adult men.

Most detained individuals came from poor peri-urban and rural areas in Syria and Iraq, characterized by strong conservative family norms and a history of political and economic marginalization. The majority (60 per cent) of Syrians detained in Al-Hol as of August 2024 said they were from Aleppo Governorate and an additional 23 per cent said they were from Deir Ezzour. Three-quarters (74 per cent) of the Iraqi population in Al-Hol reported they were from Anbar Governorate, with an additional 13 per cent saying they were from Salah al-Din and seven per cent from Ninewa.

The majority (83 per cent) of detainees arrived to Al-Hol in 2019, and of these, most arrived from the town of Baghouz. The remaining 17 per cent arrived in Al-Hol in 2017 or 2018, and many were clearly fleeing from ISIL/Da'esh-related violence. Families that arrived before the fall of Baghouz were more likely to include fathers and husbands. Half (45 per cent) of pre-Baghouz arrivals were female-headed households, compared to 79 per cent female-headed households that arrived after Baghouz.

The defining demographic feature of the households detained in Al-Hol is the relative dearth of adult men and high proportion of widows. Three-quarters (73 per cent) of households in the camp were headed by women. The average household size was 4.2, although male-headed households (4.8) were larger on average than female-headed households (3.9). The latter were generally comprised of the household head, her children, and extended female family members such as mothers, sisters, mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, aunts, and cousins.

Among households headed by women, 71 per cent had husbands who were either deceased, detained or missing. Of these, 41 per cent reported knowing definitively that their husbands were dead, while 30 per cent either knew their husbands were in prison or were unaware of their whereabouts.

One in six female heads-of-household and one in five male-heads-of-household reported having a disability, often resulting from conflict-related violence. Many women were disabled or became the sole caretakers for children and other relatives with disabilities during this time, as detainees sustained serious injuries.

² Zomia shared 38 oral histories conducted with Al-Hol detainees between 2018–2023 for other purposes. The remaining 83 were conducted in 2024 specifically for this research.

Few women had education beyond primary school due to financial constraints and conservative gender norms. Two-fifths (40 per cent) of heads-of-household in Al-Hol reported they could not read or write well, or at all. Women (13 per cent) were more likely than men (five per cent) to report being totally unable to read or write. Younger women who had begun schooling often had their education interrupted by the conflict.

Child marriages were reported as the norm among half of female Iraqi and Syrian oral history respondents. More than half of the married or widowed women who participated in oral histories had been married between the ages of 13 and 17, most often to cousins or more distant family members.

Challenging assumptions related to association with ISIL/Da'esh

Many women and men arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol have no links to ISIL/Da'esh, even through family ties. Approximately one quarter of oral history respondents described trajectories to Al-Hol that did not include any links to ISIL/Da'esh, or involvement of direct family members. In these families, male relatives had neither joined any non-state armed group nor actively fought against ISIL/Da'esh. In some cases, women were detained because they went to meet their families in the camp, or due to bureaucratic errors and misinformation.

Al-Hol also contains a contingency of men and women who have worked for the Asayish intelligence and/or the Kurdish Women's Protection Units (YPJ). These accounts present further nuance to women's participation and roles in non-state armed groups and challenge assumptions of homogeneity in ISIL/Da'esh-affiliation among Al-Hol detainees.

The majority of respondents in this study were women with "family ties" to ISIL/Da'esh through husbands or male relatives. None had taken up arms, and very few had any direct involvement or actual "links" with ISIL/Da'esh. A few women said they were attracted to ISIL/Da'esh for mainly religious reasons, but they were a minority.

In cases where respondents reported prior affiliation or family ties with ISIL/Da'esh, the findings of this study challenge the assumption that support for ISIL/Da'esh stemmed from pre-existing ideological motivations or

The practice of polygamy has heavily influenced the family structures of those arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol. One in five (21 per cent) of the total households in Al-Hol were polygamous. Likely due to the scarcity of adult men in the camp, a majority (57 per cent) of male heads-of-households were married to more than one woman.

Remarriage is common within the camp, but divorce remains difficult due to legal and logistical barriers, particularly when husbands are detained. Women sometimes saw marriage as a means of improving their circumstances, leaving the camp, or alleviating isolation. However, these marriages could sometimes result in abusive or exploitative situations.

radical beliefs. For Syrians, engaging with or joining ISIL/Da'esh was often a response to the former Assad regime's violent suppression of the 2011 uprising. Many described trajectories that started with support for the 2011 protest movement, progressed to involvement in armed factions in response to escalating violence, and ultimately led to joining ISIL/Da'esh when it took control. Similarly, most Iraqis had no prior political affiliations, although some had been involved in insurgent movements during the US-led Iraq War or had family members who were.

Women often directly linked their male relatives' decision to join ISIL/Da'esh to deepening poverty, which worsened during the prolonged war. Many families had lost their homes, jobs and businesses, leaving membership in armed groups as one of few available survival options. Because of the poor economic situation, the extent of women's support was also often influenced by financial incentives and social benefits.

Many men were forcibly conscripted by ISIL/Da'esh, and therefore many women detained in Al-Hol with alleged ISIL/Da'esh affiliation were considered "associated" solely due to their relationship with these conscripted men. Two male oral history respondents reported being forcibly conscripted, while eight women respondents mentioned their male relatives having been forcibly conscripted. Many others said their male relatives had joined "out of fear".

Although there were clear economic and social incentives for becoming involved with ISIL/Da'esh, many women and men also spoke of the ways in which ISIL/Da'esh ideology interacted with and transformed their religious beliefs during that time, contributing to their motivation to join or support. Respondents suggested that witnessing the scale of death and destruction caused by conflict fostered feelings of resentment and anger. In response, some went deeper into religious thinking as a means for seeking justice, a framework which ISIL/Da'esh readily provided.

While some women expressed a greater openness to ISIL/Da'esh control because of the social and financial benefits and sense of restored order, others were alarmed by the future they seemed to offer. A few respondents also described how affiliation with ISIL/Da'esh

brought social stigma, leading to the ostracization of their families by neighbors and communities.

A small subset of respondents, primarily men and a few women, had worked for ISIL/Da'esh in administrative or support roles. Of the nineteen men who were interviewed, most had done some form of paid work for ISIL/Da'esh at some point, although employment was often under violent or coercive circumstances. Only a small subset of Syrian women—nine out of the full oral history group—reported having paid employment with ISIL/Da'esh, while the vast majority of women, particularly Iraqi respondents, had no formal work and primarily engaged in unpaid agricultural or domestic labor both before and during ISIL/Da'esh control.

Marriage and gender-based violence under ISIL/Da'esh and women detainees' alleged "family ties"

Women and girls detained in Al-Hol have faced widespread and layered gender-based violence, including becoming linked with ISIL/Da'esh through forced and early marriages. Approximately half of the Iraqi and Syrian women interviewed for this study were married to men affiliated with ISIL/Da'esh either during or after marriage. Most had been married as children: 32 of the 53 women married between 2014 and 2019 were aged 13–17 when first married.

While some women actively sought marriage to ISIL/Da'esh members for ideological or financial reasons, most described their decisions as shaped by familial obligation and lack of alternatives. In the chaotic constellations of power and control, some respondents described how families calculated marrying girls and women to ISIL/Da'esh members as the best way to protect them, and by extension, the family.

Six oral history participants said they had been forced into marriages to ISIL/Da'esh members, or to men who eventually joined ISIL/Da'esh. Two women also said a close female relative had been forcibly married during the period of ISIL/Da'esh control. As expressed by the women respondents, these cases involved clear experiences of coercion, threat, and denial of agency—and appear to meet the legal definition of forced marriage.

A significant number of women in Al-Hol have been trafficked for marriage, confined in ISIL/Da'esh "guesthouses" after being widowed, and subjected to repeated forced marriages. Several women who described situations of trafficking also described witnessing airstrikes by Coalition forces against these "guesthouses". The report also documents severe cases of sexual violence, enslavement, and rape.

In addition to conflict-related violence, many women in Al-Hol endured extreme violence at the hands of their partners and/or family members before and during their detention. This family violence—perpetrated by husbands, fathers, brothers, mothers, and in-laws — sometimes involved dismemberment, disfigurement, attempted murder, and child abuse. In some cases, such violence pushed women towards relationships with ISIL/Da'esh members. When family political allegiances were divided, women were often forced to choose between their husbands and their families. Fearing the loss of their children, they almost invariably chose their husbands.

There is a contingent of women in Al-Hol who ended up indefinitely detained despite having resisted ISIL/Da'esh in numerous ways. Women often described their engagement with ISIL/Da'esh as painful personal journeys, beginning with support, then going

through a process of disillusionment. Sometimes this disillusionment eventually turned to hatred and resistance. In some cases, women resisted from within the family, and occasionally, they resisted in

Trajectories of Third-Country Nationals

Third-country nationals living in a separate Annex of the camp came from more socioeconomically diverse backgrounds than their Iraqi and Syrian counterparts.

Some originate from broken family situations that seemed to have influenced their involvement with ISIL/Da'esh. Compared to Syrians and Iraqis, more TCN women held jobs with ISIL/Da'esh, often bringing valuable skills due to their higher levels of education.

For both converts and those from Muslim backgrounds, the most common introduction to ISIL/Da'esh came through friends, colleagues, teachers, or family members who gradually shared its teachings. While some actively

public. Some wives and mothers did everything they could to stop their husbands and sons from fighting, often invoking their husbands' responsibilities to their children.

sought to travel for the purpose of joining ISIL/Da'esh, others seemed unaware of their destination or what was happening.

Isolated from the broader camp population, almost all economic activities in the Annex were illicit, creating a dependency on external, and sometimes ISIL/Da'esh-linked, financial networks. Like others in the camp, most TCN women were desperate to leave and deeply concerned about their children's futures, especially given the SDF's policy of separating boys from their mothers once they reach puberty.

Life in Al-Hol

Violence and abuse

Respondents described living in fear of violence given the reported presence of ISIL/Da'esh, other "extremists" and Asayish intelligence operations. Particularly between 2019 and 2022, networks of ISIL/Da'esh supporters with access to outside financial networks conducted campaigns of murder, extortion, and intimidation within the camp. Many detainees, both men and women, had family members murdered, were victims of attempted murder, or witnessed murders, often on allegations of working with intelligence services or perceived moral infractions. Most detainees live in a state of constant fear, aware that their every action may be scrutinized by competing factions—some of which are also actively seeking to recruit them. Women, in particular, have been targeted for their work with NGOs or perceived non-compliance with ISIL/Da'esh codes.

Women described being terrorized by the authorities' response to the proliferation of violence, which often involved gender-based abuse, humiliation and theft of personal items. Several women also reported being arrested or having a family member arrested and

subsequently subjected to torture and other forms of ill-treatment in custody.

Economy and livelihoods

The economy within Al-Hol camp is highly controlled, often exploitative and dominated by external actors, leaving detainees in deep poverty and heavily dependent on humanitarian organizations. Almost three-quarters of female-headed households were almost entirely dependent on assistance. Some women resorted to selling parts of their food rations in the market to survive, while others tried to work meager jobs in the market, only to quit after experiencing sexual harassment by shop owners. Very few households with any income, male or female-headed, earned more than US\$200 per month.

Most detainees expressed no support for ISIL/Da'esh, yet acknowledged that poverty, insecurity, and mistreatment by authorities had led some to collaborate with ISIL/Da'esh cells in the camp. The extreme poverty faced by men and women detainees has created an economy of desperation, allowing ISIL/Da'esh members with access to outside financial networks to take advantage of them.

Initially, women benefited from employment opportunities with NGOs, but this ended when hiring detainees was banned. Many women reported that their work with NGOs not only offered them an income but also a sense of purpose and mental wellbeing. However, they were forced to leave their jobs when the camp authorities issued a policy barring camp detainees from having NGO jobs out of concern over the financing of terrorism.

Employment opportunities are highly gendered, with women mostly working in care, cleaning, or teaching roles, often requiring permission from male relatives, even those detained elsewhere. Many women who sought work faced threats, harassment, or violence—including tent burnings and death threats—forcing some to quit. Market work was largely male-dominated. Some women ran small home-based projects like sewing or informal health services. Third-country nationals were especially constrained, relying mainly on remittances from ISIL/Da'esh networks or family abroad, as economic activity in the Annex was tightly controlled and considered illicit.

Sexual and gender-based violence

Women are routinely subjected to sexual harassment and exploitation, particularly in relation to job opportunities, humanitarian assistance and repatriation processes. Perpetrators often include camp authorities, market vendors, and even NGO workers. Several women described their personal experiences being harassed by the Asayish, by service providers such as water tankers and food distributors, and by men who came to work in the market who demanded “relationships” in exchange for services.

Many women were not comfortable reporting harassment and abuse to the authorities. The few cases that had been reported to the authorities were investigated and resulted in the arrest of the perpetrators, showing that accountability is possible. However, most women did not report cases of harassment, especially when the harasser was associated with the detaining authorities.

Incidents of rape are difficult to quantify because of stigma and fear of reporting to the authorities,

but several particularly brutal cases, including some involving children, have come to light. Accounts suggest rape, or threat of rape, is sometimes used as a means of exacting revenge for personal disputes or as punishment for alleged violations of moral code.

In addition to structural gender-based violence, women respondents reported intimate-partner and family violence were also somewhat common in Al-Hol. Several women who got married in the camp described how they had little recourse when their husbands became controlling and abusive. While men easily divorced their wives, it was often difficult or impossible for women to divorce their husbands in situations of abuse.

Social life and wellbeing

Family and household formation in Al-Hol show the strength of social bonds, both within the camp and with those outside. Women generally lived with their immediate and extended families, often in clusters of tents. Women who arrived in Al-Hol alone typically found families to live with seeking companionship and protection. Because communication systems in the camp were unreliable and sporadic, many women had little communication with family outside.

Despite their physical absence, male relatives outside the camp—particularly those in detention—continue to exert significant control over women's lives in Al-Hol, influencing decisions around marriage, work, mobility, and access to resources. This influence is particularly important to consider when it comes to a woman's marital status, as this has a profound impact on her life. Marital status can determine whether she can leave the camp, remarry or divorce, and whether she can obtain documentation for her children.

Being detained has taken a great toll on men and women's mental health. Almost everyone in Al-Hol ended up there because of immensely traumatic events, and for many, violence that occurred after their arrival to the camp only further traumatized them.

Beyond Al-Hol

Most detainees want to leave Al-Hol at the soonest opportunity: seventy-three per cent rated their likelihood of return to their home areas as high. However, Syrians, in particular, cite lack of camp authority approval (59 per cent) and fear of violence or detention in their home areas as reasons they cannot leave. Some resort to smuggling or see marriage as a means of escape.

The ability to leave the camp has depended on multiple factors such as nationality, place of origin, financial means, the extent of current or past alleged links or family ties with ISIL/Da'esh, and any actual or perceived crimes committed during detention. Since 2019, more than 30,000 individuals have left the camp, although precise data on their nationality, gender and age breakdown remains unavailable. Those with the financial means to flee in the first place, or to be smuggled, have largely done so, meaning that those remaining are generally those without the means or connections to leave.

Iraqi detainees rated their return prospects more positively than Syrians, likely due to Iraq's more stable security situation and the implementation of the Al-Amal Centre (previously known as Jedda 1) repatriation programme. Around two-thirds of survey respondents said they faced at least one barrier to return. More Syrians (73 per cent) said they faced barriers compared with Iraqis (55 per cent). The vast majority (92%) of Iraqis said they were highly likely to return.

Prior to the fall of Assad, the lack of clear repatriation procedures, limited coordination with Damascus and relevant armed groups, and fears of insecurity and potential arrest upon returning were key reasons Syrian male and female-headed households were unable or unwilling to return. As of late 2024, the majority of Syrian detainees came from areas previously controlled by the Assad regime (55 per cent), with others from SDF-held territories (19 per cent) and Turkish-controlled zones like Euphrates Shield (19 per cent). Households from these latter areas were the least likely to report plans to return, largely due to fear of reprisal, arbitrary detention, or lack of clarity about how to navigate the return process.

Approximately one in ten women report facing family or community rejection, which often means they feel they have no safe or viable place to return to. This estimate is further supported by the rate of Iraqi female-headed households who repatriated through the Al-Amal Centre but struggled to secure a sponsor facilitating the return to their home areas. A small number of women said they preferred to stay in Al-Hol due to economic uncertainty or to await imprisoned relatives.

While most Iraqis expressed optimism about returning via the Al-Amal Centre programme, approximately one in ten (eight per cent) Iraqi households rated their likelihood to return as low. The majority of those hesitant to return were female-headed households from Anbar, who cited ongoing security concerns in their areas of origin.

Perceived risk of family or community rejection was relatively low. However, given the central role of family networks in women's successful reintegration, the risk was higher for women without strong family networks. This was especially true for those with few or no male relatives to support them, and in cases where family members were suspected of having caused harm. In some cases, families disowned these women out of fear, shame, or rejection of their choices, leaving them without support, limited options for return, or nowhere to go if released from the camp.

Most TCN women expressed a strong desire to return to their countries of origin, with half reporting that they had tried to register for repatriation on multiple occasions. However, progress has been slow, and each country has adopted a different – and in many cases inconsistent or absent – approach to repatriating its nationals.

Few men and women expressed that ISIL/Da'esh was central to their identities or life journeys. While a few detainees still support ISIL/Da'esh, the majority expressed disillusionment, regret, and concern for their children's futures. They were deeply affected by their experiences and expressed a strong desire to leave Al-Hol, reunite with their families, educate their children, find employment, and build peaceful lives.

Recommendations

In line with the above findings and documentation provided by the study of the diverse experiences and profiles of men, women, girls and boys arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol, UN Women has prepared the below recommendations for the United Nations, including

through the Al-Hol Taskforce and its members, and the United Nations Country Teams (UNCTs) in Iraq and Syria. The recommendations are focused on advocacy, policy, and programmatic initiatives.

Recommendations for the Al-Hol Task Force and UNCT on an individual status determination mechanism

The current political transition in Syria offers an important opportunity to advance human rights-compliant returns and repatriation from Al-Hol and other sites of arbitrary detention. The UN should, in line with relevant mandates and through all-of-UN approaches, support the implementation of a transparent, human rights-compliant, time-bound status determination mechanism for arbitrarily detained individuals to review individual grounds of detention.

- Any mechanism must adhere to strict human rights standards, particularly related to due process and children's rights norms. It must also integrate gender-responsive and conflict-sensitive approaches, adhere to the principles of non-refoulement and other international legal norms, and be coordinated through an inter-agency framework in consultation with national and international legal experts.
- Specific screening, processing, and reintegration mechanisms must be in place for individuals potentially responsible for gross violations of human rights law and serious violations of international humanitarian law, and/or terrorist offences, drawing from best practices in

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR), rehabilitation, international criminal law, and criminal justice approaches to counter-terrorism.

- Clearance decisions must be evidence-based; adhere to due process, the principles of do-no-harm and conflict sensitivity; and avoid coercive practices like ideological “tests of conscience” or forced denunciation of relatives (such as ikhbar/tabriya³ in Iraq).
- UN agencies should advocate for the urgent release of all individuals arbitrarily detained, including men, women and children. The UN should pay particular attention to the urgent release of children and families detained solely due to male family ties or administrative errors. In line with relevant mandates, the UN should provide logistical support for return or relocation.
- All actions must uphold human rights due diligence and non-refoulement principles, particularly for non-Syrians still arbitrarily detained.
- The UN should unequivocally call for the inclusion and engagement of independent human rights observers and monitors in all stages of the process, in line with recommendations made by the UN Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights.

3 European Union Agency for Asylum, [Iraq: Arab tribes and customary law](#) (April 6, 2023), Section on “disavowal”—defines tabriya (tribal disavowal) and ikhbar (formal court notification), and explains how both facilitate return of families with alleged ISIL/Da’esh affiliation under Iraqi law

Recommendations for the Al-Hol Task Force and UNCT in Syria for facilitating returns in Syria

The recent political transition may have reduced fear of reprisal and created new opportunities to accelerate the release and return of Syrians from Al-Hol. Despite such opportunities, relevant agencies continue to face critical funding and operational gaps necessary to utilize them.

Task Force members and relevant agencies should scale up their funding and support for coordinated, voluntary, and rights-based returns, including logistical and financial assistance and access to psychosocial and community support consistent with the principles of non-refoulement.

Recommendations for the Al-Hol Task Force and UNCT in Iraq on repatriation efforts

Iraq has led repatriation efforts from Al-Hol, having facilitated over 10,000 returns through the Al-Amal Centre programme. However, the current pace has slowed and must be strengthened in order to resolve continued arbitrary detention.

- Increased funding and technical support are needed to expand Iraq's capacity and accelerate repatriations.
- Fear of arrest, particularly for men, remains the primary barrier to return. To address this, funding should integrate detailed analysis of areas where due process and human rights safeguards must be strengthened and supported, including by relevant UN actors, and be contingent on commitments and

evidenced compliance of Iraq with human rights-based standards.

- Dedicated programming is needed to address the distinct rights issues and needs of returning Iraqi women and girls, particularly women-headed households, who face stigmatization, lack of civil documentation, economic vulnerability, and restricted access to essential services. Lessons learned from this context must inform gender-responsive programming approaches for other repatriation and resettlement schemes.
- Greater clarity and transparency are needed around departure procedures from Al-Amal, which is currently viewed by many as a closed detention facility.

Recommendations for the UNCT and government counterparts in both Iraq and Syria on the meaningful inclusion of women in transitional justice and reintegration programmes

To prevent cycles of violence and radicalization, the Task Force should promote inclusive, accountable governance and invest in gender-sensitive reintegration strategies in Iraq and Syria—especially in areas of return. These strategies must engage returnees, particularly women and youth, in peacebuilding and local governance, while strengthening public services and social cohesion.

- Women formerly detained in Al-Hol should be meaningfully included in both national and local reconciliation processes, including platforms like UN Women's flagship Women's Advisory Board in Syria.
- Support for family reunification and tracing of missing persons is essential, especially for women affected by the loss or separation of male relatives. These efforts should coordinate with bodies like

the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic, and the new National Commission on Missing Persons, and uphold the right to family unity.

- Legal assistance should be scaled up to address barriers in documentation, housing, land and property rights, and civil status, especially for women and children.
- Gender-sensitive reintegration efforts should include:
 - Cash grants and livelihoods support for women
 - Remedial education for children
 - Literacy and psychosocial services for women
 - Support for women facing stigma or lacking family support, including transitional shelters and targeted outreach to host communities.

Recommendations for international diplomatic and humanitarian missions with advocacy platforms

Task Force members should continue using international fora to maintain diplomatic pressure on States to fulfill their obligations to repatriate and resettle nationals from Al-Hol and improve conditions in line with human rights standards.

- Advocacy should counter the widespread stigmatization of individuals, including women,

who face unevidenced and broad stigmatization for alleged “links” to ISIL/Da’esh.

- Women formerly detained in Al-Hol must be meaningfully included in international justice and reconciliation processes. Their experiences—including resistance to ISIL/Da’esh—offer critical insight for prevention programming and reintegration strategies.

Recommendations for the UNCT in Syria, interim authorities and AANES for ensuring conditions in Al-Hol meet international humanitarian and human rights standards

Task Force members should advocate for strengthened oversight of human rights violations in Al-Hol, including through the establishment of an independent complaints and monitoring mechanism, and through ensuring detainees’ access to due process and legal safeguards. Independent human rights observers must be granted meaningful access to all places of detention in line with prior recommendations of UN Special Procedures.

- Survivors of human rights violations—including gender-based violations, such as forced marriage, sexual violence, and trafficking—should be recognized as victims and prioritized for trauma-informed care, protection, and safe release pathways. Agencies should establish robust accountability systems, confidential reporting

channels, and community-based GBV response mechanisms.

- Adequate funding is urgently needed to ensure the provision of essential services—particularly health, WASH, child protection, education, and livelihoods—to address preventable deaths and support children’s rights.
- NGO work restrictions should be revised to allow paid employment for women, to support mental health and reduce vulnerability to exploitation.
- Scaled-up, trauma-informed mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services should begin in the camp and extend into return areas, including peer support groups and safe spaces to promote healing, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

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