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

UN WOMEN

FOR ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

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Peace and Security Section
UN Women
New York, 2025

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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
IIIM-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
RCO	Resident Coordinator Office
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)

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

PHOTO: VICTOR J. BLUE

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 2018–2024[2], 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.

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.

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 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 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.

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 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/Dae'sh 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). In addition to Syrian detainees from the 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/tabriya'a[3] 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.

A detained woman enters into her living space.

PHOTO: VICTOR J. BLUE

2 INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

As of December 2024, the wars in Iraq and Syria that led to the rise of the Islamic State (ISIL/Da'esh)[4] have left tens of thousands of men, women, and children indefinitely and arbitrarily detained in "camps" in northeast Syria. Al-Hol is the largest such detention camp and hosts 44,000 individuals, 94 per cent of whom are women and children under the age of 18.[5] While most individuals detained are Iraqi and Syrian, 6,400 came from approximately 60 countries.[6] Detained individuals live in extremely poor conditions, where access to basic and essential services are lacking or non-existent, and exploitation and grave violence are common. Detention in Al-Hol carries significant stigma because of the presumptions of alleged links or family ties to ISIL/Da'esh. The reality, however, is far more complicated.

Despite the severity of the conditions, the United Nations, including agencies and humanitarian organizations, have faced significant political and operational barriers in servicing Al-Hol, especially since it was heavily securitized in 2019.[7] In efforts to seek new pathways for UN engagement in Al-Hol, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism (UNSRCT) with the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED), Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), led an internal UN brainstorming exercise entitled *Identifying Innovative All-of-U.N. Approaches to Address the Situation in Al-Hol,* which brought together analysis and ten recommendations endorsed by 19 United Nations entities, including UN Women.[8] The ten recommendations were subsequently reviewed and endorsed by the UN Executive Committee in 2023, and adapted into a workplan for the UN Taskforce on Al-Hol, Roj and places of detention in the northeast of the Syrian Arab Republic. UN Women leads the implementation of task two under recommendation four of this workplan (see below): to develop and circulate a comprehensive gender analysis of the situation for individuals in Al-Hol camp and its connection with other places of detention in the northeast of Syria.

Recommendation 4: 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.

Task 2: Develop a comprehensive gender analysis of the situation in Al-Hol camp.

4 The study relies upon the standard UN terminology of ISIL/Da'esh. This terminology was adopted in the 7th review of the Global Counter-terrorism Strategy at the request of Member States, in part as an effort to denounce the use by Da'esh of "Islamic". Direct quotes from respondents were left as "Da'esh" when they were referred to as such, and "Islamic State" when respondents referred to the group using its preferred, formal title "Ad-dawla al-islamiyya".

5 S/2024/583, para. 10, 31 July 2024.

6 S/2024/583, para. 10, 31 July 2024.

7 Human Rights Watch, Syria: Dire Conditions for ISIS Suspects' Families, 23 July 2019.

8 This included the Office of Legal Affairs (OLA), Department of Peace Operations (DPO), the Department of Peacebuilding and Political Affairs (DPPA), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD), the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (IICI-Syria), the International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism - Syria (IIIM-Syria), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Office of Legal Affairs, the Resident Coordinator / Humanitarian Coordinators Office-Syria (RC/HC-Syria), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the four tasked entities.

In November 2023, UN Women began preparations for this study with the objective of interrogating the core assumptions of women's alleged links or family ties to ISIL/Da'esh. It used 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.

Background and history of Al-Hol

Al-Hol camp in northeast Syria was originally established by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1991 under emergency conditions to receive Iraqis displaced from conflict.[9] The camp stopped receiving humanitarian services in 2013 when Iraqis either returned or found other durable solutions. In April 2016, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) reopened Al-Hol camp to host Iraqis and internally displaced people fleeing ISIL/Da'esh.[10] It was expanded in 2019 when Syrians, Iraqis and third-country nationals (TCNs) were evacuated to Al-Hol after the fall of Baghouz, the last stronghold of ISIL/Da'esh.[11] At its height in 2019, it housed approximately 73,000 individuals, with an estimated 91 per cent of them being women and children.[12] With support from the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS ("Global Coalition"), the AANES imposed strict movement restrictions and did not permit detained individuals to leave unless escorted for emergencies, such as surgeries – a policy which continues to this day.[13] The population has recently decreased as individuals have been repatriated, returned to third countries, or escaped through smuggling or trafficking channels. At the time of writing, the estimated population was approximately 41,000 individuals, including approximately 25,000 children (61 per cent) and 13,000 women (32 per cent).[14]

As noted above, the camp has been under the administration of the AANES, the *de facto* authority since 2016. The Global Coalition "devolved" authority over the camp to the AANES and its military wing, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and has continued to engage in security operations in Al-Hol and other areas in northeast Syria.[15] The AANES oversees Al-Hol and several other "facilities," including camps and prisons housing thousands of individuals with alleged links or family ties to ISIL/Da'esh.[16] Following the fall of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024[17], on 10 March 2025 the SDF reached an agreement with the Syrian interim authorities, which focuses on a large list of issues, including integrating the SDF into the new Syrian army and state institutions.[18] At the time of writing, discussions on the implementation of this agreement

9 UNHCR, 13 years in Syria. See also, A/HRC/49/45, paras. 31-32.

10 Médecins Sans Frontières, Between two fires: Danger and desperation in Al-Hol, 2022, p. 9.

11 A/HRC/42/51, para. 13.

12 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Syria: Humanitarian response in Al-Hol camp", Situation Report No 4., May 2019.

13 Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Dire Conditions for ISIS Suspects' Families", 23 July 2019.

14 Figures provided to UN Women by Blumont on 9 July 2024. These figures closely align with the cited composition of the population provided by the UNSRCT at the time of her visit, as well as the Report of the Secretary General of 2024.

15 A full list of the member states in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS can be found on the US State Department's website. Further details on engagement and forms of support to partners in Syria are available from the US Department of Defense. For a detailed analysis of the intersection of security activities and recommendations to the Global Coalition related to Al-Hol, see Amnesty International, "Aftermath: Injustice, torture, and death in detention in north-east Syria", 17 April 2024.

16 UN Women notes that it is beyond the scope of this paper to identify and/or provide observations on the status or function of the additional sites managed by the *de facto* authorities.

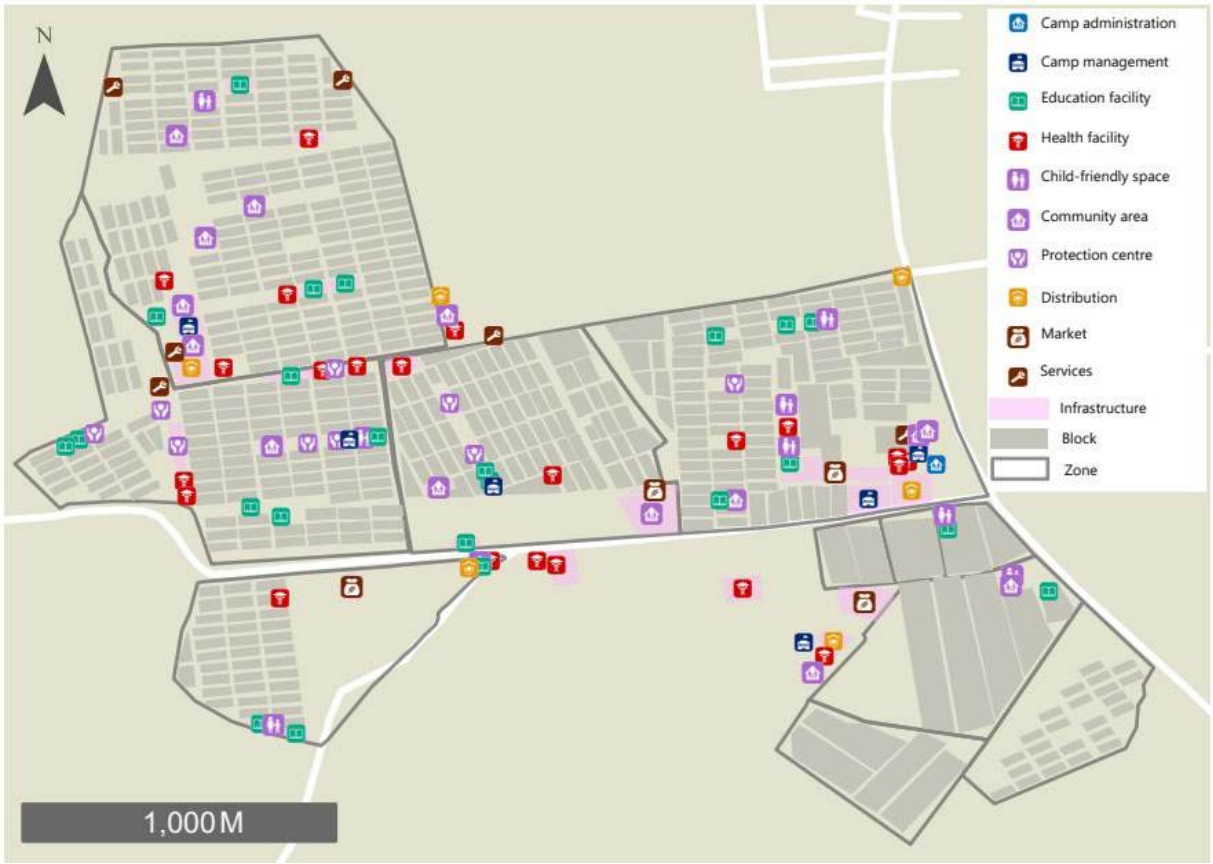
17 United Nations, Statement of the United Nations Secretary-General on Syria, 8 December 2024.

18 Reuters, "Syria's interim president signs deal with Kurdish-led SDF to merge forces", 16 April 2025 (updated).

were ongoing, although they are currently focused mostly on the "softer" issues, with little progress made on the key issues of decentralization and state/military reintegration. Repatriations to Iraq were also ongoing[19] and the AANES had announced plans to facilitate the return of Syrian citizens from Al-Hol to their areas of origin.[20] Broader plans for Al-Hol and other sites of arbitrary detention in northeast Syria had not yet been specified under the new agreement.[21]

Geographically, Al-Hol spans approximately three square kilometers and is divided into nine sections. Eight of these sections host Iraqis and Syrians and one section, known as the "Annex", houses TCNs. In the main camp, Syrians and Iraqis reportedly live in different sections, although there is no official demarcation between them. At time of writing, camp administration was under the Commission of Social Affairs and Labor of the AANES. While SDF intelligence, aided by the Global Coalition, primarily directs the camp administration, a US-based registered non-profit organization Blumont[22] is also involved in day-to-day camp coordination and administration.[23]

FIGURE X
Map of Al-Hol (REACH Initiative, 2021)



19 North Press Agency, "Hundreds of Iraqis leave Syria's al-Hol in ongoing repatriation efforts",12 March 2025. In March, 2024, the UN Secretary-General acknowledged Iraq's repatriation of 3,523 children from Al-Hol. See e.g., S/2024/247.

20 Medya News, "AANES announces voluntary return scheme for Syrian Al-Hol residents", 23 January 2025.

21 United Nations independent investigative mechanisms, human rights treaty body mechanisms, and special procedures mandate holders have presented findings of the situation of arbitrary detention in Al-Hol and other sites in northeast Syria. See footnotes 23-31.

22 Details of Blumont's engagement in northeast Syria can be found on their website. Its scope of work is stated to include receiving and registering new arrivals, communication, coordinating assistance and services delivered by other humanitarian organizations working in the camp; and liaising with the Camp Administration for all camp operations.

23 It is beyond the scope of this study to address the judicial or procedural limitations of non-state armed groups to detain during non-international armed conflicts. For further details on this topic, see Rodenhäuser, Tilman, "Internment by non-state armed groups: legal and practical limits", International Committee of the Red Cross, 15 October 2024.

At the time of writing, the humanitarian response in northeast Syria was primarily coordinated by the Northeast Syria NGO Forum. As part of formalized arrangements under the UN "Strategic Response Plan" coordination framework[24], this forum was established in July 2016 as the primary coordination body for NGOs in northeast Syria. The Forum was responsible for several core functions, including operational coordination, representation with external stakeholders, engagement with authorities, information management, and policy and advocacy. The UN, including UNHCR, UNICEF, and the World Food Programme (WFP) were active in Al-Hol, although operating exclusively through implementing partners. At time of writing, active NGOs in the camp included Save the Children, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and Un Ponte Per. [25]

The continued mass, arbitrary and indefinite detention of individuals continues to present a grave human rights and humanitarian concern. Over the last decade, the international human rights system has issued a wide range of findings on both systemic and individual human rights violations to the UN General Assembly, the UN Human Rights Council, and Member States through individual case reports and communications. The first international human rights mandate to visit Al-Hol for the purpose of examining the human rights and legal situation was the UNSRCT. This technical visit, which concluded in July 2023, presented findings of mass arbitrary detention, incommunicado detention,[26] enforced disappearances, torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, structural and systematic discrimination on the basis of age and nationality, as well as what was described as the "deprivation of the fundamental capacity to live a dignified life" reflected by a lack of access to water, food, healthcare and education. Additional rights concerns included undue restrictions on freedom of movement within the camp and prevention of family contact.[27]

Several human rights treaty bodies have also issued views on cases and matters relating to the situation in Al-Hol with notable findings on the conditions of the camp, the status of arbitrary detention of children, and the obligation of States with nationals within the camps to take affirmative steps towards repatriation, return, and reintegration. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 2022 for example, found that the conditions of arbitrary detention for six children[28] violated the children's right to life (article 6(1)) and constituted torture or other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment (article 37(a)) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.[29] The Committee found the State of nationality, Finland in this case, obliged to "take urgent positive measures to repatriate child victims"; "support reintegration and resettlement of each child" and "take additional measures, in the meantime, to mitigate the risks to the lives, survival and development of the child victims while they remain."[30] Similar findings have been made by the CRC in the case of 49 French children.[31] The Committee Against Torture, in 2023, also presented findings that France's "failure to take further measures reasonably in its powers to repatriate" the relatives of the complainants would constitute a violation by the State's obligations under article 2(1)

24 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Strategic Response Plan 2015, December 2014.

25 These organizations were all either mentioned by key informants or respondents or publicly state their presence in the camp on their websites.

26 This finding is further supported by findings of the IICI-Syria. In mid-2024, the IICI-Syria reported reasonable grounds "to believe that SDF continues to arbitrarily deprive individuals of their liberty, including some who are detained incommunicado and others in a manner tantamount to enforced disappearance." A/HRC/57/86, para. 122. Earlier in 2024, the IICI-Syria found that the "form, severity, duration and intensity of the physical and mental suffering inflicted may amount to the war crime of committing outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment." A/HRC/55/64, para. 110.

27 UNSRCT, Technical Visit to the Northeast of the Syrian Arab Republic, End of Mission Statement, July 2023.

28 At the time of the case, there were 33 additional Finnish children in Al-Hol without access to legal aid or representation.

29 CRC/C/91/D/100/2019.

30 Ibid.

31 See CRC/C/89/D/77/2019, CRC/C/89/D/79/2019, CRC/C/89/D/109/2019.

of the Convention.[32] The IICI-Syria has issued findings that the conditions in the camp suggest violations of basic human rights, including the right to health, the right to food, alongside reasonable grounds to believe that the conditions in Al-Hol "may amount to cruel or inhumane treatment, which is a war crime", including through the arbitrary deprivation of liberty of children whose detention must only be a measure of last resort, and that the security forces treatment of "detainees" overall may also amount to war crimes.[33]

Theoretical Framework

Al-Hol is an extraordinarily complex place, where humanitarian action, human rights protection, justice and accountability, peace and security, and counterterrorism responses converge. Increasingly extensive research has been conducted in the camp, and the humanitarian, human rights, and legal situations for individuals arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol are now well documented by governments, civil society, the UN and other stakeholders.[34]

This study adopts a lens aligned with UN Women's normative leadership on Women, Peace, and Security and under Recommendation Four of the Al-Hol Task Force, which emphasized the need to understand heterogeneity in the camp's population. The study provides a broader base of evidence on the gendered protection risks facing women and men in the camp to underscore the dire human rights situation and need for protection interventions. The study aims to develop a more complete and nuanced account of the experiences of women and girls leading up to their arbitrary detention in Al-Hol, and to move the UN towards a more evidence-based approach to addressing the current situation where individuals have been arbitrarily detained for their "alleged links or family ties"[35] with ISIL/Da'esh. Under international law, all individuals are entitled to a case-by-case review of the grounds for deprivation of liberty. Thus, UN Women presents this report as the first gender-disaggregated analysis of the camp's population, which is integral to ensuring that the UN can undertake meaningful efforts to support a human rights-based response to the conditions in northeast Syria. The study builds a foundation for evidenced-based approaches that respond to individual circumstances.

Defining "heterogeneity"

The study relies upon an ethnographic approach to capture the social, cultural and moral complexity of the lives of the women and men who are arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol and focuses almost entirely on Syrian and Iraqi women and girls. While the situation of third-country nationals (TCNs) has been the focus of many other stakeholders, this study places less emphasis on the TCN population. Their situation is addressed in a standalone section, while analysis of their protection risks and prospects for return is integrated where relevant alongside findings on Syrians and Iraqis. Given the sensitivity and risks for women and girls belonging to ethnic and religious minorities in the camp, the study takes additional precautions in line with the principle of "do no harm" and does not address distinct experiences or issues faced by Yazidi or Christian women.

Varying degrees of focus on standard categories of heterogeneity such as ethnicity, political orientation, citizenship status, culture and religion are integrated into the analysis.[36] For Syrians and Iraqis, however, characteristics like political orientation, tribal affiliation, and other institutional or identity associations were highlighted when analysis showed

32 The Committee found a violation of 2(1) as read in conjunction with article 16, which requires states parties "undertake to prevent in any territory under its jurisdiction other acts of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment which do not amount to torture as defined in article I, when such acts are committed by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity." See CAT/C/75/D/922/2019.

33 A/HRC/48/70, para. 116.

34 The most recent, comprehensive assessment of rights violation and the dire humanitarian situation for individuals detained in northeast Syria was conducted by Amnesty International and published in April 2024. Human Rights Watch has also published extensively on Al-Hol. MSF and Save the Children have highlighted the humanitarian assistance crisis.

35 S/2024/583.

36 Steele LG., Bostic A., Lynch S., Abdelaaty L., "Measuring Ethnic Diversity", *Annual Review of Sociology*, July 2022.

they had distinguishable impact on respondents' experiences of the conflict. Almost all participants in the study were Sunni Arab or Sunni Turkmen from relatively poor, conservative communities in Iraq and Syria. Many came from areas already shaped by years of economic marginalization, political repression, and weakened state infrastructure—conditions that exacerbated their social and material vulnerability long before their detention. Within this paradigm, there was significant heterogeneity of beliefs, perspectives, allegiances, moral reasoning, family dynamics, aspirations, and circumstances. This study therefore used a broader definition of heterogeneity oriented more towards gendered trends in experiences rather than fixed attributes that supposedly influenced an individual's trajectory into Al-Hol.

Defining "agency"

The situation in Al-Hol has been consistently characterized as a form of collective punishment, where detaining authorities, the international community, and other stakeholders have used broad notions of "association" to label individuals as terrorists or as "linked" in some way to ISIL/Da'esh.[37] A central question in this research therefore concerns the nature of agency among Al-Hol detainees—particularly women and girls—and how they navigated the pathways that led to their arbitrary detention. Social understandings of agency are deeply shaped by historical, political, and gendered expectations, both for the researchers and the detainees. In many Middle Eastern contexts, such as Syria and Iraq, where collectivist and faith-informed norms often guide daily life, women's decisions may reflect a moral imperative to prioritize family and communal survival rather than individualistic expressions of autonomy.[38]

Rather than asking whether women had agency or not, this study seeks to understand how they expressed agency within conditions of extreme constraint, violence, and patriarchal social structures. Agency here is not viewed narrowly as autonomous decision-making or explicit resistance, but rather as a set of contextual practices that could include adherence to tradition, discipline, or piety.[39] While it is true that male-dominated systems often limit women's options, this does not mean women act without influence. Material circumstances, complicated by the threat of violence, strongly shape an individual's decision-making sphere. Even in highly militarized environments, women negotiate power, assert moral reasoning, and craft survival strategies.[40] This study foregrounds how gendered power dynamics, political violence, and economic precarity intersected to constrain, yet also shape, the ways women navigated their situations.

While many women TCNs arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol may have exercised what would appear to be clear or deliberate agency in traveling to Syria to join ISIL/Da'esh, this agency was not monolithic. A significant number of TCN women frame motivations rooted in ideological conviction, religious identity, or a desire to participate in what they believed was a divinely ordained mission. Others were deceived, coerced, or trafficked into the territory—especially younger women and girls—under false pretenses regarding marriage, community, or humanitarian work.[41]

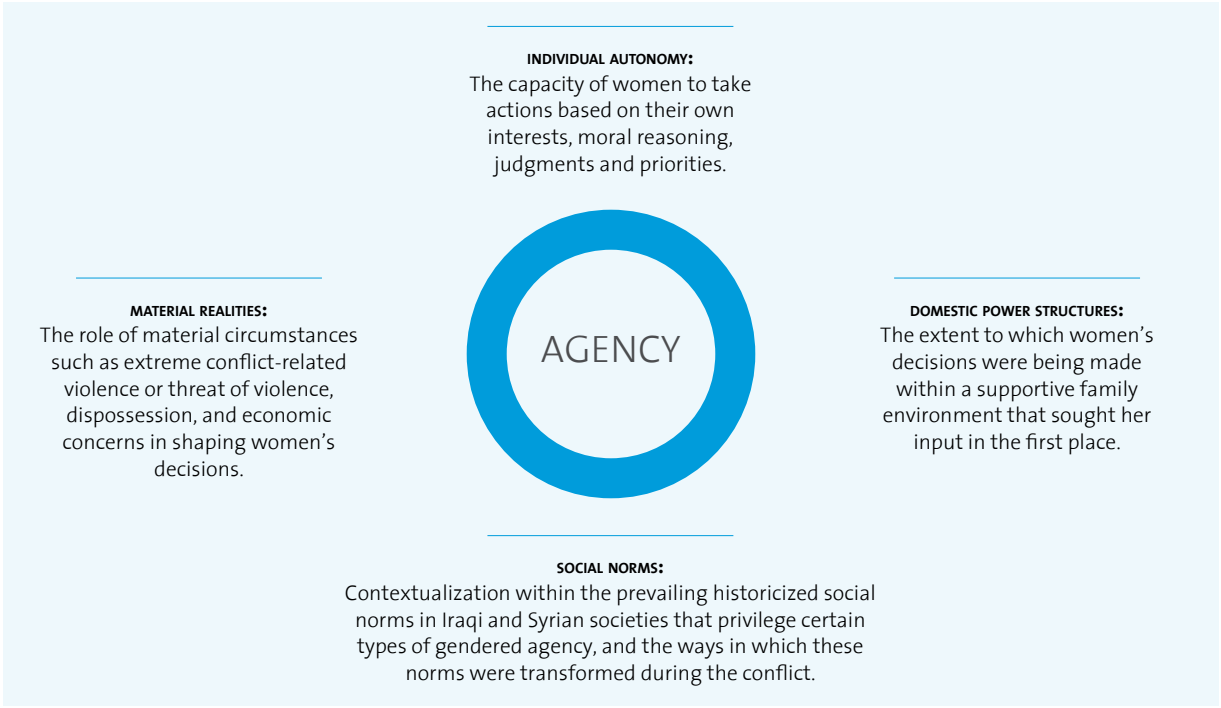
The study also takes a critical approach to assumptions often underpinning notions of agency that presuppose that individuals act with autonomous control over their decisions, and that the consequences of those decisions should determine how they are treated today. Such assumptions, rooted in liberal and individualist frameworks, risk obscuring the structural constraints, power dynamics, and survival imperatives that shaped the choices of many individuals arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol. This research recognizes that Western notions of "freedom" are often incoherent with women's lived

37 UNSRCT, Technical Visit to the Northeast of the Syrian Arab Republic, End of Mission Statement, July 2023.
38 Ahmed, L., *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Yale University Press, 1992.
39 See Saba Mahmood's work for the limitations of applying western concepts of agency to women in Muslim majority contexts. Mahmood, S., *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton University Press, 2005, p.15.
40 Enloe, C., *Maneuvers: The international politics of militarizing women's lives*. University of California Press, 2000.
41 Amnesty International, "Aftermath: Injustice, torture, and death in detention in north-east Syria", 17 April 2024.

experiences and motivations in Islamic societies.[42] Thus, the study recognizes that agency exists even in constrained contexts and attempts to attend to the entangled realities of coercion, belief, survival, care, labor, and structural violence rather than relying on reductive binaries of victimhood or culpability. These complexities are particularly central to the discussions around if, how, and why women made decisions to travel, support or engage with ISIL/Da'esh; the realities for girls who traveled, including those subjected to trafficking, force, or other forms of coercion; and how women and girls continue to make decisions in their current and severe situations of arbitrary deprivation of liberty. It is worth noting that once in Al-Hol, women's and girls' status and choice are frequently, though not always, defined by nationality and, for Syrians and Iraqis, by the status of the men to whom they are connected. The study therefore offers detailed discussions on the roles of familial ties, trust, ideology, and protection amidst an environment marked by relentless violence and precarity.

FIGURE 1

Defining agency in the context of Al-Hol



42 Abu-Lughod, L., *Do Muslim women need saving?*, Harvard University Press, 2013.

Analytical Framework[43]

The table below presents the analytical framework for this study. The lines of inquiry provided a starting point for the analysis, with the aim of identifying trends common across all or multiple groups as well as factors highlighting the heterogeneity of women, men, girls and boys arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol. Specific profiles such as TCNs or groups of people with particular experiences of the conflict, varying degrees of reported linkages with ISIL/Da'esh, and groups facing unique barriers to return were highlighted where relevant.

Research question

How can policy and programmatic interventions in Al-Hol effectively account for the diverse experiences of women and girls, taking into consideration the influences of gender, class, age, kinship, and the dynamics of conflict?

TABLE 1
Analytical framework

Theme	Sub-theme	Line of inquiry	Sub-questions
Heterogeneity	Demographics and socioeconomic composition	What are the demographic and socioeconomic compositions of individuals detained in Al-Hol?	What is the gender, nationality, age and disability disaggregation of the camp population?
			What is the marital status of the male and female population? What are the main forms of kinship and family formations?
			From which specific areas in Iraq and Syria did the camp population originate?
			For how long have detainees been in Al-Hol?
			What is the socioeconomic background of men, women, girls and boys in the camp?
			What types of religious and/or political affiliations did camp detainees have prior to their detainment?

43 This analytical framework is an amended and clarified version of that provided in the study's inception report. It covers the same themes but was reorganized and streamlined.

Theme	Sub-theme	Line of inquiry	Sub-questions
Heterogeneity	Push/pull factors	What are the main reasons detained men, women, boys and girls ended up in Al-Hol? In what ways, if any, are detained men, women, boys and girls associated with Da'esh? For those associated with Da'esh, what were the main push or pull factors to the organization?	Is everyone in Al-Hol associated with ISIL/ Da'esh?
			How did extreme conflict-related violence shape detainees' trajectories into Al-Hol?
			To what extent did forced conscription impact detainees' alleged association with Da'esh?
			How did economic concerns shape decisions around whether to associate with Da'esh?
			How did gender-based violence and marriage practices impact women's trajectories into the camp?
			In what ways did men and women resist Da'esh?
			In what ways did the trajectories and experiences of third-country nationals differ from Syrians and Iraqis?
Protection and exploitation	Gendered protection risks, gender-based violence, and exploitation in Al-Hol	What are the main gendered protection risks and rights violations men, women, boys and girls have faced since their detention?	What forms of gendered exploitation and gender-based violence are present in the camp?
			In what ways, if any, have men, women, girls and boys remained connected with Da'esh since their detention?
			How are men and women supporting their families?
Return	Gendered prospects for return	What barriers are men and women facing in leaving Al-Hol?	What are the main barriers Iraqi and Syrian men and women face in leaving Al-Hol?
			How do gendered political, social and family dynamics influence men and women's return prospects?

Methodology

UN Women partnered with the Zomia Center for this research.[44] The study used a mixed-methods approach involving secondary data analysis, and primary qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. This section provides an overview of the methodology, including approaches to quantitative and qualitative data collection, means by which study respondents were selected, ethical considerations, analytical methods, and important limitations of the study's approach.

Quantitative data collection

Official demographic data was provided by Blumont. This demographic data then informed the sampling for the quantitative study. UN Women relied on the data to survey tents in Al-Hol using a cluster model weighted appropriately for Iraqi and Syrian populations. A Kish grid for systematic selection within the camp blocks was developed, ultimately targeting 653 Syrian tents and 787 Iraqi tents for a total sample of 1,440 tents (households). Selection in the Syrian quarter was controlled for patterning based on area of origin. The sample was representative of the Iraqi and Syrian populations in Al-Hol within a 95 per cent confidence interval and 3 per cent margin of error.

The survey was administered through face-to-face interviews conducted in Arabic, each lasting approximately 30 minutes. Due to the lack of consistent internet connectivity in Al-Hol, survey responses were recorded on paper and securely transported to a data entry team based in Manbij where they were electronically recorded and reviewed in line with UN Women's standard procedures for the collection and curation of datasets. The questionnaire included a blend of multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions, and gathered information on household demographics, livelihoods, access to services, and future intentions. This exercise was carried out over June and July 2024.

All demographic data in the quantitative survey was based on self-reported information and was not verified through other official means. Individuals detained in Al-Hol are often hesitant to provide their personal information to the authorities. The datasets may therefore include inaccurately self-reported information, particularly personal or household identifiers. This limitation is also present in the official camp records for the same reasons. No names were recorded during the survey. Further details on the ethical considerations regarding the collection of data in sites of arbitrary detention, as well as the use of third-party data provided by NGOs operating in Al-Hol, is addressed in the following sections.

44 The Zomia Center is a U.S.-based non-profit that supports people living in non-state spaces through collecting local, community-level histories on the legacy of war, providing public health assistance, and responding to humanitarian emergencies.

Approach to qualitative data collection

The study is further informed by 121 oral histories. This includes 38 interviews conducted between 2018 and 2022[45]; seventy-five interviews conducted specifically for this study; and eight interviews that had been conducted before 2022 but were updated to reflect the data collection aims of this study. Seventy-six per cent (92 of 121) of interviews were conducted with Syrians, 16 per cent (19 of 121) with Iraqis and 8 per cent (10 of 121) with third-country nationals. About one-third (33 of 121) of the oral histories conducted with Syrians were with those who had left Al-Hol and had either returned to their place of origin or settled in a third country. Eighty-four per cent (102 of 121) were conducted with women and 16 per cent (19 of 121) with men. Eleven additional in-depth interviews, nine with women and two with men, were also carried out with Iraqi returnees in the Mosul area. All interviewees were adults 18 or older.

TABLE 2
Oral histories included in this study

	Iraqis		Syrians		TCN	Total
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	
Detainees	16	3	49	10	10	88
Returnee		3	27	6		33
Total	16		76	16	10	121
Nationality total	19		92		10	121

Respondent profiles

UN Women's respondent selection was informed by Zomia's large body of research on the diverse experiences of individuals arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol related to ISIL/Da'esh in Syria and Iraq.[46] This research identified several broad, gendered trajectories and how those trajectories led to detention in Al-Hol for the Syrian population, including:

1. Women and men who had little to no involvement with ISIL/Da'esh, but ended up in Al-Hol for various other reasons;
2. Women who were close family members, such as mothers, wives, sisters, or daughters of combatants in the Free Syrian Army (FSA) or other armed groups that eventually pledged allegiance to ISIL/Da'esh;
3. Women who were close family members of individuals who initially opposed the 2011 Syrian

45 These interviews were conducted for Zomia's *Legacy of War* program. Respondents were most often identified through Zomia's medical assistance program in Al-Hol, which provided an array of medical services such as primary care, vaccinations, and malnutrition treatments. An oral history example is provided in Annex 1 of this study.

46 UN Women does not rely on the terminology of "association" given its legal invocations of criminal association in the context of counter-terrorism. Given the focus of the study, UN Women instead provides more detailed experiences and uses specific language to describes individual's roles and relationships with ISIL/Da'esh. See United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Handbook on Criminal Justice Responses to Terrorism*, 2009.

uprising, a trend observed particularly in Deir Ezzour and Raqqa, then joined ISIL/Da'esh as a form of resistance;

4. Men who were conscripted into ISIL/Da'esh in some capacity, including those forcibly conscripted and those who served in administrative roles;
5. Men and women who were motivated by ISIL/Da'esh aspirations early in the conflict.

Iraqis were initially sampled according to types of experiences with ISIL/Da'esh. Once an initial sample was established, individuals were targeted based on their area of origin to build a geographically representative sample. A small number of phone interviews took place with third- country nationals living in the Al-Hol Camp Annex. The authorities were not informed about which individuals opted to participate. Third-country nationals were selected for interviews according to their region of origin. Interviewees were from the Middle East and North Africa, Western Europe, the Balkans, and Central Asia.

Returnees were identified through Zomia, which has maintained connections with former beneficiaries who have left, and/or via referrals from past or current beneficiaries. Respondents were selected to represent different age ranges, ethnoreligious backgrounds, length of time in Al-Hol and different neighborhoods of the cities to which they returned.

Approximately 30 interviews were conducted either on-site or remotely with UN, camp management, and *de facto* authority officials, researchers, journalists and activists with relevant expertise, NGO workers and service providers in Al-Hol, and other key informants connected to the camp. These interviews sought critical contextual information and relevant perspectives on the situation in Al-Hol and areas of return to inform both the research approach and the analysis.

Ethical considerations

Oral history interviews were conducted in line with UN Women's standard policies and procedures which rely on the principles of do-no-harm. All oral histories were conducted in private, which was critical given the protection concerns. In addition, UN Women has undertaken a number of measures to ensure the identity of the interviewees remains confidential and anonymous. Names and some additional identifying information, including age, names of family members, and/or area of origin were changed. All interviewees were informed that interviews were being conducted for an ethnographic study and were not undertaken for the purposes of collection of evidence for criminal or other procedures. Interviewees were also informed that the surveys and interviews were for research purposes only and not a mechanism for advocacy or a means to facilitate their exit from the camp. With the understanding that men and women in detention may not understand which information gives rise to criminal liability under both national and international law, interviewers transparently laid out the project's objectives, procedures and any potential risks associated with participation to obtain informed consent. It was made clear that respondents were free to not disclose any information they felt was too sensitive or had potential to put them at risk. Participants' willingness to engage was rarely ambiguous; they were generally either open to discussing their experiences or preferred not to engage due to personal beliefs, fear of reprisal or other reasons. All respondents who requested medical assistance were supported when possible.

Zomia interviewers were trained in storytelling techniques and trauma-informed interview approaches. Oral histories began with the respondents' earliest memories, and progressed chronologically. Following UN Women guidelines on the types of information sought, interviewers engaged in open-ended conversations that flowed naturally and allowed participants to share their

stories in their own words.[47] Particular attention was paid to family dynamics, including the ways in which their relatives would describe their individual or familial relationship to ISIL/Da'esh. This approach sought to provide personalized, nuanced insight on individual's socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as the events that led to their detainment. Respondents were also asked to reflect on their experiences in Al-Hol and the most important events that had happened since being detained, with focus on security incidents and gender-based violence, access to services, gendered social relations, and exposure to exploitation. Returnees described their process returning and experiences so far in the community to which they returned. Third-country nationals were asked to describe the process by which they became involved with ISIL/Da'esh in their country of origin and details on their migration journeys.

Data processing, analysis and reporting

Interviews were transcribed by local researchers, then iteratively improved upon by the Zomia research coordinator in collaboration with the researcher. Following their approval from the research manager, the transcripts were sent for translation. Qualitative data from the interviews was analyzed using content analysis techniques in accordance with the predefined analytical framework. Analysis focused on identifying core narratives of the conflict, as well as distinct gendered trends around the ways in which men and women engaged, or were forced to engage, with their dynamic circumstances. Because the oral histories were so rich with detail, the analysis heavily emphasized respondents speaking for themselves using direct quotations. Quantitative data was analyzed descriptively, with all findings disaggregated by gender of the head of household and nationality.

Additional exploratory analysis was conducted on specific populations of interest, including households from the most common areas of origin in Iraq and Syria, single women, elderly women, households from various zones of control in Syria, and households that arrived pre- and post-2019.

Throughout, rather than focusing on women as a singular group, the analysis aimed to parse out gender relations as they pertained to other aspects of social life, while striving not to reduce or oversimplify their experiences. Critical differences among Syrians, Iraqis, and third-country nationals were discussed where relevant, as well as other important aspects of respondents' identities such as extreme poverty, disability, age, and religious conservatism.

Limitations

Due to resource and movement restrictions, researchers were unable to conduct interviews with returnees in Anbar Governorate in Iraq. Interviews from Iraq were not as detailed as the interviews from Al-Hol and from Syria because they were done in a shorter period and were not subject to the same iterative process as the oral histories. UN Women was also unable to conduct interviews with individuals who returned outside of the formal returns process, which according to recent research, likely numbers in the thousands. While interviewees were asked to discuss the situation for girls and boys, and interviews often covered time periods where respondents were themselves under 18, no interviews occurred with children. Emerging policies of the Syrian interim authorities following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 are likely to change the situation in Al-Hol in the near future. While the study's findings will remain relevant to informing return and reintegration processes, in the future, the organizations and actors involved in such activities may differ from those discussed in the text.

47 Using open-ended questions techniques and allowing interviewees to tell their stories and use their own "free narrative." See United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh (UNITAD) and the Human Rights in Trauma Mental Health Program at Stanford University (UNITAD), *Trauma-Informed Investigations Field Guide*, 2021.

TABLE 3

Data collection summary

Data collection activity	Iraqis		Syrians		TCN	Total
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	
Oral histories	16	3	76	16	10	121
Iraq community interviews	9	2				11
Survey	641	146	512	141		1440
Total	666	151	588	157	10	1572

Report structure

Section 1 of the report provides a detailed demographic breakdown of individuals detained in Al-Hol, disaggregated by gender, age, disability, arrival time frame, areas of origin and marital status. This section delves into detainees' socioeconomic backgrounds and discusses how family and social life in the camp have been impacted by the relative absence of adult men.

Section 2 explores the relationship between alleged links of family ties to ISIL/Da'esh and arbitrary detention in the camp. It includes analysis of push and pull factors for individuals who were, to varying degrees, linked through affiliation or family ties with ISIL/Da'esh. TCNs are profiled in a standalone section as part of this analysis.

Section 3 focuses on the gendered forms of violence and exploitation that have resulted from arbitrary detention, and how women participate in and are impacted by the prevailing power dynamics.

Section 4, the final section, turns to the future of the camp, including the continued indefinite and arbitrary detention, and prospects for former detainees.

The report concludes with a summary of key takeaways and conclusions, as well as a series of recommendations targeted to various actors involved in the camp.

Al-Hol is comprised of approximately 93% women and children under 18.

PHOTO: ARTHUR LARIE

3

SECTION I: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF DETAINEES

SECTION I: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF DETAINEES

As of July 2024, camp management estimated the population consisted of 41,032 individuals. Of these, 44 per cent reported they were Iraqi, 40 per cent reported they were Syrian and 16 per cent reported they were TCNs. The majority (61 per cent) were children and 32 per cent were adult women.[48] UN Women's survey, which only assessed the Syrian and Iraqi populations, broadly reflected this breakdown.[49] 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.

FIGURE 2
Gender and age breakdown of Syrian and Iraqi individuals (Blumont)

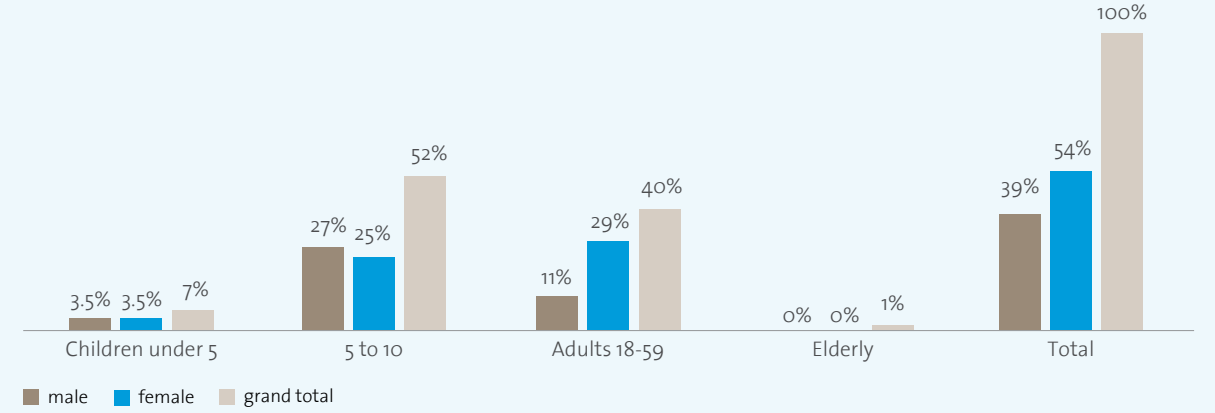
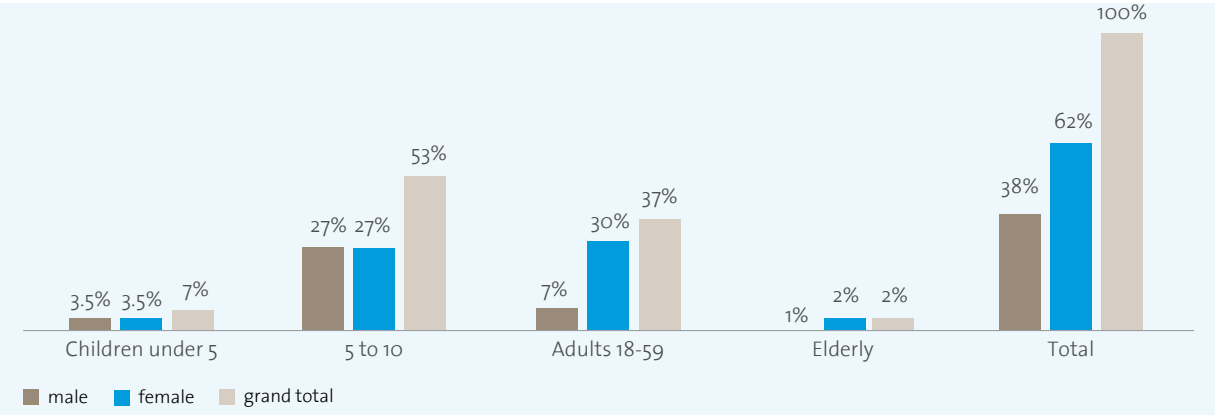


FIGURE 3
Gender and age breakdown of Syrian and Iraqi individuals (UN Women)



48 Figures provided to UN Women by Blumont via email on 9 July 2024.

49 Neither UN Women nor Blumont collected data on the gender of children under 5, and Blumont did not collect data on children aged 3-11. Since there is no reason to believe there is a significant gender difference in young children in the camp, estimates were provided through dividing the total number of children in these age categories by two.

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, with slightly more Iraqi households (76 per cent) headed by women than Syrian households (70 per cent). Approximately 4% of households identified as co-headed by one or more person.[50] 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. Families often lived in clusters of adjacent tents. Sometimes widows from polygamous marriages continued living with their co-wives. Only four households said there was a mix of Iraqis and Syrians in the household, meaning almost all households are only of one nationality. There were very few elderly people. Only twelve total households, or one per cent of the surveyed population, included a man or woman who was 60 or older. As of August 2024, excluding TCNs, Iraqis constituted just over half (55 per cent) of the detained population, and the other half (45 per cent) was Syrian. There was no significant difference between Iraqi and Syrian households in terms of gender and age demographics.

Very few people lived alone in Al-Hol. Only three per cent of total households consisted of women living alone and one per cent of households were men living alone. In cases where women ended up in the camp alone, they would typically move in with another family. There were several female oral history respondents who had lost their entire families, or had become estranged, during the conflict and had arrived at Al-Hol alone.

"I found three women who offered me the chance to come and live with them, because living alone is very difficult."

Jana, who had been forcibly married by her family to a ISIL/Da'esh emir and ran away to the camp, moved in with another family.

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.

FIGURE 4
Nationality and gender of the HoH

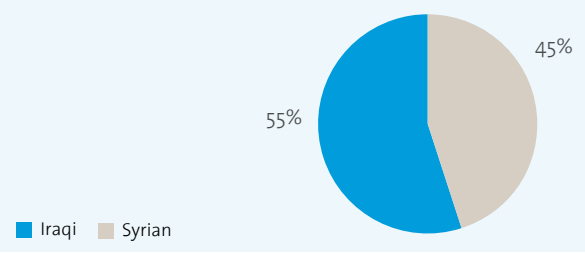


FIGURE 5
Nationality of the Head of the Household

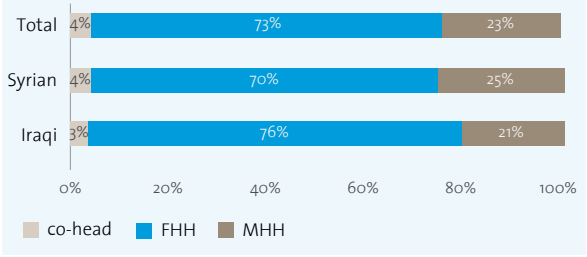
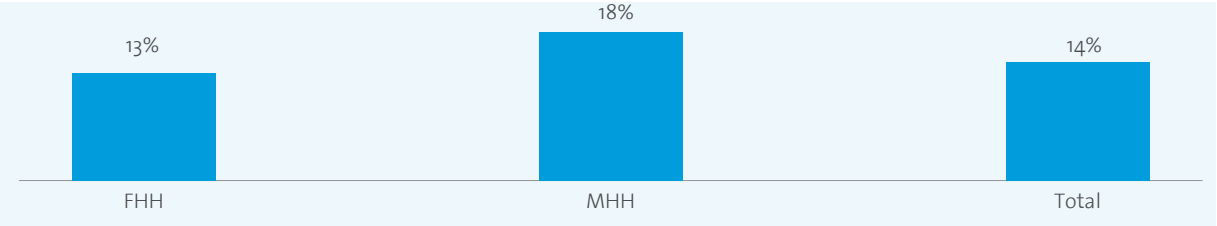


FIGURE 6
Male and female heads of household with disabilities



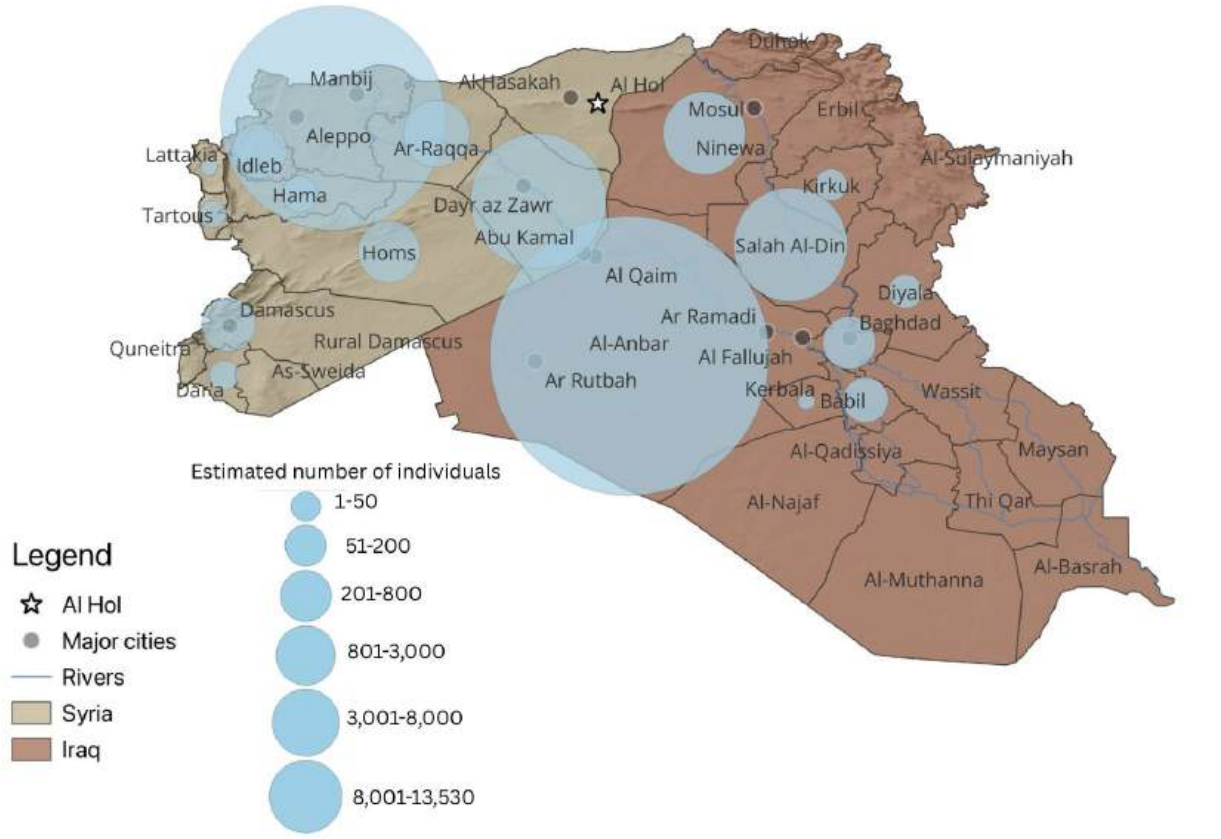
50 The survey question for "Are you the head of the household?" included "I am the co-head" as an option for respondents to indicate that household decision-making was shared between one or more individuals, typically a husband and wife/wives.

Places of origin[51]

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. Small numbers of Syrian detainees originated from other governorates, with no detainees from Quneitra or Al-Sweida, which are primarily Druze, or Al-Hassakah, which has a primarily Kurdish population.[52] 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 remaining six per cent said they were from five other governorates or declined to specify their place of origin. The age, gender and area of origin information identified by UN Women's survey of Al-Hol is consistent with IOM's Al-Amal Centre return monitoring data.[53]

FIGURE 7

Governorates of origin for Iraqi and Syrian families in AlHol



51 Information on area of origin was self-reported and not verified by reviewing official documents. It is possible some respondents did not provide accurate information for various reasons.

52 Between 2019 and 2022 there were more families from Deir Ezzour detained in the camp, but at the time of writing many had returned under the agreements made between the SDF and tribal leaders.

53 The Iraqi population has been steadily decreasing since 2021 with the implementation of a government-sponsored repatriation programme. According to data provided to UN Women by IOM, as of 16 October 2024, 10,241 Iraqi nationals (5,963 girls and women; 4,278 men and boys) had returned from Al-Hol via the Al-Amal Centre rehabilitation programme. By the time of publication, the number of returns through Al-Amal Centre was far higher.

Arrival time frame

The majority (83 per cent) of detainees arrived in Al-Hol in 2019, and of these, most arrived from the town of Baghouz (Deir Ezzor Governorate), ISIL/Da'esh's last enclave prior to its territorial defeat. Almost all of 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. About half (45 per cent) of pre-Baghouz arrivals were female-headed households, compared to 79 per cent female-headed households that arrived after Baghouz. This suggests that men in pre-Baghouz households were less likely to have been fighters – or perceived as such - since they were neither killed nor detained.

FIGURE 8

Year of arrival to Al-Hol by male, female and co-headed households

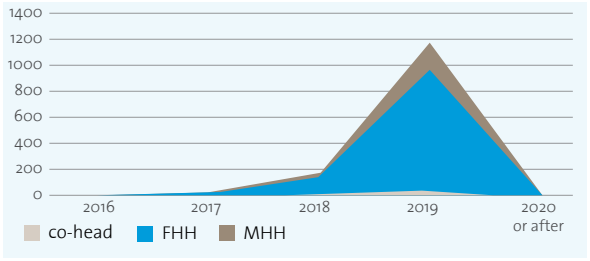


FIGURE 9

Previous locations for 2019 arrivals

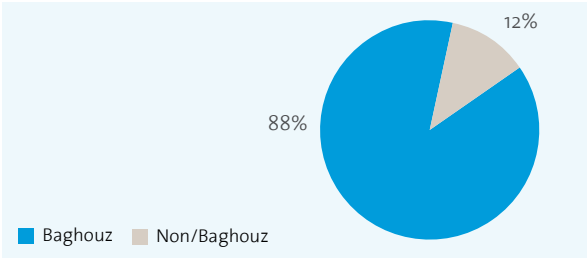
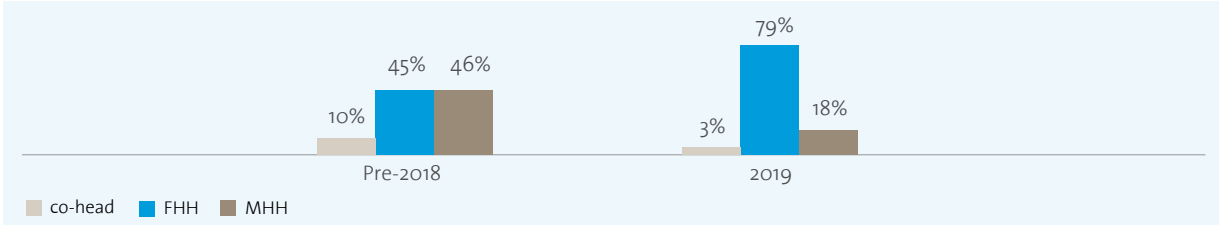


FIGURE 10

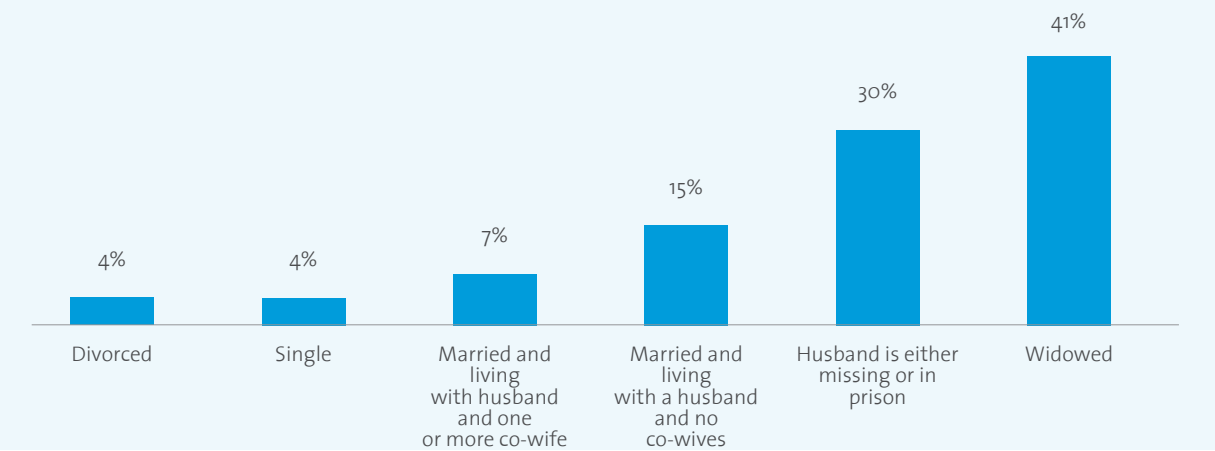
Male, female and co-headed households that arrived in Al-Hol before 2018 and in 2019



Marital status, early, child and arranged marriages, marital gender dynamics, and divorce

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. For the remaining female-headed households, 22 per cent were married and living with their spouse in the camp. Only 4 per cent of female-headed households were unmarried. In contrast, 57 per cent of male heads of household were married to multiple wives, and an additional 30 per cent were married to one wife. The remaining male heads of household were single, widowed or divorced. Male-headed households were more likely to include children under five (40 per cent) compared to female-headed households (12 per cent).

FIGURE 11
Marital status of female-headed households



Early, child and arranged marriages

UN Women's survey did not capture specific data on the age or manner of marriage; however, arranged and/or child marriages were reported as the norm among all 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. This pattern broadly reflects the prevailing norms in both Iraq and Syria. According to a 2018 UNFPA survey, 60 per cent of Iraqi women had entered marriages arranged through relatives, with the rate even higher (69 per cent) in rural areas. The average age of marriage was 21, and 26 per cent of women had married before the age of 18.[54] There are no recent estimates on arranged or child marriages in Syria, although a 2009 study found that 35 per cent of marriages were consanguineous, with higher rates in rural areas.[55] In most oral history accounts, marriage was generally seen as a strategic alliance between or within families, often to consolidate lineage and property. In the poor, rural communities with conservative norms where most respondents came from, it was common for girls to begin receiving marriage proposals shortly after reaching puberty. Whether or not a marriage should proceed was generally seen as a collective

54 UNFPA, "Fact Sheet: Iraq Women Integrated Social and Health Survey (IWISH)", 2021.

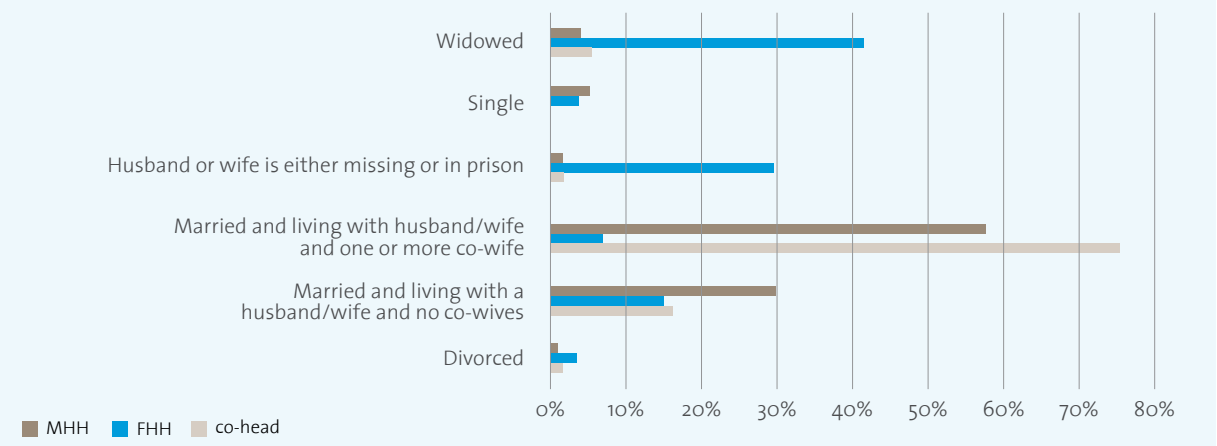
55 Othman H., and Saadat M., "Prevalence of consanguineous marriages in Syria". Journal of Biosocial Science, 2009 Sep;41(5):685-92,12 May 2009.

family matter, usually determined by male family members like fathers and brothers, in consultation with women in positions of authority like mothers and grandmothers and with the agreement of the potential bride herself. This often came with a vetting process that sought testimonies from other relatives or community members on the moral standing of the bride and groom. However, especially when girls were young, it was not common for them to openly challenge or reject the marriage plans made by their male relatives. The interplay between longstanding practices of arranged, child, and consanguineous marriage and the emergence of forced marriages under ISIL/Da'esh is explored in more detail in section two.

Polygamous marriages

The practice of polygamy has heavily influenced the family structures of women 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-headed households in Al-Hol were married to more than one woman.

FIGURE 12
Marital status of male, female and co-headed households



Polygamy, already a relatively common practice in conservative Syrian and Iraqi communities, may have become more widespread under ISIL/Da'esh rule, as the group actively promoted it. The ways in which polygamous families navigated the conflict have also shaped family structures in Al-Hol. Several oral history respondents described very close relationships and a sense of solidarity with their co-wives, often raising their families together as a single-family unit. In some cases, women continued living with their co-wives even after the death or disappearance of their husbands. However, many women reported not being consulted before becoming co-wives and described distant or even antagonistic relationships with their co-wives, some of whom were also in Al-Hol. Sometimes men married other women

without the consent of their first wife or wives or without disclosing their marital status to subsequent wives. Polygamous relationships are an important component of demographic composition and household formations in Al-Hol and should be taken into consideration in the design of programmes and policies.

Umm Samir's story: young mother raising her co-wives' children

Umm Samir was only fourteen when she got married. Her husband was killed in a bombing one month after her marriage, and after the mourning period, she was immediately married again. Within a year, her second husband had married two more women. **"We got married in Raqqa, and things were going well, but I was surprised to find out that my husband had a strong desire for women—he wanted to have multiple wives because his friends all had three or four wives…Not understanding much about these things, I agreed, and after four months, my husband married a second wife…I lived with my co-wife, and we got along fine, but then he decided to marry a third woman. I didn't understand what he felt that drove him to keep marrying more women. Four months later, he married his third wife."** By the time she turned seventeen, Umm Samir's husband had disappeared and both co-wives passed away, leaving her with her own three children, and then one from each co-wife, to raise alone in Al-Hol.

Detained and missing men

About one-third (30 per cent) of female-headed households in Al-Hol had husbands who were either missing or in prison. For many women, the day of their detention was the last time they ever saw or heard from their husbands or other male relatives again. Even though many men, some combatants and some not, fled Baghouz alongside their families, almost all were automatically detained by the SDF upon capture. According to respondents, as the final battle drew closer, the SDF patrolled the frontline regions and intercepted those escaping. Men were usually arrested on the spot, regardless of whether they had joined ISIL/Da'esh, while women and children were taken to Al-Hol. At least nine oral history participants suspected their male relatives were in prison but have not heard from them since and have no information about their whereabouts. This gendered pattern of separation—experienced by many women as a source of profound sadness—has not only left many bearing the burden of caring for their families alone but has also led some to form households with other women or to remarry within the camp as a means of coping with isolation and securing support.

Connections with men outside the camp

Surviving fathers, brothers, husbands and other male relatives outside the camp—both those in other sites of detention and those living elsewhere—continue to hold a high degree of influence over women's lives in the camp. Some women reported they were eventually contacted by their imprisoned relatives, some through humanitarian family reunification programmes. However, in some cases, husbands would make contact and then disappear again, leaving their wives in a state of legal and social limbo. Fathers who were in prison or living in other parts of Iraq or Syria could dictate key decisions, such as whether a woman could remarry, work, or leave the camp. This control was especially pronounced for women who relied on these relatives for financial support.

"Eventually, my husband said, 'That's enough, we're leaving.' We packed our belongings, got dressed, and left for al-Mayadeen with my husband, my co-wife, and me. From there, we went to the mountains of al-Baghuz. When we arrived, we surrendered to the soldiers stationed there. They interrogated my husband and took him with them, while my co-wife and I were taken to the al-Hol camp."

Riham, a young woman from Deir Ezzour, made no mention of her husband being involved with ISIL/Da'esh, but he was taken to prison anyway.

"We left the areas of the Islamic State and my father was with us, but they separated the men from the women. They took us away in large trucks used to transport sheep, and we no longer know what is the fate of these men."

Hana, a young woman from Idlib.

"We felt the sadness of our situation deeply, having lost all the men in our lives. Life in the camp was harsh, with cold, rain, and floods running under our tents due to the heavy rains. We had always relied on our brothers and husbands to handle such things, but now we were helpless."

Salwa, a young woman from Aleppo, described her family's sense of loss at the separation.

However, communications with family outside the camp, especially men in prison, was often sporadic at best. Phones were expensive, phone service was limited, and calls were heavily monitored. Those suspected of ISIL/Da'esh affiliation had their phones confiscated, so sometimes women would turn off their phones and hide them for extended periods. These conditions made getting in touch with family members outside the camp challenging, and women would regularly go for long periods without contact with their families. It sometimes took women months or years to even find out whether their relatives were alive, and if so where they might be. Many women said they remained unable to contact or find any news about their male relatives, usually husbands.

"When my daughter's uncles heard about the possibility of my remarriage, they cut off the allowance they were sending."

Hana, a young woman from Idlib, wanted to get remarried but couldn't because her deceased husband's brothers would cut off her money.

"My family also left the camp and I do not talk to them because I do not have a mobile phone and my salary is not enough to cover one."

Samaher had lost contact with her family because she could not afford a phone.

Women who remarried in Al-Hol

Two in five (39 per cent) households in the camp were composed of married couples or polygamous relationships. Though UN Women did not collect data on how many of these marriages occurred prior to or after detention, marriages within the camp appear to be common given the number of adult men deceased or currently detained or imprisoned. Many oral history respondents reported getting married while in Al-Hol, usually to men arbitrarily detained in the camp, but also sometimes to men from surrounding areas who came to work in the camp. Since marriages occurred outside the traditional norms of marrying within one's extended family, women often saw marriage as a way of improving their circumstances, of leaving the camp, and to alleviate pain and loneliness.

"I decided to work in a grocery store so that I could cover expenses for food, clothing, and medicine, but the burden became very heavy and I could no longer bear it. So I got married in the camp and gave birth to a third child."

When Salma felt she couldn't afford life on her own, she decided to get married.

"I left the shop and forgot my phone cover there because of my bad mental state. I went back to the owner of the shop to retrieve the phone cover and he told me that he had liked me for some time and that he wanted to marry me. I told him my story and that I had a girl, and he said he had no objection and that she would be like his daughter. I was very happy because my suffering was over."

Hana, from Idlib.

"During my work, I met a man from outside the camp, who also works with me, and he proposed marriage to me. I told him my story, where I am from, what my background is, and everything. After I got to know this man, I agreed to marry him, but on the condition that he take me out of the camp and the marriage takes place outside the camp...My purpose for marriage is to leave the camp and go to Idlib. I want to search for my sisters who went with their husbands to Idlib."

Hazar, from Deir Ezzour, started working for Blumont as a camp cleaner and met another employee who promised to marry her and get her out of the camp. She saw this as an opportunity to get out of the camp and try to find her sisters.

Divorce[56]

Only a small percentage of Syrian and Iraqi female-headed households (four per cent) were divorced in Al-Hol, although the topic of divorce was commonly discussed. Many women said that although they wanted divorces, they were unable to get them because of the absence of male relatives who could help negotiate the process with their husbands. Sometimes groups of "older men" reportedly stepped in to facilitate the process for women seeking divorce in the camp. Divorcing men who were outside the camp was even more complicated. Several women stated they wanted to divorce their husbands—in many cases because of their husband's involvement with ISIL/Da'esh —but were unable to contact them or even confirm whether they were alive. Women who wanted to divorce imprisoned husbands faced communication and logistical challenges in doing so, and sometimes their husbands refused. In many cases, divorcing a detained or imprisoned husband required a lawyer able to access the SDF prison, and many women did not have the resources to hire one. These findings highlight how legal, logistical, and familial barriers within and beyond the camp constrain women's ability to formally separate from their husbands, limiting their autonomy and prolonging dependence on relationships they may no longer consent to.

"I received a message from my husband through the Red Cross, checking on me. My response was clear: I hated him and wanted a divorce. He hasn't replied since, and I have no interest in anything related to him. My father is seeking a lawyer to facilitate communication with my husband in prison to secure a divorce."

Sahar, a young woman from Aleppo.

"[My mother] gathered some older men and told them about my situation, asking for a divorce. They spoke to my husband, and he agreed to the divorce on the condition that I return everything he had bought for me."

Karima, a young woman from Aleppo married, then divorced a man in the camp.

"There was no communication between my husband and I to move forward with the divorce, and it would be impossible for me to do what some of the other women in the camp did, which was to divorce their husbands while they were at the camp."

Umm Rania, a 29-year-old woman from Deir Ezzour

56 In many jurisdictions where Shari'a-based personal status laws are applied, gender inequality is embedded in divorce proceedings. Typically, men can unilaterally initiate divorce (ṭalāq) without providing justification, while women face stricter conditions and legal barriers to obtain a divorce (such as khulʿ or judicial divorce), often requiring the husband's consent, financial compensation, or proof of harm.

Socio-economic background

Irrespective of any involvement with ISIL/Da'esh, most detainees came from towns and villages located in isolated, economically disadvantaged "borderlands" and rural regions of Syria and Iraq. Although they are on different sides of an international border, the economic and social nature of the large towns along the Euphrates River in Iraq and Syria share many characteristics. Economies in these areas are primarily based on subsistence agriculture, supplemented by irregular daily wage work whenever available.

"Our life is very simple, and our livelihood depends relatively on agriculture as it's seasonal farming, therefore, not completely reliable."

Omar, a middle-aged man from a village near Al Bo-kamal

The areas of origin for Al-Hol detainees were predominantly Sunni Arab, religiously conservative, and shaped by patriarchal tribal customs. The Iraq-Syria border was porous, and people traveled back and forth trading goods, often with limited government oversight. Almost all respondents described growing up in conservative families that were strict about matters of religion. Between 2014 and 2017, all these towns and cities were taken over by ISIL/Da'esh and were retaken between 2015 and 2017. The battles to reclaim them came at a tremendous cost, where thousands of people were killed, many more displaced, and much of the urban infrastructure was left in ruins.

"My father was very strict about religious matters, and this influenced his rules for us; he restricted our interactions with relatives and forbade us from mingling with men."

Imane, a young woman from Al-Qaem

The deprivation many detainees face in Al-Hol reflects a continuation of the violence, impoverishment and lack of opportunity that marked their earlier lives. Most women detained in Al-Hol, particularly Syrians, were from areas with underdeveloped infrastructure and limited access to public services, and where most lived in poverty. They typically came from large families surviving on precarious and intermittent work, usually as agricultural laborers, construction workers, and service workers. Most men were engaged in agriculture or animal husbandry or working in services like repairing cars, carpentry, appliance sales, printing shops, or selling food. A few Iraqis had worked, or had family members who had worked, in professional jobs such as secretaries and security agents for the pre-2003 Ba'athist government. Due to economic marginalization, it was also relatively common for Iraqi and Syrian men in these communities to migrate to Lebanon, the Gulf states, or Europe for work. Women worked in the farms or in menial jobs like cleaning or tailoring when there was economic necessity, although they were primarily engaged in housework.

"We were working as wage laborers on agricultural lands that did not belong to us, and the life of my siblings and I was very difficult, as we would go out from 7 in the morning until 7 in the evening, and there was not a day in which we could rest, to the point that we no longer knew anything in life except hard work, fatigue, and exhaustion."

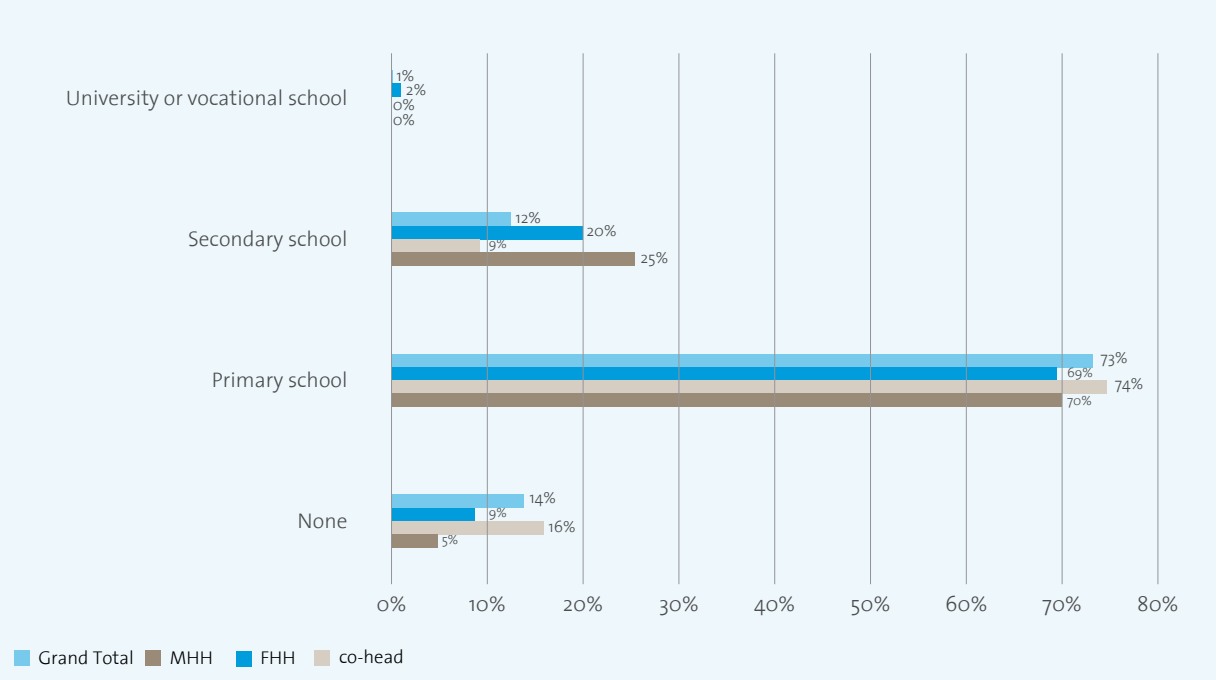
A 24-year-old woman named Jana from Al-Safira, Aleppo, describes the daily life of her large family prior to the Syrian uprising. This type of narrative was very common for Syrian women.

Educational opportunity

Women and men in Al-Hol were largely deprived of education as children due to the need to work, limited school availability, and conservative gender norms. Three-quarters (73 per cent) of heads-of-household had only completed primary school, and an additional 14 per cent had not attended school at all. Female-headed households, particularly among Iraqis, were more likely to have had no schooling at all. University attendance was extremely rare, with only an estimated 1 per cent of women in the camp having pursued higher education. The few women oral history respondents who had attended university were from more urban areas, and all but one had studied education, since teaching was the main professional opportunity available to women.

FIGURE 13

Highest educational attainment for Syrian and Iraqi male, female and co-headed heads of household, with totals



Education was seen as an aspiration or a luxury for most women. Respondents described being first and foremost dedicated to the collective effort of feeding their families, first as children, and later as adults. Although economic factors featured most strongly in Al-Hol detainees' lack of educational opportunity, conservative gender norms also limited girls' access to education. Fathers and brothers often prevented their daughters from going to school, and mothers and stepmothers sometimes also participated in enforcing these restrictions.

Although a lack of educational opportunities was the norm, education mattered greatly to many interviewees. For example, Amal, a 39-year-old woman from Manbij, recalled walking 2.5 kilometers to and from school every day. A 27-year-old woman named Dina from a very poor family in Deir Ezzour said she would finish working in the fields, then ask her neighbors to teach her what they had learned in school. A woman named Umm Rania from Deir Ezzour said she conditioned her marriage on her continued education and a young woman named Souad from Homs sought an abortion to stay in school—both ultimately thwarted by the conflict. Some respondents reflected on having been prevented from their education by families or by the conflict with a degree of resentment and frustration. They expressed similar frustration that their own children are being deprived of schooling because of their detention.

"My sisters and I were unable to attend school due to our very poor financial situation. My mother worked as a house cleaner, and my sisters Suha and Miha sold vegetables from a cart. My younger sisters and I stayed at home working in textile and sewing, selling our products in the market or door-to-door."

Hazar, a 27-year-old from Mayadin, Deir Ezzour.

"I would often beg my father to let me go to school, but he refused. My brothers had a narrow mindset towards me, and my mother used to say that a girl shouldn't study. 'Why go to school just to mix with men and ill-mannered boys?' [my mother] would argue. And my father believed that schools teach girls nothing but how to rebel against their parents. That's why they prevented me from studying."

Lubna, a 33-year-old woman from a village in the Al-Joura district of Deir Ezzour.

"All I want, think about, and strive for is to raise my children in the best way, and to have them complete their education so that their future will not be like mine, and to see them in the best condition. This is the only thing that matters to me."

Kawthar, a 30-year-old woman from Deir Ezzour who had been forcibly married to a Da'esh member by her brothers.

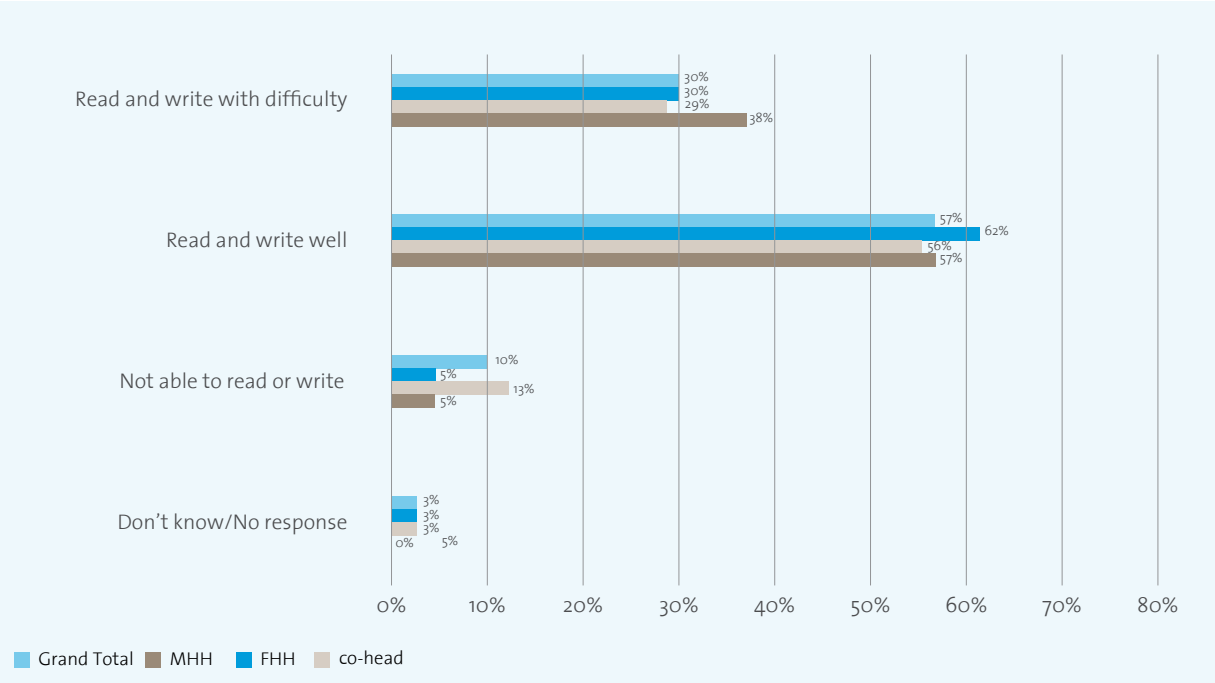
Umm Raed: how poverty prevented education

Umm Raed, a middle-aged widow and mother from Maskanah, Syria was born into a poor family. She started working in the fields when she was only ten years old and never learned how to read or write. After marrying, she continued to work in the fields all day only to return to cook and clean for her children. On days the family had no work they had nothing to eat, and she felt they had no power to change that. She supported her husband's participation in the Syrian revolution, then joined Da'esh. Umm Raed became more devout and began going to the mosque where she started learning to read. She and her family were displaced by bombings, and she lost her husband and one of her sons to airstrikes. She and her family surrendered at Baghouz and were brought to Al-Hol, where she struggles to survive and supports her daughters by working in a clothing shop. She feels like she has nowhere to go and has no intention of leaving Al-Hol anytime soon.

The lack of educational opportunities – and interrupted schooling – has left a significant portion of detainees semi-literate or illiterate. Two-fifths (40 per cent) of heads-of-household in Al-Hol reported they could not read or write well, or at all. Illiteracy rates were high among men and women heads-of-household, but women (13 per cent) were more likely than men (five per cent) to report being totally unable to read or write. There was little difference between Syrians and Iraqis in this regard.

FIGURE 14

Literacy levels of male, female and co-headed households, with totals



Political histories and alleged links or family ties to ISIL/Da'esh

The Syrian uprising

Poverty, deprivation and a lack of educational opportunities were key contributing factors that pushed residents of rural areas and poor neighborhoods to participate in the 2011 Syrian uprising, which eventually contributed to the rise of ISIL/Da'esh.

Rawan's story: revolting due to loss of livelihoods

Rawan grew up in an agricultural area along the Euphrates where she and her family cultivated fruit trees and vegetables. She studied up until the sixth grade when her family's hopes were shattered by a plan by the Assad Regime to build a dam near her family's orchards. Her village was submerged by the river, and all the villagers were strewn to different areas, as the waters took everything from them. Her family was given land in another area, but the land was not fertile and required years to bear fruit. When the uprising began, her brothers saw an opportunity to avenge this loss. They joined the Free Syrian Army and participated in a battle near the dam. She got married around the time that Da'esh took control of the area, and while Rawan's brothers did not join, her husband joined three months after their marriage.

While conservative religious values were often the norm in their communities of origin, there is little evidence in the oral histories that suggests individuals arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol—despite alleged links to ISIL/Da'esh—were politically or ideologically-oriented towards specific movements before the war. Only a handful of women and men respondents said they or their relatives had any political affiliations with groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood or designated terrorist organizations (e.g. Al-Qaida affiliates) prior to the uprising. Rather, most Syrian respondents described the beginnings of their alleged links or family ties to ISIL/Da'esh as tied to their family's participation in the 2011 anti-government protests. Most described their participation as a response to poverty and oppression in general, rather than stemming from a particular ideological orientation.

"Life was harsh, made even more difficult by the oppression imposed on the citizens of Syria... which deliberately impoverished the people so they could not demand even their basic rights and live with dignity...people had to work day and night within the country and in neighboring countries just to survive."

Rahaf, a young woman from Manbij described how her parents exhausted themselves working.

"In 2011, the revolution began, and my father, who hated [the government], would sit with us every night watching the demonstrations on TV. Soon, the revolutionary movement reached Manbij, and protests started daily in the city. My father encouraged my sons and my nephews to participate in the demonstrations, and they, loving their grandfather dearly, listened to him and joined in daily."

Abu Bassam, a middle-aged man from Aleppo, Syria, described a trajectory that was common to many Al-Hol detainees from Aleppo governorate.

"After a short period, the government began to violently suppress the demonstrators with live ammunition, killing many young people. In response, the revolutionaries decided to form armed groups to protect the protesters. My husband joined the Free Syrian Army, which was established within the neighborhood, and he worked with them in the Omar ibn al-Khattab unit of the Farouq Battalions. Soon after, the neighborhood was completely liberated and controlled by the Free Syrian Army."

An older woman named Umm Hani described how the protest movement led to individuals and family members joining non-state armed groups, some version of which was highly common for Syrian respondents.

No women respondents described having personally taken part in the protests or directly participating in hostilities by joining non-state armed groups. In contrast, male respondents described how, in response to the increasingly violent government crackdown on protests, they began to feel a need to organize themselves into "armed brigades" for self-defense. Some reported their initial opposition to taking up arms, but they ultimately joined a non-state armed group after witnessing the scale of the former Assad regime's violence, namely the violent suppression of protests and mass killings of civilians. The proliferation of small, disorganized non-stated armed groups contributed to a power vacuum that ISIL/Da'esh exploited. At the time, ISIL/Da'esh consisted of a small number of radicalized locals, bolstered by an inflow of foreign capital and fighters.[57]

Many women respondents said that ISIL/Da'esh was initially appealing because it seemed to bring a sense of moral and legal order to the highly chaotic situation that had emerged by 2013. In their view, ISIL/Da'esh was one of several Islamist groups that attempted to bring the fragmented armed groups into their fold to form a more cohesive front. Women respondents further described feeling conflicted, acknowledging that ISIL/Da'esh governance was extreme, yet preferable to the exploitation and lawlessness associated with smaller, less organized non-state armed groups. While women respondents reportedly both lent and withheld various forms of "support," they highlighted how structural decisions around whether a Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigade should join ISIL/Da'esh were made almost entirely in male-dominated spheres, underpinned by customary networks such as religious groups, tribes, and family ties.

"The Islamic State in Iraq and Sham appeared, which was spreading Islamic thought to attract young people to join its ranks under the slogan 'Implementing Islamic Sharia and establishing Islamic rule.' At that time, the Free Army brigades were fighting among themselves and forming on a tribal basis, far from the aim that the Syrian people revolted for, which was the overthrow of the regime. As acts of kidnapping and extortion for ransom appeared among the Free Army brigades, the Free Army lost its credibility, and this was a strong reason for the emergence of the organization and its gaining popular support in the region. After that, the organization's dispute with the Free Army began, which ended in an armed conflict, the result of which was the control of the Islamic State organization in the area."

Dalia, a middle-aged woman from Manbij, explained how Da'esh was able to attract conscripts using religious rhetoric and promises of a united front amidst inter-battalion divisions.

57 Gopal, A., & Hodge, J., Social networks, class, and the Syrian proxy war, New America, 15 July 2019.

It is important to underscore that many respondents framed their alleged links or family ties with ISIL/Da'esh not as an expression of ideological alignment, but rather as a response to the extreme violence they had experienced at the hands of the former Assad regime. Nearly all Syrian respondents described being subjected to state violence and losing multiple family members. Some recounted, as included in this study, witnessing or surviving incidents that align with documented gross violations of human rights by United Nations investigative mechanisms, as well as war crimes and crimes against humanity. These included the use of cluster munitions,[58] deliberate starvation,[59] rape,[60] and the systematic targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure. For many respondents, ISIL/Daesh was not initially perceived as a religious project, but as the only force capable of resisting the former Assad regime responsible for the deaths and destruction surrounding them. In this context, links or family ties to ISIL/Da'esh often emerged not from dogma, but from despair, the drive for survival, and the absence of viable alternatives.

BOX 1

AL-HOL DETAINEES RECOUNT HOW VIOLENCE OF THE FORMER ASSAD REGIME DROVE THEIR FAMILIES TOWARDS DA'ESH

"My husband began to fill his heart with hatred against the regime that was killing people on a daily basis. He wanted to demonstrate and object to the bombing, destruction and killing of innocent people by artillery and air strikes. My husband changed step by step, first by becoming one of the most ardent opponents of the regime. Then he joined the Free Army and fought with them on the battlefronts. After the emergence of Jabhat al-Nusra, he joined them. Finally, he joined the Islamic State. I did not object to him joining the Islamic State, but at the same time I did not agree."

Noura, a 36-year-old woman from a village outside of Deir Ezzour said she and her husband initially opposed the uprising, hoping to keep the peace by abstaining from what they saw as increasingly divisive politics. But when Noura's brother-in-law was killed in a bombing, her husband began to change.

"Some families dug a large hole and put the children inside it in order to maintain their safety. The children in the hole ranged from the ages of five to ten years or more. When they finished digging, a plane came and dropped cluster bombs on the hole. I remember how we mothers ran out towards the hole, but when we arrived, we saw the children were completely deformed by the exploding cluster bombs. Forty-five children died, and most of the mothers lost consciousness; some of them had a stroke when they saw their children dying in front of them in this horrific way; the children were deformed, so that different bodies were merged."

A woman named Kawthar from Deir Ezzour had only recently lost her husband and brother, who had joined Da'esh, when she witnessed what she described as a cluster bombing by the Government that killed dozens of children in the Al-Shafa area.

58 The IIIM-Syria has documented use of cluster munitions through its investigation A/HRC/57/86, A/HRC/57/86, A/HRC/52/69, A/HRC/48/70, A/HRC/46/54. The IICI-Syria has also documented the use of cluster munitions.

59 A/HRC/25/65, paras. 132-140.

60 The Commission of Inquiry has previously found that the government and its forces had committed "gross violations of human rights and the war crimes of murder, hostage-taking, torture, rape and sexual violence, recruiting and using children in hostilities and targeting civilians in sniper attacks." A/HRC/25/65, paras. 56, 69.

"Two of my siblings died while we were under siege. They succumbed to hunger and the absence of medicine before they could be saved... We became accustomed to the bombings, and eventually we stopped being terrified by them. It was like clockwork: an airplane would drop a bomb, people would rush to help, retrieve the bodies, and tend to the injured, and then within an hour, life would go on as if nothing had happened...I would frequently find myself thinking, 'Humans have become the cheapest thing in the world,' while simultaneously praying for divine retribution."

Ziad, a young man from Ghouta whose father joined Da'esh, lost two siblings to hunger and lack of medicine during the Regime siege of Ghouta.

"My family knew about what happened after the relatives started talking about my honor, and because of the pressure my father was subjected to, he called and asked me to leave everyone and come to them."

A young woman named Sara was a victim of sexual violence by Regime forces.

"As time passed, the barrel bombs started falling, destroying homes and killing children, women, young people, and the elderly. We lived through countless deaths whenever a barrel bomb dropped, causing us to fear for our relatives and ourselves. One day, a barrel bomb killed a large number of people and families. It was all anyone could talk about for a long time. They would go to see the impact site, a truly tragic scene with bodies, killings, and blood everywhere."

Noura was only fourteen when her home in Deir Ezzour was targeted by a Government airstrike and she was almost killed. After this experience, she became so terrified when bombing started that she was diagnosed with alopecia caused by fear and lost patches of her hair.

"In 2003, when the American army entered Iraq, I left school and sat at home and remained in this state for a while because the situation in Iraq had become miserable. After the fall of the regime, when the resistance factions were formed, I joined them and began fighting with them, and from here my suffering began…I participated in the first battle of Fallujah … After the American army took control of the city in the second battle, I left with the group and stayed with the resistance…When the State was formed, I disagreed with people within the Organization from the beginning, then I left them and joined the [Sufi] Tariqa group, then after a while, when the Caliphate was declared in 2014, I returned and affiliated with the State and began fighting with them."

Abu Karim, from Hit, described his trajectory from battles during the US invasion to Da'esh. He went into hiding for six years then re-emerged to fight with Da'esh.

"The Islamic State organization took control of our region and we were happy about that, as we coexisted easily with the organization as if we were one body with its members, because the organization's ideology had been popular among people since the time of 'Abu Omar al-Baghdadi' and 'Abu Hamza al-Muhajir' (two leaders of the Islamic State in Iraq)."

Abu Samir, from Hit

The Iraq War

Like their Syrian counterparts, few Iraqi respondents had been involved in specific political movements prior to Da'esh assuming control of their areas. However, several male Iraqi respondents from Anbar described trajectories that linked their involvement with Da'esh to experiences during the Iraq War. Anbar governorate, the place of origin for the majority of Iraqis detained in Al-Hol, was a stronghold of the post-2003 Sunni insurgency against the US-led Coalition. Eventually, a segment of Al-Qaida in Iraq[61] (AQI) rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) or Da'esh in order to legitimize its expansion into the Syrian Arab Republic and "to detach itself from the Al-Qaida brand."[62] Two of the four Iraqi male respondents said their fathers had been arrested while fighting with the insurgency. Both these men ended up joining their fathers to fight with insurgent groups during the Iraq War and later aligned with ISIL/Da'esh. For example, one male respondent described how his father, a former security agent under Saddam Hussein, was imprisoned for fighting against the US invasion. When his father was released from prison, he conscripted his son to continue organizing with various armed Islamist factions and the son was eventually appointed a governor under ISIL/Da'esh.

Almost all Iraqi women who participated in oral histories were under the age of thirty, meaning they were young during the US-led invasion. None reported having been involved with any armed groups or factions directly. Only a few discussed the US-led occupation during their interviews, although some were aware that their male relatives had been working in support of insurgent groups. These accounts illustrate how the 2003 US-led invasion and longstanding grievances in Anbar shaped the political and ideological trajectories of some male detainees. In contrast, the experiences of Iraqi women were more often marked by indirect exposure through male relatives rather than active participation.

61 Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) was listed by the United Nations Security Council on 18 October 2004 pursuant to paragraphs 1 and 16 of resolution 1526 (2004).

62 S/2014/41, para. 15.

"When my father returned [from one of his work trips], he spoke with my mother and revealed that he had been working with the Islamic State for some time, using his trucking work to smuggle weapons, explosives, and even rockets for them wherever they requested, facilitating their operations without exposing them...This continued until 2014, when my father came home with men who were strangers wearing similar clothing and speaking different languages; none of them were Iraqi. They gathered at our house, and after a few hours, they left carrying weapons and dispersed across the al-Qaim area."

Imane, from Al-Qaem

"My father followed the news about [Da'esh] closely and was very interested in their activities until they entered the Hit area without resistance from any party. They entered and took control easily because of the men who came before them, carrying out suicide bombings among the Popular Mobilization Forces or in any place where they were present. After their entry, my father immediately joined them, and my mother did not oppose him."

Jumanah, from Hit

A detained woman describes the events that led to her detention.

PHOTO: VICTOR J. BLUE

4

SECTION II: CHALLENGING ISIL/DA'ESH "ASSOCIATION" AS THE REASON FOR AL-HOL DETENTION

SECTION II: CHALLENGING ISIL/ DA'ESH "ASSOCIATION" AS THE REASON FOR AL-HOL DETENTION

Historically, the arbitrary detention of individuals in Al-Hol has been justified by their alleged "association"[63] with ISIL/Da'esh. This section aims to offer a foundation for the development of a human rights-compliant and gender-responsive set of procedures by exploring the complexities of the lives of women, men, girls and boys, and their subsequent arbitrary detention in Al-Hol. The analysis outlines in detail the developments, decisions, life circumstances, and experiences that inform these trajectories, and closely examines the extent and nature of these individuals' connection—or lack thereof—with ISIL/Da'esh.

Individuals with no links or family ties to ISIL/Da'esh

Contrary to prevailing stereotypes, findings reveal that a large number of individuals detained had no connection to ISIL/Da'esh. Approximately one quarter of oral history respondents described trajectories to Al-Hol that did not include any links to ISIL/Da'esh, nor 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 general, families in this category had fled earlier in the conflict and followed similar displacement routes as those more clearly linked to ISIL/Da'esh. The direction and timing of shifting frontlines left them with few options for safe passage, ultimately leading them to Al-Hol. These families often described experiences of extreme violence and human rights violations at the hands of ISIL/Da'esh, acts which may amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity, as discussed below. For example, women described witnessing the murder, public execution and desecration of corpses of family members by ISIL/Da'esh, or receiving death threats, which prompted them to flee.

63 Supra note 43.

Iman's story: ISIL/Da'esh brutally kills both her brothers for attempting to flee

Iman's father decided the family should flee for the sake of his sons when ISIL/Da'esh arrived. Her two brothers left Al-Mayadeen first by a smuggler. She and her family were concerned when they did not hear from her brothers after they had left. Then, **"one day before Eid al-Fitr, our neighbor came running to my father in the morning to tell him that Da'esh was gathering people in 'Al-Dawar' Square to watch the 'retribution' sentence against my brother Lulwa with another young man. I quickly ran to my brother, hugged him and asked him: Where is [our other brother] Omar? He…told me that Da'esh killed him a week ago in Al-Rahba Castle, which is an archaeological area where there is no one and we used to go for a walk…I could not see my brother being killed, but rather I hugged my mother, who was screaming with my father with grief and pain, because she would lose a piece of her heart. I looked behind me and saw my brother's body with a pool of blood underneath it, while his head was two meters away from him. But the Da'esh members were not satisfied with this only. They hung my brother on the Al-Saha bridge for a week, placing his head between his feet for all people to see."** Her father died of a stroke shortly thereafter. Iman was almost arrested for screaming at ISIL/Da'esh members after her father died. She recalled, **"We hated everything related to Da'esh, who claimed to be Islam but did not even know the meaning of Islam. Our religion is a religion of tolerance, not a religion of fanaticism. They were unjust and killed without mercy and took money from everyone."** After fleeing many times along the frontlines, witnessing a series of extreme atrocities, nearly starving to death and digging holes to survive, Iman and her family were taken to Al-Hol during a truce with the SDF. She remains detained there with her mother, uncle, and extended family.

Individuals without any prior links to ISIL/Da'esh recounted a range of experiences that resulted in their presence in Al-Hol. Several women said they chose to go to Al-Hol before 2019 because they had relatives there. For example, one young woman from Mosul traveled to Al-Hol to get married, while another travelled to reunite with her family after being raped by Syrian government forces while she tried to flee. Some women understood their detention in Al-Hol as an administrative mistake. For example, one woman from Jarablus was detained after visiting relatives in Al-Hol due to a registration error. A woman named Faten recounted the kidnapping of her one-year-old child from her Damascus home by a mentally ill neighbor; she followed the abductor to ISIL/Da'esh-controlled territory in an attempt to find her child. These accounts offer a more complete and complex understanding of the diverse and often tragic circumstances in which women were arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol – challenging common narratives that frame all detainees as being associated with ISIL/Da'esh.

Faten's story: following her kidnapped child into ISIL/Da'esh territory

Faten lived in Damascus with her young child. Her husband worked in Beirut and traveled back and forth. She noticed her neighbor, a widow, behaving strangely and obsessing over her child. One day this neighbor kidnapped Faten's child and took him into Da'esh territories in Deir Ezzour, prompting Faten to follow her. She received help finding her child from her brother's friend, who worked with Da'esh. Miraculously, she eventually found the former neighbor with the child, but she was unable to return to Damascus because of the position of the frontlines at the time. "**I wouldn't meet the woman who took my child because I didn't want to fight with her or see her. I wanted to get away from Da'esh; I only wanted to take my child."** Unable to find a way back to Damascus, she was eventually forced to flee because of the bombings. She ended up taking her recovered child with her to Al-Hol and has been detained since.

Munira's story: trapped by a registration mistake

Munira and her husband decided to flee their home Deir Ezzour to Jarablus when Da'esh took over because her husband wanted to continue fighting with his battalion in the Free Syrian Army. Munira lost contact with her family in Deir Ezzour as the fighting intensified, but eventually located them in Al-Hol. Her brother Maher was tragically murdered in his tent in Al-Hol not long after her family arrived. When Munira went to see her family for the funeral, she ended up being detained. **"After the mourning period, my visit was supposed to end, and I was to return to Jarabulus. However, when I went to the gate with my parents to leave, I was not allowed to exit. They informed me that I was registered as a resident, not a visitor, complicating my return and deepening my distress amid the already harrowing circumstances at the camp."** Her family tried to correct this mistake many times, but at the time of the interview Munira was still detained.

Though most respondents were not affiliated with or members of ISIL/Da'esh or any other non-state armed group designated as a terrorist organization, Al-Hol also contains a contingent of men and women who have worked for the Asayish intelligence and/or the Kurdish Women's Protection Units (YPJ). Two women respondents, both in their twenties and from Arab tribes in Deir Ezzour, shared that they had worked with the YPJ. Both had been detained in Al-Hol but were later released and returned to their communities. One of the women attributed her choice to join the YPJ because she had been beaten for refusing a forced marriage, while the other woman cited economic reasons— she needed to support her family and afford medical care. Both women reported receiving death threats in Al-Hol due to their association with the YPJ. In addition, several other women respondents said that relatives had been murdered for alleged or real involvement with intelligence services. These accounts present further nuance to women's participation and roles in non-state armed groups and challenge assumptions of homogeneity in ISIL/Daesh-affiliation among Al-Hol detainees.

Fleeing armed conflict and violence

One of the main reasons individuals arrived in Al-Hol, irrespective of any actual or perceived links to ISIL/Da'esh, was to escape extreme violence. Most respondents described fleeing both US Coalition-led airstrikes as well as ISIL/Da'esh-related violence in the period immediately preceding their detention.[64] The grave human rights violations, war crimes, and crimes against humanity perpetrated by various parties to the conflict have been well-documented by the United Nations. Both women and men respondents reported witnessing horrific acts, including the use of chemical weapons; the use of cluster munitions, the deliberate targeting of civilians, including pregnant women and children. Although nearly all respondents identified as civilians who had never taken up arms on behalf of ISIL/Da'esh, many had lost family members and experienced or witnessed extreme violence —only to be indefinitely and arbitrarily detained in harsh conditions, treated as perpetrators rather than victims.

"The medical staff set up a field hospital inside a small house to treat injuries. We were eventually struck with chemical and white phosphorus bombs, resulting in a massacre that killed around 400 people. They then ordered women and children to surrender. Initially, everyone refused, but there was no choice left. I decided to surrender for my daughter's safety."

Umm Farah, from a country in Central Asia, was working as a nurse on the frontlines in Baghouz

"We packed our luggage to flee with all the people of the village, but the [Coalition] plane bombed the water crossing that transports the people to the other bank of the river, and a massacre took place, as the people were gathering to move to the other side for fear of the bombing, at that time, about a thousand people were killed, and the color of the river turned red because of the abundance of blood."

Warda from Deir Ezzour described the final crossing of the Euphrates

"My 14-year-old brother, Ali, was on his way to work—he worked repairing phones—and was killed in an airstrike. That painful scene is something I will never forget as long as I live. It was the hardest day of my life, and to this day, I still feel the bitterness of loss because he was like my shadow."

A young woman named Umm Samir from Aleppo lost her 14-year-old brother, who was not involved with Da'esh, to a Coalition airstrike.

64 The IICI-Syria has documented and reported on U.S. Coalition-led airstrikes that have "caused civilian casualties, failing to take all feasible precautions to avoid and minimize incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects in violation of international law." A/HRC/46/54, para. 31. See also A/HRC/36/55, paras. 78-79; and A/HRC/37/72, sect. IV.A.1 and annex IV, paras. 7–11.

"The whole family was killed, only me and my brother Salah remained. After that, I moved to the village of Al-Shafah, where only two months had passed until my brother Salah was also killed in the international coalition bombing, so that I could be left alone...I wish I had died with them; it would have been better than staying alone. Children as old as roses were killed. On that day, I lost my brother Mustafa and his wife Doha, who was also pregnant, in addition to his children: (Ritaj - born in 2014, Loujain - born in 2016, and Einat - born in 2017). Also, I lost my brother Salah's family: his wife Hasiba and his children (Nihal - born in 2009, Diya - born in 2010, Doaa - born in 2012, Buraq - born in 2014, Zaid - born in 2016, and Safaa - born in 2017).

Samira, a 35-year-old woman whose brothers fought with Da'esh, lost her entire family, including three children to a Coalition airstrike. Apart from her brother, casualties included eight children and two women, one of them pregnant.

In some cases, ISIL/Da'esh actively prevented people from leaving areas under their control, even as those areas came under extreme bombardment. Several women said they stayed in Baghouz for so long because their husbands or families prevented them from leaving. In recognition of the coercive control ISIL/Da'esh exerted over civilians, including preventing civilians from fleeing bombardment zones like Baghouz, it is essential that women in these circumstances be acknowledged as victims of dual forms of violence—both from ISIL/Da'esh and from Coalition military actions.

"I tried to escape from him several times but was unable to do so. I continued moving with him, and by some miracle, he was not killed during that time...I grew to hate him and regretted the hour I married him, and I grew to hate every Da'esh member along with him...I stayed with him until the Battle of Baghouz, when the Organization had no place left. I asked him to send us to Türkiye, but he refused, saying, 'You will die here, and you and your daughter will not move.'"

Um Shada, from Aleppo, begged her husband to allow her to leave with her daughter, and he refused.

"When the situation in Hawija worsened, we left it, heading to the Sharqat district. We did not settle there as the situation was very bad, so we continued our journey towards the Ba'aj district. When we reached this area, there was heavy bombing; planes were dropping explosive barrels and cluster bombs. Da'esh was trying to withdraw from this area, and we had no other place to go but the border between Iraq and Syria. We couldn't go back because all the areas we had passed through were destroyed by the Da'esh. Any area we entered would immediately be besieged and completely bombarded, so we and many other families headed for a desert route without knowing where to go."

Fawzia, an Iraqi woman from Salah al-Din described her displacement route from her area.

"Whenever the battles got closer, we would migrate. We reached the village of Al-Susa, so I decided to escape from the organization-controlled areas to the areas controlled by the SDF. I actually escaped with a smuggler, along with my wife, through the desert because the organization didn't allow us to leave."

Ribal, a 33-year-old man from Homs who had lost his foot while fighting with ISIL/Da'esh.

The violence caused constant and chaotic displacement, which increased in frequency as airstrikes intensified. This confusion meant that many men, women, boys and girls in Al-Hol were unaware of their destination prior to their detention. In many cases, people fled with very little warning and without a clear plan for where to go, ultimately ending up in Al-Hol. Some women reported being tricked or exploited during displacement. As the violence continued to worsen, families often had to pay smugglers to escape ISIL/Da'esh-controlled territory, an option that was dangerous, expensive and often exploitative. Several women recalled how smugglers took advantage of their vulnerable situations. Sometimes smugglers would take their money and disappear or tell the client they were taking them to a certain town, only to hand them over to the SDF. These accounts underscore how displacement under extreme duress, combined with deception and exploitation, played a significant role in individuals' arrivals to Al-Hol.

Imane's story: prevented from fleeing Baghouz

Imane, a young woman from Al-Qaem, recalled her last days in Baghouz and her arrival to Al-Hol. Her father and brother refused to surrender or allow their female relatives to leave, even after her mother and sister were injured. She recalled, "**After a week, a second truce was established, and we still did not leave. Then, during the third truce, we were informed that everyone had to surrender and leave as this was the last chance for the Islamic State; after this truce, the area would either be completely bombed or subjected to chemical attacks. Therefore, we, along with a few families who were the last to leave the Islamic State-controlled areas, exited. Many armed soldiers were waiting for us, and they immediately arrested the men and took them to prison. We women and children were transported in large trucks, and when we informed them that many of us were injured, they acknowledged this and told us we would be taken to the Al-Hol camp, where everyone would receive treatment."** Again, upon arrival, many people did not know where they were. **"In the morning, we left the tent to see a large number of families and SDF members, one of whom my mother asked: Where are we now? He answered her: In the reception section within Al-Hol camp."**

Forced conscription and defection of men and boys

Many men in Al-Hol were forcibly conscripted by ISIL/Da'esh, and 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". Respondents often described a period of relative calm after Da'esh first took control, followed by systematic arrests and efforts to conscript any man who had been involved with the Free Syrian Army and had not yet pledged allegiance to ISIL/Da'esh. Men who refused to join were often imprisoned, tortured, or publicly executed. Some women witnessed the killings of their relatives for their defection.

Fida's story: ISIL/Da'esh publicly executed her brothers for defecting and confiscated her house

Fida, a young woman from Deir Ezzour, had two brothers from Deir Ezzour who were involved in tribal conflicts, then the FSA, then briefly pledged allegiance to ISIL/Da'esh. However, at the urging of their mother and friends, they left Da'esh and started working in smuggling. One day, Fida learned that her brothers had been publicly executed. When she and her family went to see, ISIL/Da'esh refused to take down their bodies for burial. "**We stood there gaping at my brothers for more than half an hour. We didn't talk or cry, just staring. When my mother saw my brothers, she started crying loudly, as if she finally realized that she had lost her children. My mother begged the authorities to take down my brothers' bodies so that we could bury them properly, but they refused. They insulted her and threw her out of the place. What made it even worse was that their bodies had to be left hanging for three days. Then they took the bodies to throw in the desert for dogs to eat. They did not return the bodies to their families. The Islamic State did not stop at killing my brothers. They expelled us from our house and confiscated it. They said that every family that has a military man in the Syrian army will be killed, their properties confiscated and their women expelled. My uncle took us in at his house. As for our house, a family of theirs–Da'esh– moved in."** After fleeing several times with her small child and husband, who was not a ISIL/Da'esh member, Fida ended up fleeing to Al-Hol.

ISIL/Da'esh employed extreme and gendered forms of coercion. Several respondents described how young men were kidnapped and taken to ISIL/Da'esh training centres against their will. While men were subjected to kidnapping and death threats, women were subjected to different forms of pressure, including through controlling access to basic services. For example, a woman named Umm Anas described how ISIL/Da'esh prevented her from giving birth in a hospital under their control until her husband signed a loyalty pledge. As a result, she was forced to give birth without medical care, and her baby was stillborn.

Omar's story: forced conscription

Omar was in in his mid-thirties when ISIL/Da'esh arrived to Al-Bokamal. He went into hiding, but his cousin joined ISIL/Da'esh and forced Omar to turn himself in. After being tortured in prison and nearly executed, ISIL/Da'esh demanded he join their combat forces. He resisted as long as he could and even tried to make a deal that he would fight but not declare allegiance. He recalled how ISIL/Da'esh leadership refused and said to him, **"You will not fight with us until you pledge allegiance to the organization." So I said to myself that I was dead either way, so I decided to declare a pledge of allegiance, and joined the fighters."** Omar ended up being forced to fight in combat until he was injured in the stomach, losing his kidney. Now in Al-Hol, he went on to reflect on his involvement with ISIL/Da'esh: **"I did not like Daesh but love for my land was what motivated me to join this criminal organization."**

Although some men and women respondents stated that they (or their male relatives) initially joined ISIL/Da'esh, they also indicated that they had defected prior to their detention in Al-Hol. Defections were often motivated by a refusal to fight or growing fear for their lives. Several respondents shared accounts of defecting, or of helping male relatives to flee or defect to avoid being forced into combat. The continued detention of individuals who took steps to distance themselves from ISIL/Daesh—or whose family members did so—raises important questions about the complexities and limitations to use "affiliation" or "association" as broad categories of analysis. It also shows the critical need for individualized assessments, grounded in human rights and the rule of law, to appropriately address the situations of those detained in Al-Hol.

One day, my brother Bilal came home…He told us that he fled from the clashes. He wanted to flee from the territory of the Islamic State so that they wouldn't find him. My father agreed immediately. The next day, we all left Sousseh."

Aida, a 25-year old from Deir Ezzour

"Someone knocked on my door. I opened the door, and there was a member of the organization carrying a verbal message asking me to quickly join the ranks of the fighters. Here, I had to choose between joining the ranks of the fighters or fleeing the area, so I chose to flee with my family."

Ali was 44 and working as a mobile vegetable salesman when ISIL/Da'esh entered Deir Ezzour. He worked for them as a court clerk initially, but when they demanded that he join the combat ranks he defected.

Socioeconomic factors

A wartime economy in which affiliation with armed groups became one of the few viable means of income compounded the threat of forced conscription. Women often directly linked their male relatives' decision to join ISIL/Da'esh to deepening poverty, which worsened amidst the prolonged war. Many families had lost their homes, jobs and businesses, leaving membership in armed groups as one of few available options. Many respondents said men came to see ISIL/Da'esh membership as the only way to support their families.

"Poverty and hunger were [my sons'] main reasons for their joining."

Um Nabil, an elderly mother of four from a village outside Manbij

"My husband lived his life as a poor worker moving between several countries for his livelihood, and this experience fueled his desire to fight."

Mahasin, a middle-aged woman from Manbij

"Since my husband was unable to find work at the time, he began associating himself with the armed groups that were moving into our neighborhood... At some point in time, he became a member of the 'Daesh' group and swore allegiance to them."

Umm Rania, a 29-year-old woman from Deir Ezzour

Because of the poor economic situation, the extent of women's support was also influenced by financial incentives and social benefits. ISIL/Da'esh paid salaries in US dollars, hired men and some women into a variety of jobs, provided services, and took care of the families that pledged allegiance. Alongside improved financial situations came a sense of social prestige, which appealed to women, particularly those from poor backgrounds.

"We lived happily as Mohammad was provided a house and a car by the Organization's housing authority...The Organization granted salaries to the families of its members to incentivize people and encourage allegiance."

Nisreen, a middle-aged woman from Manbij described how incentive packages were Da'esh policy to attract members.

"After the Free Syrian Army was defeated and the Islamic State took control of the city, life improved significantly. The Islamic State provided job opportunities and distributed Zakat money to Muslims. They also helped us treat my father by arranging for him to undergo surgery at their expense."

Rahaf, a young woman from Manbij, explained how life improved after Da'esh arrived

"Our lives revolved around the Islamic State, the news of its battles and victories. We became people of influence and authority, everyone feared us, so we lived our lives in luxury."

Narjis, a 42-year-old woman from Manbij, described how her family's social status changed considerably after joining Da'esh,

Although there were clear economic and social incentives for becoming involved with ISIL/Da'esh, some 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 degree of support or motivation to join. 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. For some, newfound financial security and enhanced social standing reinforced a sense of divine providence grounded in radical religious ideas. A religious fervor appeared to take hold among some men and women during this time, reinforced by grandiose rhetoric and the influx of supporters from all over the world. Several women described experiencing a profound euphoria during this period. For many, at least temporarily, ISIL/Da'esh was perceived as a liberatory force, coming to serve long-overdue justice to the people of Iraq and Syria.

"The family began to receive salaries in US dollars and their economic situation improved. Hassan obtained a car from the organization and became very radical in thought, as the reason for joining the organization was religious and not financial."

Khadija, from a village outside Manbij recalled how her husband changed over time due to the money and religious rhetoric,

"During those days, I would go out and see the Islamic state flag flying high. My heart would almost burst with joy. The Islamic State expanded, taking control of areas in Syria and Iraq. There was joy among Muslims worldwide, and the pledges of allegiance to the State began to come in succession."

Umm Ayman, a 34-year-old woman from Deir Ezzour, said "life became beautiful" during this time.

"Joy filled our hearts after this victory over the infidels and my husband's return home safely. After a short period of time, the caliphate was announced, and Caliph Abu Bakr appeared publicly, so the umma rejoiced with this announcement. The pledges to the State began to come in succession from all Islamic countries."

Afnan, a 35-year-old woman from Aleppo

Souad's story: financial stability as a driving factor for ISIL/Da'esh conscription

Souad grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in Homs with two schoolteachers for parents. When she was in ninth grade, she married her cousin Amer who was returning from Lebanon to take over his family farm near Aleppo. Although she was getting married, she insisted on completing her education and was very sad to have to leave school because of the protests. When she learned she was pregnant, she even tried to have an abortion because she wanted to continue school so badly. When ISIL/Da'esh arrived, she lost touch with her family and was forced to stay at home all day. ISIL/Da'esh extracted "zakat" from the families that did not join, causing their financial situation to deteriorate. She saw how the ISIL/Da'esh families lived in luxury while her family struggled to get by. One day, her uncle told Souad that her husband Amer had joined because he could not find any other job. Souad was devastated and wondered how she would manage on her own. The next day, a large car arrived with women who tried to recruit her into the "Hisbah" (religious police), but Souad refused. Then Souad's uncle was given a large sum of money saying it was for Amer's affiliation, and within two months, their financial situation had improved dramatically.

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. These accounts highlight the complex interplay of socioeconomic deprivation, ideological appeal, and coercive pressure that shaped individual and household-level decisions to align with ISIL/Da'esh. Respondents suggested that involvement often stemmed less from rigid ideological conviction and more from a convergence of survival strategies, perceived opportunities, and shifting moral and political frameworks shaped by the realities of war.

"A month later, while I was heading to my school, in the middle of a lesson, many armed men entered... When I got home, I told my family what had happened. My brother confirmed that they had closed all the schools, wanting a generation that knows nothing but jihad for the sake of Allah."

Sahar, a young woman from Aleppo city, said she was depressed because Da'esh closed her school and she loved studying. She felt Da'esh could not possibly offer a brighter future.

Employment

A number of men and women respondents reported having undertaken paid labor for ISIL/Da'esh. The nature of this work was highly gendered.[65] Of the twenty men interviewed, most had performed some form of paid work for ISIL/Da'esh at some point, although, as shown above, this employment was often secured under violent or coercive circumstances. In contrast, only a small number of Syrian women reported receiving payment for working with ISIL/Da'esh. Women respondents more frequently described the various roles that male relatives had occupied for ISIL/Da'esh, often emphasizing that these roles were assumed out of fear, poverty or necessity rather than ideological alignment. Most TCNs had some form of paid employment with ISIL/Da'esh, which is discussed in detail in the following section. This section focusses on the subset of Syrian and Iraqi men, as well as Syrian women, who were affiliated with Da'esh through paid employment.

Women who worked in paid jobs for ISIL/Da'esh

The vast majority of women respondents did not have paid employment with ISIL/Da'esh. Only nine Syrian women who participated in the oral histories reported having worked for the group, while no Iraqi woman reported any form of paid employment. Most Syrian and Iraqi women had worked in agriculture for little or no pay and/or performed domestic labor prior to the conflict and, for Syrian women respondents, many continued this work under ISIL/Da'esh. The few Syrian women who had worked outside the home prior to ISIL/Da'esh either lost their positions or started working for ISIL/Da'esh. Of the Syrian women who worked under ISIL/Da'esh, four taught Qur'an classes, two served in the "Hisbah" (religious police)[66], one held a managerial role in the education department, and one worked in clothing sales and distribution. Umm Imad, an older woman and early ISIL/Da'esh supporter, mentioned preparing food for fighters during the final battles, although this work was likely not paid. One woman also mentioned working in an all-women's internet hall at one point, although it was not necessarily directly funded by ISIL/Da'esh.

65 Labor was already highly gendered prior to the arrival of ISIL/Da'esh and became more so during their rule. The group's gender ideology, expressed through their online propaganda magazines such as Rumiyah and Dabiq, declared men as the active participants in what could be considered as "labor" - militant activities and bureaucratic work - while relegating women to roles centred around domestic tasks and reproduction. This rigid gender dichotomy led to a perception of women as adjuncts to the organization – as wives, mothers, or sisters – rather than as workers or members. This perspective is often echoed in the language the international community uses to describe women, typically as "affiliates" rather than direct participants. See the work of the Clarion project, UN Women, and the Global Network for Extremism and Technology for more on gendered employment dynamics under ISIL/Da'esh.

66 *Hisbah* refers to the enforcement of moral and religious conduct under Islamic law. Under ISIL/Da'esh, the hisbah police acted as religious enforcers, monitoring public behavior—especially of women—and punishing perceived violations of dress codes, gender segregation, and religious practice.

"I worked in the education office and became a teacher for the Organization. Things were good as salaries were paid in US dollars. The reason my husband joined the Organization was religious, and I also joined for the same reason, aiming to serve Muslims and teach children their religion."

Yara, a 48-year-old woman from Manbij had worked in an ISIL/Da'esh [religious] education department.

"One day, women came to all the residents in our area, informing us about the opening of a special house for women to memorize the Qu'ran, learn Tajweed, and everything related to Islam, aiming to create a generation that knows only Islam. I agreed and started going to the place every day to learn how to recite the Qur'an with Tajweed. Within a year, I became one of those who had memorized the Qur'an, earning the admiration and pride of many women, especially those who taught me. I was honored in a special ceremony, which filled me with joy."

Malak, from Aleppo, describes how Qur'an teaching was a main employment option for women.

"I was not separate from the activities of my husband and children for the State, but rather I was part of the Organization, as I worked for the Hisbah Diwan in Manbij. My job was to help sisters with the women's hisbah in the Sharia lessons that were given in the mosques. I called on women to adhere to Islamic dress, maintain modesty, not mix with men, and support the Islamic State. I punished violations with flogging. I was proud that I was from a family in which the husband and sons were fighters with the Islamic State."

Narjis is a 42-year-old woman from Manbij whose entire family joined ISIL/Da'esh in the early stages. She started working with the Hisbah to show the depth of her family's commitment to the cause.

Unlike men, who were often forced into combat or compelled to take other roles for ISIL/Da'esh, the few women who worked for the group appeared to have done so for different reasons. Women who taught Qur'an courses were religiously committed and had prior teaching experience. They appeared to have been deeply dedicated to ISIL/Da'esh at the time and appreciated the prestige these positions afforded them within the organization. Teaching or participating in Qur'an lessons effectively represented the only educational opportunities available to women and girls under ISIL/Da'esh rule, as well as one of the few accepted opportunities for them to gather. There was also a financial incentive, as women who performed well were given monetary rewards. This was particularly appealing for women who needed to work out of economic necessity, as was the case for several respondents. For example, a woman named Hazar, a single mother from an extremely poor household in Deir Ezzour, accepted a job with ISIL/Da'esh because of her family's financial situation and her mother's illness. Accounts such as Hazar's show the complexity of push and pull factors—religious belief, social status, and economic survival—that influenced women's decisions to accept employment with ISIL/Da'esh.

"A year after the Islamic State's entry into Mayadin, our situation became worse than before, with no job opportunities available. One day, our neighbor visited my sick mother, who needed medicine and hospital care. The neighbor mentioned she would ask her husband about finding a suitable job for me and would inform me as soon as possible. A week later, she told me that there was work available with the Islamic State in Hisbah. I was surprised and asked what I would do there. She explained that I could either whip women who didn't adhere to the dress code, teach Quran memorization courses, or be responsible for managing and distributing clothing. After much thought, I agreed to work in the clothing sales and distribution.

I began working from eight in the morning until six in the evening, with a special car taking me and the other women who worked with me. Food, drinks, and money were distributed daily, and I enjoyed the job very much. My situation improved significantly; I started buying gold and silver jewelry. Since working with the Islamic State, they took care of my mother's medical needs and our monthly expenses. Every month, they sent complete aid to our home, allowing me to save a lot of money. I became passionate about my work and did not want to leave it."

Hazar, a young woman from Deir Ezzour

Men who worked in paid jobs under Da'esh

Of the twenty men who participated in the oral histories, most had some form of paid employment with ISIL/Da'esh. As previously discussed, ISIL/Da'esh attempted to conscript or hire all men of working age, and the consequence of refusal could be severe, including detention, torture, and execution. In the initial stages, men worked in a wide variety of government-style jobs in addition to combat roles. Some men managed to keep jobs that could be considered "private sector" within ISIL/Da'esh controlled territories, including as mechanics, working in grocery stores or raising livestock. However, as more men were killed on the battlefield, ISIL/Da'esh increasingly coerced any men of fighting age into combat roles. Respondents reported that almost all men in their families who fought in combat were either dead, missing, or in prison by the end. For this reason, only four of nineteen men interviewed had been in combat roles, and one reported his forced conscription. Two mentioned having worked as imams and two mentioned working in the ISIL/Da'esh court system. One had worked in the media office, and another had worked in the medical section. The remaining male oral history respondents worked in a variety of private sector jobs or did not discuss their employment. In addition to the work of the male participants, men and women respondents described a wide range of roles held by their male relatives with ISIL/Da'esh, ranging from administrators, intelligence, police, doctors, teachers, nurses, emirs, and even in minting coins.[67]

67 For a more detailed account of ISIL/Da'esh governance, please see: Bakkour, S, Stansfield, G. The Significance of ISIS's State Building in Syria. *Middle East Policy*. 2023; 30: 126–145.

Marriage and gender-based violence

A high number of women and girls detained in Al-Hol have experienced gender-based violence, including forced marriages, early marriages, human trafficking, enslavement and rape.[68] Based on respondents' stories, even when marriages were not forced, women and girls often had little say in their prospects, or whether their husbands joined ISIL/Da'esh. This section explores the experiences of women and girls detained in Al-Hol with gender-based violence both within families and prior to the conflict, as well as during experiences with ISIL/Da'esh and in Al-Hol. It addresses issues of influence, power, coercion, and resistance in women's and girls' stories as presented by respondents.

Marriage

The oral history sample was designed so that approximately half (43 of the 92 Iraqi and Syrian women respondents) were married to a man in some way "affiliated" with ISIL/Da'esh either at the time of marriage or sometime thereafter. Of these women, most were under 18 at the time of marriage, which was the norm for marriages prior to ISIL/Da'esh. Older women respondents had generally been married to a man who later became affiliated with ISIL/Da'esh rather than having married during the period of ISIL/Da'esh rule. Marriage under ISIL/Da'esh took many forms. Previous research found some families may have seen these marriages as strategic, others felt it was the best way to protect their daughters, and still others resisted; but it was rarely the decision of the girl or woman by herself.[69] Almost all women in this study entered marriages arranged by male relatives and often knew little about their husbands prior to the marriage. Some of the marriages that took place during ISIL/Da'esh were undertaken in a similar manner to forms of marriage prior to the conflict, while others were conflict-related forced marriage,[70] either through direct coercion or under conditions where refusal was nearly impossible (as described by the women below). Alternatively, some women respondents report that they had actively wanted to marry ISIL/Da'esh members for ideological and/or financial reasons. The oral histories collected for this study reflect a wide spectrum of experiences: from marriages that mirrored pre-conflict norms, to those shaped by financial incentives or shared ideological

A note on the definition of forced marriage

OHCHR defines forced marriage as "a marriage in which one and/or both parties have not personally expressed their full and free consent to the union." Child marriage is any marriage where at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age (CEDAW/C/GC/31-CRC/C/GC/18). It is important to highlight that most of the marriages described by both Iraqi and Syrian women in the oral histories would fall under the category of forced marriage or conflict-related forced marriage. However, this framing does not always align with how the women themselves described their experiences. While nearly all married or widowed participants were in family-arranged marriages—many of which occurred between the ages of 13 and 17—only a small subset of women explicitly referred to their marriages as "forced" and are highlighted as such.

This study takes the approach of relying on women's and girls' narratives through the oral histories to understand the ways their marriage experiences are shaped by constrained negotiations, layered obligations, and, in many cases, the severe limits placed on choice in conditions of war and patriarchal systems.

68 See Vale, Gina, "Victory, Violations, and Investment: Inside the Islamic State's System of Slavery" in Ashraph, S., Cheung Ka-Man, C. and Cook, J. ed(s), *Holding ISIL Accountable: Prosecuting Crimes in Iraq and Syria*, The Hague: ICCT Press, 2024.

69 Tsurkov, E., An Unnerving Fate for the Families of Syria's Northeast, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020.

70 For further discussion of conflict-related forced marriage see Donnelly, P. and Myers, E., "Forced Marriage by Non-State Armed Groups: Frequency, Forms, and Impact", International Peace Institute, 2023.

beliefs, to marriages marked by clear coercion and harm.

For the purposes of this study, decisions on marriage cannot be understood outside the broader context of war and displacement, where families often reported how marriage was a means of protection. 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. This often occurred in step with the decisions, or compulsions, of male relatives to join ISIL/Da'esh. Some families began to feel that unmarried female family members were at risk of sexual violence and felt it necessary to marry them off quickly. Several respondents said ISIL/Da'esh members had reputations for forcing marriages, which their families saw as good reason for marrying them as soon as possible. As ISIL/Da'esh solidified their territorial control, this concern became more acute.

"In 2018, my life changed, as I reached the age of puberty, and because of the closure of schools and the situation that was bad, in which kidnapping and rape spread, it was better for a girl at that time to get married."

A young woman named Sara from Al-Mayadin in Syria

"[When Da'esh arrived], out of fear for us, my father decided to marry us off. My turn came first, when I was 15 years old."

Shahed, a young woman from Anbar

"[My uncle] was worried about me and his daughters because, in Baaj, ISIS men would marry any girl they liked, even forcing her family to agree and forcing the girl herself. It didn't matter to them whether it was forced or consensual; they only cared about getting what they wanted."

Nawal, a young woman from Ramadi, Iraq, displaced to Baaj with her uncle's family after Da'esh took over Ramadi in 2014

While a few women expressed ideological or economic motivation for marrying ISIL/Da'esh members, most described these decisions as shaped by a sense of familial obligation and survival. As was customary in many of the women's communities, few girls went against the marriage plans of their male relatives. Many had very little information about their husbands prior to the marriage. For example, Kawthar from Deir Ezzour did not even know the nationality of the man she was about to marry. It was common for women to express disappointment in their husbands for joining ISIL/Daesh shortly after marriage, showing how women's expectations were often subverted by the escalating violence and instability around them.

Six oral history participants said they had been forced into marriages to ISIL/Da'esh members, or with 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 further appear to meet the legal definition of forced marriage.

"One day, my mother told me that my brothers wanted me to marry one of their friends who'd joined the Islamic State. I did not oppose my brothers' decision, as I do what they ask of me, and my brothers and mother know my best interests better than me. A month later, I married Abu Jihad, and after I married him, I learned he was from Palestine."

Kawthar, a 30-year-old woman from Deir Ezzour

Jana's story of forced marriage

Jana had grown up in a very poor family. Neither she nor any of her brothers and sisters had been able to go to school and had been required to work instead. Her father did not seek consent from his daughters for their marriages. She recalled, **"My father married three of my sisters to men who worked with my brothers [in the Free Syrian Army]…My sisters did not accept the marriage, but my father and my young brothers forced them to marry. I was afraid of forced marriage, and I always asked my mother, 'Will my father force me to marry'? My mother used to tell me she could not stand up to my father and prevent him from marrying my sisters to men we do not know, and all we know about them is that they are with the revolutionaries and have a lot of money."** Jana and her family were imprisoned shortly after ISIL/Da'esh took over due to her brothers' involvement in the FSA. Her father negotiated their release through forcing Jana to marry an ISIL/Da'esh member:

> **"In return for our freedom, he would marry me to a man from Da'esh. The man had the rank of prince and I did not know what his rank meant, but I realized he was like a ruler. My mother strongly objected to my marrying this man, and I tried desperately to convince my father to find another solution. But he was adamant and told us he did not see a problem with my marrying a man affiliated with the Islamic State, and in any event, this marriage would protect the family and its property.**
>
> **Indeed, the man arrived at our house, and he was accompanied by a sheikh, who wrote the marriage contract. My father forced me to agree. What is strange is that my father and the man agreed that on that very day, I would go with the man to his house without having a wedding party like other girls. I said goodbye to my mother, who was crying hard, and her brokenness was very clear. She was unable to prevent this marriage. I left the house feeling hatred towards my father and my brothers. I married Abu Mustafa, that was his surname, and I did not know his real name because he was a very mysterious man. He was already married to three women, and I was the fourth. He was originally from Algeria and his position in the Islamic State was a prince, and each of his wives lived in a house alone, and I lived in a house alone, and because I was 15 years old, he brought girls to serve me and do the housework.**
>
> **He treated me well, but I felt hatred towards Abu Mustafa, my father, and my brothers. It was not my fault that I should be punished for the actions of my brothers, who had chosen the path of misfortune and trouble."**

Abu Mustafa ended up divorcing Jana and setting her free during the final battles in Deir Ezzour, and said he recognized their marriage had been forced. Jana recounted how he said he wanted her to live a better life, gave her a sum of money, and sent her to Al-Hol.

Child marriage,[71] already a norm in many communities before the conflict, became even more commonplace during this period.[72] Thirty-two of the 53 women oral history respondents who were married to ISIL/Da'esh members between 2014 and 2019 were between the ages of 13 and 17. Some women said they had initially felt content and well taken care and "treated as children" in these marriages. However, this rarely lasted for long because their husbands were often killed not long after their marriages. Several women who had been married at a young age expressed how confusing and challenging it was to be married as a child. For some, marriage was seen as a temporary escape from other forms of familial oppression; for others, it marked the beginning of an entirely new set of constraints. Many of these women also became mothers very young. While most described feeling joyful about their pregnancies, some also expressed similar confusion and fear about being so young with so much responsibility and dealing with the grief and fear of the death of a child. These accounts illustrate how marriage and motherhood during the conflict were shaped by a mix of coercion, cultural norms, survival strategies, and personal hopes.

"After marrying him, I was not very happy because I was still a child and everything was strange to me. I did not know how to talk to my husband's family or how to behave around them, having had no prior experience with people. Thus, I found married life to be very difficult for a girl who was not yet an adult."

Imane, from Al-Qaem was married at fourteen.

"My daughter became very ill. I didn't know what to do because I was young when I had her and didn't know how to handle such situations...My daughter was dying in my arms, and I didn't know what to do."

Noura, from Deir Ezzour, was only sixteen when she lost her first child.

Several women said they had actively wanted marriages to ISIL/Da'esh members for financial or religious reasons. This seemed especially true when they came from poor backgrounds. For example, Rahaf, a 24-year-old woman from Manbij who grew up in a very poor family wanted the marriage because they had "provided job opportunities and distributed zakat money" to her family. Several women described having been attracted by the ideology and specifically sought to marry an ISIL/Da'esh member, some needing to convince their families of the marriage. These findings highlight the need to understand marriage under ISIL/Da'esh as shaped by constrained choices and overlapping vulnerabilities, rather than fixed categories of consent or coercion.

71 Child marriage, also sometimes referred to as early marriage, is any marriage where at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age. See CEDAW/C/GC/31-CRC/C/GC/18, para. 20.

72 See for e.g., United Nations, "Syria's decade of conflict takes massive toll on women and girls",16 March 2022.

"I even considered marrying a man from the Islamic State, provided he held a position of authority. Indeed, a man whose rank was governor in the Islamic State proposed to me. I told my mother, but she opposed my marriage to a man from this faction. We argued a lot, and I told her that I would marry him whether she agreed or not. A month later, I married Abu Bakr, who was originally from Tunisia and held a position of authority in the Islamic State."

Hazar came from a very poor single mother household in Deir Ezzour. Being hired by Da'esh to distribute Islamic clothing was the first time she ever experienced a sense of financial security. She recalled,

"One day, a woman informed me that a man affiliated with the Islamic State was interested in marrying me. I immediately agreed and went to tell my grandmother. It took some effort to convince her, but she eventually agreed to my wish to marry a man from the Islamic State, understanding this was my desire."

Malak, from Aleppo, also experienced somewhat of a religious awakening when Da'esh arrived and had to convince her grandmother to allow the marriage.

Trafficking in persons, enslavement and sexual violence

Al-Hol contains a significant number of women whose experiences may meet the legal criteria of trafficking in persons—individuals who have been recruited, transported, transferred through forms of coercion, abduction, force and more.[73] Trafficking in persons is perpetrated in contexts where the "traffickers" exploit a variety of vulnerabilities in order to have control over a person for exploitation, which can include for the purposes of forced and conflict-related forced marriages. Several women shared accounts of having been confined in ISIL/Da'esh "guesthouses" with the expectation they would remarry. When a woman's husband was killed in combat and she had no other male family members who were eligible to be her male guardian (*mahram)*, she was taken to such a "guesthouse" and confined there, often with their children.[74] To leave, she would be required to remarry (after the three-month mourning period) or find a way to reunite with a *mahram* in her family. Because of how common it was for ISIL/Da'esh members to be killed in battles, some women were trafficked for marriage two or three times during this period and often had children by multiple fathers.

73 Trafficking in persons can be defined as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation." See Article 3, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. In addition, enslavement as a crime against humanity under the Rome Statute may encompass situations of trafficking in persons. See Article 7(1)(c) of the Rome Statute. The United Nations Security Council has also condemned the commission of act of trafficking in persons, among other violations of international law that may amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide. See for e.g, S/RES/2379 (2017).

74 Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children in Armed Conflict, *Child Trafficking and Armed Conflict*, 2023, pp. 12.

"I was forced to live in an Da'esh guesthouse with the 'sisters', where I had to bear all the problems and misfortunes that happened there and be patient. Da'esh members brought us food every day and gave us a monthly allowance to buy some of our needs, but they prevented us from leaving unless we obtained permission from the hostel official. They proposed to us every day; some sisters accepted and others refused (like me) as my only concern was to raise my son."

Mariam, a 35-year-old woman from Aleppo was forced to live in a guesthouse following her husband's death in battle.

"After some time, my husband went to work and was gone for more than a week, and we didn't know anything about him. His younger brother was with him. Then, the Islamic State came and wanted to take me to the 'Guesthouse.' This 'Guesthouse' was a place for widows, divorced women, or those whose husbands had abandoned them. My uncle and aunt were shocked and asked them why I was being taken there. They told us that a plane had dropped cluster bombs, killing my husband and his younger brother."

Umm Anas's husband was forcibly conscripted by ISIL/Da'esh and killed shortly thereafter. She was informed of his death only when ISIL/Da'esh members showed up to take her to the guesthouse.

Several women who described situations of trafficking also described witnessing airstrikes by Coalition forces against "guesthouses" where women were trafficked for marriage. Three women and one man described losing women family members to airstrikes against guesthouses. These accounts underscore the lethal risks trafficked women and children faced, not only from the violence of trafficking itself, but from being trapped in an area being targeted by airstrikes with no means of escape.

"On the twenty-first day, after the Hajin road was cut off from the desert side, the international coalition bombed 'the guest house', which is a gathering place for widowed women in Gharanij, as my family's house was very close to the guest house (directly behind it). On that day, my parents, my sister, and my two brothers were killed, in addition to a large number of people (about forty people inside and outside the hostels), only I had one brother left alive in the organization's territory, in addition to my husband."

Sara, a young woman from Mayadin

"One day, my mother and my sisters Fayza and Yusra went to Sousa to visit a friend in one of the guesthouses and to buy some things from the market. That day, by divine decree, the coalition bombed the guesthouse near the Sousa roundabout, killing my mother and both sisters in the bombing. Only I, my sister Noura, and my son Ali remained alive from the entire family. I wish I had died with them; it would have been better than staying alone."

Huda, from Aleppo, had only just lost her infant son and husband when an airstrike on a guesthouse also killed her mother and sisters.

"In that bombing, I lost my wife and my three young children [ages ranging from two to ten]. After I left the hospital, I went to the bombing site, where there was no longer a trace of the 'guesthouse' that was behind my house. In that bombing carried out by the international coalition forces, a large number of 'brothers' were killed, and my house was destroyed in addition to another house."

Abu Samir lost his wife and three children in a coalition airstrike on a guesthouse, which was next to his house.

In addition, some women respondents described experiences of victims of enslavement,[75] sexual slavery, and rape[76]. The oral histories included two particularly disturbing accounts of women having been trafficked and enslaved, shared in detail below. These stories illustrate the extreme gender-based violence to which some individuals detained in Al-Hol were subjected to, and the serious violations of international law. The continuation and compounding nature of these harms through continued arbitrary detention in a context of rampant gender-based violence where they are treated as criminals rather than victims runs contrary to principles of international human rights and humanitarian law.

Nada and Majda's story of enslavement and rape

Nada, a 27-year-old woman from Al-Bukamal, Syria recounted a harrowing story of getting caught by ISIL/Da'esh members when she and her cousins attempted to get smuggled out of Al-Bukamal. ISIL/Da'esh took Nada, her aunt, and her fourteen-year-old cousin Majda to a Hisbah prison where they were beaten, and Majda was suddenly taken away. They were eventually released and made their way to Al-Hol while escaping the bombings, while constantly asking about Majda and unable to find her. Nada began working for an NGO helping to receive people who were arriving to Al-Hol, and one day was overjoyed to recognize Majda among the injured. Majda's story shows how the Da'esh trafficking system worked, and how profoundly traumatic this was for anyone who went through it.

"She told us that after she was taken from us, they put her in a closed vehicle with four other young girls. She didn't know where they were being taken. When they arrived, there were many Da'esh men, and they were taken to a man around 45 years old who was sitting and waiting for them. She said, 'They presented us to him, and he was examining us. His accent was different from ours, heavy and difficult

75 Article 7(2)(c) of the Rome Statute defines the crime against humanity of "enslavement" as "the exercise of any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership over a person," including in the context of trafficking, particularly of women and children. This encompasses practices such as forced labor, sexual slavery, and domestic servitude, even in the absence of physical restraints, where individuals are controlled through threats, coercion, abuse of power, or other means that deny their autonomy and freedom."

76 The Rome Statute codifies rape as a crime against humanity (article 7(1)(g)) and a war crime (Article 8(2)(b)(xxii), 8(2)(e)(vi)). For elements of the crime of rape as a crime against humanity and as a war crimes see International Criminal Court, *Elements of Crimes*, 2013.

to understand.' From what was happening, Majda realized that he was a high-ranking Da'esh member, possibly an emir.

She said that 'He examined us to choose a concubine or a wife.' After about fifteen minutes, he chose Majda and four other girls. The other girls were taken to another place to be presented to their emir or governor. Majda was left alone with this man, and women came and took her to a special room that had everything in it. Because she was young and didn't know what to do, she did whatever they asked of her. She said that after she was prepared, a sheikh came, and so did this strange man. They performed a marriage contract and told her that he was now her husband.

Majda tried to escape many times but couldn't succeed. She told us that this older man, whom she was forced to marry, would beat and torture her frequently. She even attempted suicide more than three times, but each time, she was saved. She told us that a year after their marriage, the place where the emirs and the wali were having a meeting was bombed, and her husband was killed in the attack. At that moment, she escaped from the house and found refuge with a family she didn't know. After telling them her full story, they took her in and informed her that she was now in Anbar, Iraq.

Majda stayed with this family until they fled from Iraq to Syria, arriving in the Sha'fa area. In Sha'fa, they were besieged from all sides until a truce was established between the parties, allowing them to leave. They eventually reached the camp. Majda told us this entire story, expressing her fear of returning to her family, thinking they might kill her. My aunt hugged her and reassured her, saying that she had told everyone that Majda was married and that they would now tell them her husband had been killed, and she had returned to them."

Malak's story of enslavement and murder

Malak married Abu Ali, a high-ranking Palestinian ISIL/Da'esh member who was impressed by her achievements in learning and teaching the Qur'an. When they moved from her village outside of Aleppo to Hajin in Deir Ezzour, she was shocked when he told her he would bring slave girls to do the household chores. Her shock turned to fury and disgust one night when she learned he had sexually assaulted the girls and murdered one of them. She recalled:

"Hajin was a beautiful area, with even the smallest house resembling a palace. We settled in a two-story house, and soon I learned I was pregnant. Abu Ali was overjoyed with the news and said he would bring three girls to take care of me and the household chores. He explained that many girls were captives of the Islamic State and were available for anyone to take and do with as they pleased. His words angered me, and I insisted that no girl should be forced to work or be held as a captive in our home. I did not accept the imprisonment of anyone's freedom. He reassured me that they would only be there to help me, so I reluctantly agreed to their arrival.

After a few hours, Abu Ali returned with three captive girls who then worked in serving me. I felt like a queen with servants at my side, and soon I became a mother to a daughter, and they also cared for her. Life seemed regal until one night I was awakened by gunfire. Rushing out, I found one of the girls dead on the ground, murdered by Abu Ali. He claimed she was killed for trying to escape, labeling her an infidel whose punishment was death. I was stunned and retreated to my room, haunted by the girl's image.

Over time, I had grown close to these girls; they were like friends to me. We would sit, talk, and eat together whenever Abu Ali was out. Fear of Abu Ali grew within me, and I began to despise seeing him.

The next morning, I rushed to the kitchen to talk to the girls alone. They looked at me fearfully and eventually revealed that they had been assaulted the night before, and the girl was killed by Abu Ali because she resisted him. I was deeply saddened by the injustice done to the girl and the treatment of the other girls in the house, realizing the law of the strong over the weak was prevailing."

Malak ended up running away with the enslaved women and eventually ended up in Al-Hol. Tragically, one of the enslaved women was murdered because of alleged involvement with the Kurdish security forces. Malak did not know what became of the other.

Marital and family violence

There is a significant subset of women in Al-Hol who faced familial conflicts due to their husband's decisions to join ISIL/Da'esh or ended up in Al-Hol on account of marital and family violence. Often because one side joined ISIL/Da'esh and the other did not, women were given ultimatums where they were forced to choose between their husbands and their families. In most cases, women chose to remain with their ISIL/Da'esh-affiliated husbands out of fear of losing their children. Some had attempted to resist their husbands but were forced to stay due to the threat of violence, sometimes putting them at odds with the rest of their family.

"My husband joined Da'esh after it took control of the area, and disputes began between my husband on the one hand, and his family and my family on the other hand. My brothers asked me several times to leave my husband and go with them, but I decided to stay with my husband and my child, so my brothers disowned me and refused offering me any help."

Fatima, a 36-year-old woman from a village outside of Aleppo

"My family became upset with Khaled after he declared his allegiance to [Dae'sh], and they presented me with the option of choosing between them and Khaled... [When I finally asked for a divorce] he said, "Go and stay at your family's house for as long as you want, and dream of getting a divorce. It would be less difficult for me to kill you than it would be to divorce you."

Umm Rania, a 29-year-old woman from Deir Ezzour

Many women in Al-Hol suffered severe violence from their husbands or family members during the ISIL/Da'esh years. Several women respondents said their ISIL/Da'esh-affiliated husbands or family members had attempted or committed extreme violence towards them, including dismemberment and attempted murder. Perpetrators were not limited to male ISIL/Da'esh members, however. Aside from fathers and brothers, stepmothers and mothers-in-law seemed to be common perpetrators of family violence. For example, multiple women shared accounts of stepmothers or mothers-in-law disfiguring them. Family violence often contributed to women wanting to get married to ISIL/Da'esh members, or to trapping women in abusive relationships with ISIL/Da'esh members. These accounts reveal how violence during the ISIL/Da'esh period was not only perpetrated by members of the group but was also embedded in prior marital and familial relationships.

Maysa'a's story: family violence drives her and her sister towards ISIL/Da'esh

Despite having lost her mother young, Maysa'a said she lived a comfortable life in Baghdad with her father and older sister. Then everything changed when her father married her stepmother, who eventually assaulted her sister**. "Men began to propose marriage to my sister after she reached puberty, but my stepmother rejected them all. She refused to marry her so that she could keep her as a servant. One day a tragedy fell upon my sister: my stepmother was at home angry, and my sister was working in the kitchen. I heard her screaming and ran to find out what happened. In a traumatic scene, I found her hand burned and in great pain. She said that my stepmother intentionally burned her hand with boiling oil."** Maysa'a and her sister then sought revenge by pouring oil on their stepmother, then running away into ISIL/Dae'sh-controlled territory to their mother's family, where Maysa'a sister married a Da'esh member.

Jamila's story: attempted murder by her mother-in-law

Jamila endured years of extreme abuse from her husband and his mother but did not want a divorce because she did not want to lose her children. She recalled**, "I was working as a maid in the house, and most of my family did not know what was happening to me because I did not tell them anything for several years. I was a mother of five children; I bear their upbringing and responsibility alone."** During the years of ISIL/Da'esh control, her mother-in-law came up with an incredibly cruel scheme to get Jamila killed by sending her into ISIL/Da'esh territory to retrieve gold from their family's old house, threatening that if Jamila did not do this she would not allow Jamila to flee with the family to Türkiye. Terrified of being separated from her children, Jamila described how she swam across the river and ran through destroyed towns in the desert, stepping across dismembered bodies all over the roads, only to find a Kalashnikov buried where her mother-in-law had said the gold was. **"At that moment, I knew that Khaldoun's mother had asked me to go back and bring the Kalashnikov because she knew that the plane would bomb me because I carried a weapon and would die alone."** Eventually, she found her way to Al-Hol where her husband had taken her children, only for her husband to divorce her and take them from her anyway. She remarried in Al-Hol and started a new family but remains estranged from her children with Khaldoun.

Resistance

There is a group of Al-Hol detainees who ended up indefinitely detained despite having resisted ISIL/Da'esh in numerous ways. Such resistance was manifest in their own personal journeys in rejecting ISIL/Da'esh ideology, family relationships, and their participation in public and collective efforts. In some cases, women resisted from within the family, and occasionally, they resisted in public. 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. Several women described a process of having grown disillusioned witnessing how their husbands' behavior changed after joining and finding ways to resist. Some women tried to leave their husbands after they were conscripted under conditions of extreme risk and precarity. Previous UN Women research also emphasized that women played various roles in resisting ISIL/Da'esh, from discouraging their husbands or children from joining the group to collaborating with opposing forces.[77]

Nur's story: from support to hatred and resistance

Nur was in eleventh grade in Deir Ezzour when the uprising began and her family was displaced. When Da'esh initially took over her area, she supported them: **"They treated us well: their words were convincing and comforting in order to make people love them. There were no problems and we were convinced that after they entered the situation would improve."** She married a Da'esh member and said their life was together was beautiful. But then her husband was killed in battle when she was four months pregnant after only eight months of marriage. She became vengeful and bitter. **"I lived the most difficult days and started thinking about how to take revenge for my husband. I thought about joining the Islamic State because the other faction was the one who killed him. I do not know why they killed him, as my husband did not harm anyone. Then I started to quarrel with anyone who spoke against the Organization. I became very committed and wanted to continue on my husband's path, but my family was against everything I thought about or said, especially my father who was afraid of all the factions."** Then, one day she was shocked to witness a public beheading and began feeling horrified by Da'esh. **"I remained in shock for a week, not talking and eating.... I started thinking, is it possible that my husband was like them and would be such a brutal person? After this shock, my view of these dogs changed completely. I could not believe that there existed people who would kill someone with such brutality and criminality."** Now returned to Deir Ezzour, she struggles with community members who are suspicious of her for Da'esh association.

77 Lahoud, N., Empowerment or Subjugation: A Gendered Analysis of ISIL Messaging, UN Women, 2018.

"I asked my husband to divorce me when he joined the Organization, but he refused and asked me to go to my family's home and talk about the divorce after he returned from the war front."

Ruba, from Deir Ezzour sought a divorce after her husband joined Da'esh.

"I came to see ISIS as the reason for my brothers' deaths, with my husband being the primary cause...This experience shifted my perspective on the faction; I began to see their oppression, their lack of mercy for the youth, and how they killed many men, broke mothers' hearts, and left many children orphaned...I grew to despise ISIS and my husband, and I asked for a divorce, which he refused because he claimed to love me. But I couldn't stand even the sight of him, so I decided to leave with my surviving family members—my mother, father, and brother. We left in the middle of the night, not knowing where to go, walking past bodies and the wounded, feeling a death of my own might have been preferable to the destruction my naïvete had led me to."

Sahar left her husband because he refused to stop fighting.

"I immediately asked Abu Ali to leave for the sake of our daughter, but he refused, stating we would rather die here than flee to the lands of the infidels. His response and mindset infuriated me; where were these lands of the infidels if we were all Muslims? So, I decided to escape with my daughter and the girls working in the house."

Malak began to hate her husband when she discovered he had raped and murdered a girl working in her house. When he refused to allow her to flee from the bombing with her daughter, she fled to Al-Hol and took the two remaining captive girls with her, in defiance of her husband.

Some wives and mothers did everything they could to stop their husbands and sons from fighting, often invoking their husbands' responsibilities to their children. They also tried to prevent ISIL/Da'esh ideology from reaching their children. For example, a young woman named Lina recalled how her mother tried everything at her disposal to stop Lina's brothers from fighting for ISIL/Da'esh, including begging, plotting to get them married, and lobbying ISIL/Da'esh emirs to exempt them. Lina's mother did not stop trying. After the family was displaced to Hajin, her mother asked Lina to make friends with the neighbor girls to find wives for her two other sons who had also been conscripted, again in effort to save them from ISIL/Da'esh.

"I told Wael that it had become his duty to leave Da'esh and stay at home, as he had three children to take care of…I asked Wael to go out to his family, but he always refused because of his fear of the organization; Whoever left them would be imprisoned and subjected to punishments, and on some occasions he would be charged with treason and executed."

Umm Fadi loved her husband Wael deeply and understood that he had joined ISIL/Da'esh for protection from a relative that had been threatening him. But when she saw how likely it was that he would be killed, she started lobbying for him to leave.

"I lived with my child, focusing on his upbringing, fearing that staying in Da'esh-controlled areas might turn my child into a mini-version of them. I tried hard to ensure that my child learned nothing from his father… Amer sent me a message apologizing, but I was firm in my decision to divorce. I no longer want any ties to Da'esh."

Souad expressed that she "felt joy inside" when she heard ISIL/Da'esh would fall. Amer was taken to prison, and she was taken to Al-Hol. She divorced Amer, and eagerly awaits being able to leave Al-Hol so that she can be reunited with her family.

Several men and women told stories of having public outbursts at ISIL/Da'esh members out of their extreme anger and frustration. There was one rather remarkable instance of women's collective resistance against ISIL/Da'esh described below. Despite these women's roles as de-radicalizers, mediators, and peacemakers, they remain indefinitely and arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol.

Ahlam's story of women's collective resistance

Ahlam's husband Faisal went missing one day not long after Da'esh entered Deir Ezzour. She had a sinking feeling when one day she heard a truck go by with a loudspeaker announcing that there would be a public execution, fearing that her husband would be among the victims. She recalled how the crowd, who were mostly women, prevented the execution:

> **"When we arrived, I saw twenty men wearing orange, all destined to be killed in various ways. I pushed to the front to see them clearly, wishing it was only a dream, not reality. My heart broke when I saw Faisal among them, about to be killed before my eyes. The ISIS fighters were few, and the crowd of locals was enormous, including Faisal and his companions, who were in the same dire situation. Everyone's family was there, crying, screaming, and begging ISIS not to carry out the executions. How could any parent watch their child be killed before them? The scene was profoundly sad, with every mother pleading with God to save her child. Suddenly, all the families attacked the ISIS fighters, overwhelming them, and seizing their weapons, and the women rushed to free their sons to escape. I ran towards Faisal with his brother and mother, and quickly, his brother helped us to flee."**

Al-Hol is heavily securitized, especially in "the Annex" where third-country nationals are detained.

PHOTO: ARTHUR LARIE

5

PROFILE: THIRD COUNTRY NATIONALS

PROFILE: THIRD COUNTRY NATIONALS

TCNs in Al-Hol represent a distinct and highly securitized population and are housed separately in an area of the camp called the "Annex". Their pathways to Syria, socioeconomic backgrounds, and experiences with ISIL/Da'esh differed markedly from those of Iraqi and Syrian detainees. This section draws from ten interviews with women from across the Middle East, Central Asia, Europe, and the Balkans, offering insight into how ideological, personal, and structural factors shaped their trajectories. It explores their motivations for travel, the roles they played under ISIL/Da'esh and the complex challenges they now face in Al-Hol, ranging from social isolation and family separation and resource scarcity to the near impossibility of repatriation.

Of the ten respondents, six were from countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), one was from Western Europe, one was from the Balkans, and two were from Central Asia. Nine of the ten respondents were between the ages of 27 and 40, and one was older. TCNs came from more socioeconomically diverse backgrounds than Iraqis and Syrians. Most were from middle or upper-class families with parents who worked in professional jobs like university professors, government employees, and merchants. Four respondents had received a high school education and four more were college educated. Some had full careers as doctors and teachers, arriving to Syria with skillsets they were able to use in service of ISIL/Da'esh. For example, one interviewee from Central Asia was trained as a gynecologist and her husband, also a TCN from Central Asia, was trained as a surgeon. Two respondents, one from Central Asia and one from the MENA region, came from impoverished backgrounds and had not attended school, or had dropped out of school at a young age because their families could not afford it.

"My father was an employee in the Ministry of [sic] as a general manager. My mother was a teacher in a girls' school. My siblings and I grew up in an open and intellectually, scientifically, socially and culturally educated family."

Umm Shadi, from the MENA region grew up in a highly educated family.

"[My son] Roshen went to work in another area, then he came back and asked us to move from our impoverished village, because he found a better job. So we went with him, as there was a rich man who loved Roshen very much and began to get close to him and provide him with everything he wanted."

Umm Faris said her whole family worked in agriculture in Central Asia, and that her son ended up getting closer to conservative ideology because he was being paid by a wealthy patron in a nearby village.

Several respondents came from abusive or difficult family situations that seemed to have contributed to their eventual turn towards ISIL/Da'esh. As examples, Umm Mohammed, from Western Europe, left home as a teenager after being molested by her stepfather. Umm Saad from the Balkans was badly bullied in school, then lost her brother to suicide and her mother to a heart attack in quick succession. Umm Salima from the MENA region fled her country after almost being killed by her brother for marrying a man he did not approve of. Umm Zaina from the MENA region had been kicked out of her home by her co-wife following the death of their husband. Such circumstances did not fully explain a turn towards ISIL/Da'esh, but in some cases, childhood trauma or a search for answers during unstable life circumstances seemed to have created an opening for their radicalization and recruitment.

TCNs became introduced to ISIL/Da'esh in different ways. Seven of the ten respondents were born into Muslim families while three—one from Central Asia, one from the Balkans, and one from Western Europe—had converted. Six of those who had grown up in Muslim families said they were from moderate families that did not have particularly conservative beliefs. Only Umm Salima from the MENA region came from a very conservative background that contributed to her involvement with ISIL/Da'esh. She described how during her teenage years, her brother became very extreme in his thought, forcing her to drop out in her last semester of high school, forcing her to wear conservative clothing at home, and confining her to the house.

"One of my brothers would mock me, jokingly saying that they would make me the imam of the mosque."

Umm Raymesa, from the MENA said her brothers would even mock her growing religiosity.

Isolation and fractured familial relationships appeared to be significant factors in the lives of TCN women who converted to Islam prior to joining ISIL/Da'esh. Umm Farah had left the farm in Central Asia where she grew up to study medicine in a city far away, and her family was unaware of her conversion. Umm Saad from the Balkans was a young woman who rarely left her room because her father, her only remaining family member, was depressive and drunk. Umm Mohammed's mother did not believe Umm Mohammed's complaints about her stepfather's molestation, so while she still had a relationship with her mother, she harbored resentments. Her mother discouraged her from converting and tried to pull her back once she understood the seriousness of her intent and the practical steps she had taken but ultimately failed to do so. Broken family situations seemed to have shaped both TCNs' vulnerability to recruitment and the depth of their eventual ideological shifts.

The oral histories of TCN women underscore how pathways into ISIL/Da'esh were often relational and gradual rather than the result of abrupt ideological shifts. For both converts and those from Muslim backgrounds, the most common introduction to ISIL/Da'esh was through someone they trusted such as a friend, a colleague, a teacher, or a family member who fed them teachings over time. Interestingly, ISIL/Da'esh ideology seemed to have further crystalized for two respondents because of events they saw as medical miracles around the time that ISIL/Da'esh was getting started. This recruitment process often blended personal vulnerabilities with emotional dependencies and a slow intensification of religious teachings.

Umm Sawsan

Umm Sawsan, from the MENA Region, had a friend from school who made her afraid she was going to hell. She said, **"At school, I had a very religious friend from a committed family. She often spoke to us about prayer and the torment of the grave, and her words left a deep impression on me. I became fearful at night and wouldn't sleep unless I had completed all my prayers."** When years later, this friend eventually confessed to Umm Sawsan that she intended to travel to Syria to join Da'esh, Umm Sawsan immediately agreed to go along with her **"perhaps driven by friendship and the promise [she] had made."**

Umm Farah

Umm Farah, from Central Asia, was introduced to Islam through her husband, who had been taught by a Tunisian friend. She recalled, **"[My husband] began spending most nights at his Tunisian friend's place and was frequently absent from home. His behavior started to affect me as well. He began to criticize my clothing, saying it was too short, and questioned why I socialized with other doctors. These and other personal remarks continued until he eventually surprised me by converting to Islam and asked me to do the same."**

Umm Saad

Umm Saad, from the Balkans, seemed to have been targeted by recruiters because of her apparent vulnerability. She had recently lost her brother to suicide and began posting about his death on Facebook. Then, a stranger from Morocco saw her posts and reached out. **"One day, a woman named Maryam from Morocco reached out to me. She spoke multiple languages and began advising me to seek help from God and that this was a trial and test, and I should be patient as it was God's will."**

Umm Salima

Umm Salima's new husband told her they were going to Türkiye for their honeymoon then suddenly announced they would emigrate to Syria from there. **"He said we hadn't come for a honeymoon, but rather, he had come to emigrate to the Levant. Surprisingly, I was happy about it because his good morals made me want to follow him wherever he went."**

Umm Jassim

Umm Jassim recounted how her father had become more withdrawn and severe after her mother's death until one day he announced the family would be migrating for the sake of God to Syria and that she was to marry one of his students. "**A week later, my brother, father, [my husband], and I traveled together. My brother and I had no idea where we were going or why. However, I overheard my husband talking on the phone once, telling the person on the other end that he didn't want to go alone, but preferred to travel with a family to avoid scrutiny during travel or when crossing borders. I didn't understand anything beyond that.**"

Umm Mohammed

It took a long time and great deal of coercion for Umm Mohammed's Moroccan doctor friend to convince her to emigrate from Western Europe. She recalled, **"At first, I refused because I had no wish to go, but she said that jihad is obligatory for everyone, we must all work to raise the word of God. I remained very hesitant about the matter but she said that wanted us to emigrate together. The discussion about emigration continued for a month. In the end, I decided to emigrate, knowing that the issue was basically mandatory."**

Gendered power dynamics and familial obligation played central roles in women's journeys to Syria, often overriding personal autonomy. Several women's involvement with ISIL/Da'esh appears rooted in obedience to male authority figures—fathers, sons, or husbands—highlighting the relational and coercive dimensions to their travel. Three respondents were taken to Syria by their male relatives and did not seem to have had a clear idea where they were traveling. Umm Shadi, a highly educated woman from the MENA region, was the only respondent who described independently self-radicalizing. Most women faced external pressures, but Umm Shadi's account shows how personal conviction was also a driver towards ISIL/Da'esh. She became a core recruiter and travel facilitator for others to join.

All TCNs had travelled to Syria through Türkiye, initially staying in houses rented by ISIL/Da'esh. With the help of guides coordinated by ISIL/Da'esh members like Umm Laith, groups of women made their way to the border and crossed into northwest Syria, controlled by various non-state armed opposition factions at the time. Some went under the auspices of pledging allegiance to Jubhat al-Nusra,[78] seemingly to be let into northwest Syria, but soon left for ISIL/Da'esh territory. Upon arriving, several women said they felt doubt but were then encouraged by the large number of other women they encountered.

"I thought I had migrated with a small number of people to fight for the sake of God, but I was wrong–the matter, which encouraged me most, was the numbers I found around me."

Umm Mohammed, from Western Europe, said she felt hesitant and afraid until she saw how many women there were in the Idlib guesthouses.

78 Jubhat al-Nusra was originally listed by the United Nations Security Council on 14 May 2014 pursuant to UN Security Council resolution 2083 (2012) under the name of Al-Nusrah Front for the People of the Levant. The listing was updated in 2018 to reflect the group's alias and name change to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). See, UN Security Council Narrative Summary, QDe.137, Al-Nusrah Front for the People of the Levant, last accessed 19 June 2025. See also UN Security Council Press Release, "Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Amends One Entry on Its Sanctions List", 5 June 2018.

Most stayed in guesthouses in northwest Syria with full amenities and a full curriculum of Islamic teachings. Some women married upon arrival to Türkiye or Syria. Like Iraqi and Syrian detainees, TCNs suffered through tragedies and constant displacement as the battles grew more intense. Several suffered through the deaths of their husbands and were remarried, sometimes multiple times, and a few also lost children. Some respondents said they tried to flee but were tricked by extortion schemes being run by the SDF or FSA affiliates.

Findings were aligned with previous research that found TCN women often worked for ISIL/Da'esh in support roles such as nurses, doctors and teachers, actively recruiting new members, operating as part of the Hisbah, surveillance, and engaging in fundraising activities.[79] This was likely linked to the fact that many had higher education status, applicable skills, and prior job experience. Seven of the ten interviewed TCNs worked for ISIL/Da'esh in different capacities during their time in Syria. Two women worked as nurses, one worked as a midwife, one as a gynecologist, one as a Qur'an teacher, one a member of the Hisbah, and one woman did odd jobs, such as distributing money. Umm Farah, from Central Asia, continued her work as a gynecologist - at one point overseeing an entire department - and did medical work up until the very end of the hostilities in Baghouz.

"I moved to al-Shaafa and continued working there. I stayed at the same hospital, taking charge of the entire gynecology surgery department. I received my husband's stipend from the Islamic State and my salary from the hospital, making around $700 monthly."

After her husband was captured, Umm Farah continued working in various locations as she was displaced during the battles.

These findings suggest that the profiles and trajectories of TCN women in Al-Hol differ considerably from those of Syrian and Iraqi detainees. Their experiences were shaped by a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds, cross-border recruitment patterns, and degrees of ideological commitment. While many TCN women were educated and held skilled roles under ISIL/Da'esh, their pathways were often marked by a history of family violence, gendered coercion, or long-term exposure to ideological grooming. These complexities reflect their diverse motivations and histories, with important implications for assessing risk, responsibility, and prospects for their repatriation.

79 Schmid, C., "Gender Dynamics and Online Spaces: the Case of the Islamic State", Global Network on Extremism and Technology, 2023.

A detainee outside her tent.

PHOTO: ZOMIA

6

SECTION III: LIFE IN AL-HOL

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Al-Hol is not only a site of mass, indefinite, and arbitrary detention, but has also been found to be a site of "incommunicado detention, disappearances, structural and systematic discrimination for detained persons on the basis of age and nationality, torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment as well as the deprivation of the fundamental capacity to live a dignified life including access to water, food, healthcare and education."[80] The detaining authorities treat the camp population as hostile and use broad terminologies of "association" such as "ISIL families"[81] to describe individuals arbitrarily detained. This section delves into the complexities and diversity of men's and women's experiences of arbitrary detention in Al-Hol. It includes an analysis of the security situation, relations with camp authorities and other State and non-state actors active in the camp, and gendered forms of violence and exploitation. It then turns to the main ways in which men and women are supporting their families during their detention, and the state of their mental health and wellbeing.

Violence and insecurity

Men, women, boys and girls in Al-Hol continue to be subjected to violence from camp authorities and other detainees. The UNSRCT's findings align with observations from respondents in this study, highlighting daily insecurity, including regular occurrences of "murder, physical harm, intimidation and sexual assault" with no pathways for investigation or accountability.[82] According to respondents, the prevalence and sometimes gendered nature of the violence proliferating in Al-Hol has changed over time. While much of the violence reported was linked to real or perceived affiliation with intelligence operations or organized crime, some of the ways in which it manifested were gendered. In addition, the camp conditions themselves have also led to many accidents and deaths.

Violence perpetrated by ISIL/Da'esh, other non-state actors, and intelligence operations

Respondents described living in fear of violence and basic security given the reported presence of ISIL/Da'esh, other "extremists" (referred to by respondents as "Kharijites")[83] and Asayish[84] intelligence operations.

Respondents described how ISIL/Da'esh, financed by individuals outside the camp, maintains a network of men and women to work as Hisbah and intelligence agents. ISIL/Da'esh also paid individuals to murder, extort, and intimidate people. There was a sense these operatives could be anyone, which heightened the terror. Sometimes, respondents said, murders seemed like acts of personal vengeance rather than punishment for an ideological transgression. Two male respondents also discussed being blackmailed by former ISIL/Da'esh members who had started working with the Asayish. According to these respondents, former intelligence agents for ISIL/Da'esh would threaten to have men arrested if they did not pay them money.

80 UNSRCT, Technical Visit to the Northeast of the Syrian Arab Republic, End of Mission Statement, July 2023.

81 The UNSRCT has also documented the language of "cubs of the Caliphate" by the detaining authority.

82 UNSRCT, Technical Visit to the Northeast of the Syrian Arab Republic, End of Mission Statement, July 2023.

83 The Khawarij, or Kharijites, were a radical religious sect from the time of the Prophet Muhammed who are believed to have killed Ali, his descendant. In this context, "Kharijite" is used as a derogatory term to refer to extremists.

84 Security forces of the Syrian Democratic Forces. See Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/48/70, para. 111, 13 August 2021, discussing raids undertaken by the Asayish, including biometric data collection.

"The situation in the camp remained stable until the arrival of the displaced from al-Baghouz after its liberation. The displaced were of different nationalities, Syrians, Iraqis, and foreign immigrants. This led to a multiplicity of ideas inside the camp in terms of groups that reconstituted themselves such as the Khawarij, State cells, and intelligence agents. Each party began to work according to a certain ideology for the benefit of itself to achieve goals that we knew nothing about."

Noura, a 36-year-old woman from Deir Ezzour

"If you are safe from the harm of the Asayish, you will not be safe from the harm of the Kharijites, and if you are safe from the harm of the Kharijites, you will not be safe from the harm of the State. You sleep at night and remain afraid until the morning, and every night you think whether the Kharijites will burn me or will the Asayish arrest me."

Umm Nabil, a middle-aged mother of four from Manbij described how people in the camp were trapped amidst the factions.

"My children and I were constantly fearful of these campaigns and the Asayish because of the harassment they caused to the camp residents. Additionally, I had a significant fear of the sleeper or secret cells of the Organization within the camp. I was always worried about doing something wrong in their eyes and being punished for it. You never knew who would carry out the punishment—it could be a man, a teenager, or a woman."

Yara, a middle-aged woman from Manbij described the sense of always being watched.

"My situation in the camp was not the best, because during my work in the market I got to know many Iraqis who were members of the Islamic State. After they came to the camp, a number of them became agents in the SDF intelligence. These people knew me well, so I started to be subjected to continuous blackmail by them. They threatened me that they would report me as a former State member. They wanted money in exchange for silence, and I had to pay them to protect myself from prison."

Abu Jameel, a 38-year-old man from Hama

"Whoever had a personal feud against someone was killed in the name of the Islamic State."

A 36-year-old woman named Laila from Deir Ezzour

Most respondents did not express any support for ISIL/Da'esh or other non-state groups and described the criminal activities of the various state and non-state actors in the camp with anger and fear. However, four men and seven women openly talked about their continued involvement or support for ISIL/Da'esh activities or having been arrested for working with the Hisbah. For example, one young man shared how his mother was arrested indefinitely for working with the Hisbah inside the camp, and said ISIL/Da'esh had murdered the person they believed turned her in. Though ideology may play a role in these decisions, many respondents believed impoverishment in Al-Hol and mistreatment by the SDF were the most common reasons some detainees supported ISIL/Da'esh in the camp. Previous research has also shown that ISIL/Da'esh paid higher salaries than other work available in the camp through NGOs or in the market, also suggesting economic deprivation as another critical factor.[85]

"We lived in the camp in constant fear of those pigs [the SDF], but when State members entered the camp and carried out some operations, our situation changed. There were no more troublemakers inside, and we no longer felt the same fear as before."

Umm Raed continued to support ISIL/Da'esh during her time in Al-Hol because she feels protected by them.

"These cells were active inside the camp, and poverty and hunger contributed to recruiting people into these cells, while the SDF's mistreatment of people also played a role in this."

Nisreen, a middle-aged woman from Manbij

"[Da'esh] controlled the economy and took money from people under the pretext of zakat. They even gave financial salaries to their subjects, and provided wages to the killers, for example they would give 100 dollars to kill a person. Some of the Da'esh leaders were inside the camp and some were outside the camp."

Roua'a, a young woman from Al-Baaj in Iraq, described the way ISIL/Da'esh was paying people to commit murders

85 Mironova, V., Life Inside Al-Hol. Middle East Institute, 2020.

Murder is commonplace in Al-Hol.[86] Many individuals arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol have had family members murdered or have received death threats themselves. Several men and women respondents had survived attempts on their lives or had witnessed their loved ones murdered in front of them. Murders were most common among men and women for alleged involvement with intelligence operations. However, more women than men were reportedly murdered for working with NGOs, which are seen as allied with the SDF, or for perceived non-compliance with ISIL/Da'esh morality codes. 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.

BOX 2

WOMEN AND MEN DETAINEES RECOUNT MURDERS IN THE CAMP

"As the curfew persisted, the camp experienced more mysterious murders, leading many people to speculate that these were the actions of Da'esh members targeting those involved in intelligence, prostitution, or those cooperating with organizations deemed infidels."

- Fawzia, a young Iraqi woman who arrived in Al-Hol in 2018

"Even covering the eyes was imposed on us, and they even held my mother, an elderly woman, accountable. Da'esh women would beat women who did not wear the niqab, and if the matter was repeated more than once, they might kill her...Even if someone cried, they would kill him later and ask why did you cry for this person."

- Roua'a, from Al-Baaj, explained how women affiliated with ISIL/Da'esh began imposing a dress code and moral code on other women with beating or murder as the consequence for transgression.

"One day at ten o'clock in the evening, we were all sitting and talking. Suddenly, three armed men entered, accompanied by a woman. When they entered, they asked us not to make a sound or a noise. They wanted Maryam. We would not say who Maryam was among us, so the woman accompanying them pointed to her, "This is Maryam," as she knew Maryam well. They took her by force. We tried to stop them, but they pointed a weapon at us and said, "It is better for you all to remain calm." Then they left the tent with Maryam, who was wearing her home pajamas, and they did not allow her to cover her hair or even herself... After half an hour we heard the sound of gunfire near the tent with the sound of a woman screaming before the shooting. Hanaa and I were looking at each other in terror, we were afraid that this was Maryam's scream and they killed her."

- Lina from Deir Ezzour recounted the terrifying story of her sister-in-law's murder for working with the Asayish.

"One day I was with [my father] outside the tent and a masked person came from behind carrying a pistol and shot him 8 times in the back."

- Jaza'a was only a teenager when he was displaced from Al-Ba'aj to Al-Hol, and witnessed his father get murdered in front of him, even though his father was not a member of any group.

"One day, I was sitting in my tent while my brother was playing cards with his friends. I heard a voice outside. They were four armed men wearing black clothes. They asked me to stay in the tent and not leave it. Then they took my brother and his friend. Two days later, they brought them back and shot them between the fourth and fifth sectors, near the reception."

- Razan, from Al Bo-kamal was still a teenager when her brother was murdered.

"One day I was walking inside the camp and a person was killed in front of me. He was a young man less than 20 years old. I don't know who killed him, but it was said that this young man was an agent with the army and intelligence."

- Suha, a young woman from Anbar, recalled witnessing a stranger murdered right in front of her.

86 Insecurity Insight's monitoring has recorded a total of 195 incidents of threats or violence inside Syrian camps between January 2021 and July 2023. In these incidents, 123 residents have been killed, including women and children, and numerous others injured. In addition, over 300 more have been arrested by various security forces.

Most respondents agreed that the camp felt safer after 2022 because there were reportedly fewer murders in 2023 and 2024. However, respondents also said that ISIL/Da'esh cells with male and female members remained active in the camp,[87] and inspections continue periodically. For example, as recently as January 2024, Farhad Shami, head of SDF media stated on X (formerly known as Twitter) that "31 ISIS terrorists and extremists were captured, several mines, IEDs [improvised explosive device], and other terrorist materials were seized, and a tunnel was destroyed," in four days.[88] Still, while the security situation is perhaps not as acute as it was in the past, the above-described security dynamics among the various factions continue to threaten the protection and rights of individuals arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol.

The situation for TCNs mirrors the rest of the camp, although because they are confined to a securitized zone, their circumstances are arguably more extreme. They were immediately separated from Iraqis and Syrians upon arrival, although a fortified demarcation was not put in place until 2021.[89] Women split into factions, where some continued with ISIL/Da'esh-affiliated groups, others started working for intelligence services, and still others did their best to maintain their distance from all groups. When murders and organized crime started spreading, TCN women were believed to be some of the main perpetrators. Phones were banned, and two respondents recalled having been deprived of food and water for a week as punishment. Likely for intelligence purposes, the Annex was further divided into sections based on regions of origin.

"Several assassination attempts occurred while we were at the market. The authorities gathered us, beat us severely, and returned us to our living quarters. They established a separate market for us, closed the gate, and imposed strict supervision and thorough searches for any necessary exits."

Umm Farah explains how TCN were separated into the Annex.

Abuses by detaining authorities

The human rights violations perpetrated by the detaining authorities are increasingly well-documented by the United Nations,[90] NGOs,[91] and other actors. Amnesty International found detainees in SDF-run prisons are held in inhumane conditions and have been subjected to torture or other ill-treatment, including severe beating, stress positions, electric shocks and gender-based violence.[92] Respondents raised several markedly consistent themes. Men and women respondents reported widespread, sometimes gender-based violence and harassment during the inspections undertaken by the SDF (with the support of the Global Coalition). During these inspection campaigns, respondents experienced extreme humiliation, and almost all respondents had their belongings, including essential goods such as a food, fuel, and blankets stolen, to the extent that some respondents believed inspection campaigns were a pretext for theft. Two women who had small businesses said their businesses

87 The terrorism risks have continued to be documented by the UN Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, which noted that "from a counter-terrorism perspective, delaying the processing and rehabilitation and reintegration of residents who are not candidates for prosecution risks radicalizing them and adding to the number of hardened extremists with the potential to multiply the future threat from ISIL, Al-Qaida and any successor groups." See S/2021/655, para. 5.

88 Rudaw News, "SDF captures 31 ISIS members in Al-Hol camp", 30 January 2024.

89 Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Dire Conditions for ISIS Suspects' Families", 23 July 2019.

90 UNSRCT, Technical Visit to the Northeast of the Syrian Arab Republic, End of Mission Statement, July 2023.

91 Amnesty International, Aftermath: Injustice, torture, and death in detention in north-east Syria, 2024.

92 Ibid.

were looted during the inspections, causing them to go deep into debt. Several respondents said loved ones were arrested under false pretenses—blackmail for example—and some women said their husbands who were arrested were never heard from again.

"We suffered humiliation, insults, and physical abuse, with female Asayish officers forcibly removing our headscarves. After the campaign ended, life returned to normal, but the raids and arbitrary arrests continued to terrify us."

Hana, a young woman from Idlib recounted how sometimes the abuse was gendered, particularly when women were forced out of their tents without their hijabs or abayas.

"When they took us out for the second time, a week later, we returned to the tent to find a tragedy. Our tent was robbed clean of clothes, food, sponges, and blankets. Even gas cylinders given by an organization were stolen."

Sara, a 21-year-old woman from Deir Ezzour

"The most horrific, frightening scene I saw was of one of the soldiers severely thrashing a 12-year-old child. He kept beating him until the child fell, injuring his head on the stones. The child was bleeding profusely from everywhere. I do not know how a human can beat a child in this way."

Aida, a young woman from a village in Deir Ezzour recalled witnessing the authorities brutally beating a young boy during this time.

Several respondents said their loved ones were arrested without being informed of the charges against them, or on charges such as "throwing stones". While some respondents admitted to having committed crimes, others maintained their or their family member's innocence. Several men and women respondents who had been arrested reported degrading prison conditions, as well as what appears to amount to torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment by the authorities in line with previous UN human rights, treaty body, and investigative mechanism findings.[93] The persistence of the conditions and full lack of due process in Al-Hol has been both by design and through the support or tacit agreement of the international community/third-states. The gravity of the harms described in respondents' interviews have not been met by any measure of access to justice or meaningful redress—either before and during the conflict or in the context of this continued arbitrary detention.

93 See e.g., supra notes 29, 58.

"They arrested my husband, alongside many other men, without telling us what the charges were. I was very distraught and scared for my husband. Especially since I was sure that my husband had no security problems and had not dealt with anyone."

Taghrid, a 29-year-old woman from Hit, Iraq was distraught when her husband was arrested, she believed, on false accusations.

"My neighbors' daughters, I got to know them in the camp, one of them was arrested for 5 days and was beaten and tortured and when she got out of prison she was always screaming like a madwoman. She was accused of throwing stones at a neighboring tent, but this wasn't true."

Randa recalled how her neighbor's daughter was arrested one night, accused of throwing stones at a tent.

"After two months, the Asayish raided my tent and arrested me on charges that I was a legitimate member of the Organization. I remained in prison for three months, and they tortured me a lot. They pulled out my nails and electrocuted me in order to confess to the charge against me, but I would not confess to anything I had not committed, and when they saw that I did not confess, they released me from prison."

Abu Karim, a man from Hit, Iraq, reported being arrested and tortured.

"They did not stop at just cursing, but accompanied it with beatings, as they beat me with thick hoses and sticks, electrocuted me several times in an attempt to extract confessions from me...As for the prisoners who were with me, some of them were accused of working with cells, others of delivering money to families inside the camp–there were donors outside who sent money inside to help–and one prisoner was accused of trying to escape the camp. Their ages were between twenty and thirty-five years. I received the same humiliating treatment that I received in the camp prison, including beatings and torture. I always heard the screams of other women being tortured during interrogation."

Umm Mazen was arrested for alleged involvement with the Hisbah. She said she was in a cell in Qamishli prison with thirteen other women, where she was beaten and tortured.

A few TCN respondents also discussed the aggression of TCN women towards the SDF as well as torture by the SDF in prison. There was a broad sense among TCN respondents that as SDF repression worsened, so did the TCN women's aggression towards the SDF. Some felt TCN women were receiving extreme collective punishment, given their inhumane living conditions.

"One day I went out to buy things from the market, and one of the sisters who was with us suddenly stabbed an Asayish soldier in the back and ran away. We were arrested and subjected to the most severe types of torture in prison."

Umm Mohammed, from Western Europe, recalled being imprisoned and tortured after someone she was with stabbed a soldier.

"The situation has become unbearable, with the increasing number of diseases, lack of services, and the collective punishment of the migrant section due to the actions of some extremists within the section."

Umm Jassim, from the MENA, was frustrated by the feeling migrant women were being collectively punished.

Accidents in the context of structural deprivation

In addition to the dangers posed by ISIL/Da'esh and other operatives, the inhumane and degrading living conditions in the camp constitute significant safety risks, especially for children. These safety risks and resulting disasters have been well documented by United Nations investigative and human rights mechanisms,[94] Médecins Sans Frontières,[95] Save the Children[96], and other actors. A few female respondents described tragic accidents that had befallen their children, and several had lost their children to tent fires and drowning. These preventable tragedies highlight the urgent need for immediate policy action to address the unsafe, rights-violating conditions in Al-Hol, where children continue to suffer and die in what should be a place of protection, not danger.

94 See for e.g., Independent International Commission of Inquiry On The Syrian Arab Republic, Punishing the innocent: Ending violations against children in Northeast Syria, 2024.

95 MSF, Between two fires: Danger and desperation in Syria's Al-Hol camp, 4 November 2022.

96 Save the Children, Remember the armed men who wanted to kill mum: The hidden toll of violence in Al-Hol on Syrian and Iraqi children., 2022.

"One day, while I was sitting with some women, the children came running, telling me that my daughter had caught fire. I rushed out and saw many men extinguishing the flames on her clothes. By the time I arrived, they had put out the fire and told me that she needed immediate medical attention."

Hanan, a 33-year-old woman from Anbar

"The fire continued for about half an hour, and when it was extinguished, they broke the door and found the three children charred to the point that their features were unrecognizable. The neighbors started checking on their children, and I also started searching for mine. After a while, one of the neighbor's children said that the children in the fire were my son Khalid, my son Omar, and my neighbor's son Samir."

Hassina, a mother of five from a village outside of Aleppo lost two of her young sons and her neighbor's son to an accidental tent fire. She recalled how a fire erupted while she was asleep.

Sexual and gender-based violence and sexual exploitation

Poverty, degrading living conditions, and structural power dynamics akin to a prison have created conditions for numerous forms of exploitation. While certain forms of exploitation applied to everyone—raiding detainees' tents to steal their valuables, for example—other forms like sexual harassment and exploitation were gendered. Several women respondents said NGO workers and service providers had charged them commission for services. For example, one woman said her *komin*[97] manager takes a part of her food rations every day, another woman said NGO workers charged her for medicine for her sick daughter, and several Iraqis said they had been charged commissions to be included on the repatriation list. These accounts show how the absence of oversight has enabled predatory practices to thrive under the guise of humanitarian assistance.

97 A komin is a local governance unit within the camp, often composed of camp residents, that assists with community organization, distribution of aid, and sometimes collaborates with security forces in administrative or surveillance roles.

"I suffer from exploitation, as some of the water tanker drivers affiliated with Blumont will not give me water until I give them bread in return, meaning water for food. Every time there was a raid, the security forces would steal everything from my tent and tear it apart. Each time, people would collect money and buy me a new tent."

Umm Shada, a 30-year-old woman from a village outside of Aleppo

"Some employees charged a commission to bring medicine from outside the camp. Everyone in the camp was exploited in different ways, but I refused to let anyone exploit me."

Hanan, whose daughter was terribly burned because of an accident in a tent, said medical workers charged her a commission to bring medication for her daughter.

"I constantly fear patrols, raids, and Asayish spies, like the komin manager in our section who steals our bread daily. We cannot confront him because he is an informant for intelligence.

Umm Ayman said her komin manager takes part of their rations every day.

"A person working in the archives office offered me help to leave al-Hol camp to al-Jadaa camp in Iraq in exchange for paying a sum of approximately five thousand dollars."

Umm Tamer said she had been charged a commission to be put on the list for repatriation.

There was a broad sense among women respondents that sexual harassment and exploitation were rampant in Al-Hol, and many had directly experienced it. Men working in the camp would ask for sexual relationships in exchange for humanitarian assistance, jobs and return registration, among other services. Several women described their personal experiences being harassed by the Asayish, service providers such as water tanker drivers and food distributors, and men who came to work in the market who demanded "relationships" in exchange for services.

"We - women - were not safe from their constant harassment and verbal assault on us when their patrols roamed on normal days. They often tried to seduce women and tempt them into a romantic relationship."

Hala, a 41-year-old woman from Manbij

"I was harassed by Asayish members in the camp in various ways, including being offered support in exchange for a relationship, but I refused and insisted on living with dignity."
A 39-year-old woman named Nisreen

"I once heard one of these [SDF] elements telling a woman in the camp, 'You are the ones who took the Yazidi women, and the Organization brutalized them. Now the day has come for us to take revenge on you."

Reem, a young woman from Jarablus

"I was subjected to sexual harassment in the camp by an Asayish member. One of the members tried to get close to me through a girl who was working in the camp. This girl tried to convince me to be his friend and in return he would provide what I needed, and he tried to tempt me with this offer. I knew in fact that there were a lot of cases of sexual exploitation by some Asayish members who exploit women inside the camp, using friendship and sex in exchange for providing needs. This member was someone who had broad powers in the camp, but I did not want to make a mistake and violate Sharia law, so I expelled the girl even though she had threatened me, saying that this member might harm me. But I did not pay attention to her threats."

Hammouma's experience is an illuminating example of how sexual exploitation in Al-Hol could operate.

"I started getting texts and phone calls from a specific person, initially under the guise of receiving assistance from him. These exchanges of information gradually developed into more personal conversations, mirroring the manner in which some young men approach young women. Conversations that lasted late into the night started happening more often, which made me uneasy. I tried to discourage him on multiple occasions, but he persisted, claiming that he didn't want to risk losing our friendship. In the end, I cut ties with him, explaining that I'm married, I don't talk to men, not even as friends, and that includes casual acquaintances."

Umm Rania, a 29-year-old mother from Deir Ezzour

Men who worked in the market were the other main perpetrators of sexual harassment and exploitation. They often targeted the women they worked with, trying to lure them into sexual relationships. Three women shared their stories of having been asked for sexual relationships by men they were working with in the market. Sometimes men from outside the camp would propose a "secret" marriage – that is, they proposed to a woman in the camp, sometimes without informing another wife – to elicit sex. Sexual exploitation was also a risk in the returns process. For example, a young Syrian woman recalled how the official she went to register with attempted to "establish a relationship" with her. Several respondents said they knew of forced sex work, although none said they personally knew anyone who had been a victim. For example, one woman said she suspected her husband was involved in a prostitution ring and was almost murdered for this involvement. Though most cases of harassment involved camp security or workers, a few women mentioned other detainees as perpetrators. A young woman also recounted how her mother was harassed and assaulted by a male neighbor who had been "spying on our tent".

BOX 3

WOMEN RECOUNT THEIR SUBJECTION TO SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN AL-HOL

"I couldn't find a suitable job, and most of the people who offered help expected a romantic relationship in return, otherwise, I wouldn't get the job."

- Hana, a young woman from Idlib, tried to find employment after her third husband was murdered by ISIL/Da'esh for working with the intelligence.

"I started going to work from eight in the morning until six in the evening, but the pay was very little and I did not feel comfortable with the behavior of the man who owned the shop. He was trying to get close to me and get to know me, but I was indirectly refusing, until one day he tried to harass me."

- Hazar, a 27-year-old woman from Deir Ezzour, started working in a clothing shop where the shop owner harassed her and eventually asked her for a sexual relationship.

"After a few weeks, the shop owner started harassing me a lot and trying to get close to me, taking advantage of my need to work and my inability to leave it, but I always refused indirectly. In the end, he proposed to me, as he wanted to marry me secretly in the camp, but I refused and left working for him."

- Souad, a young woman from Homs, had a similar experience also working in a store for women's clothing.

"I met an employee from Al-Hasakah and he started approaching me, asking about my residence, marital status, and age. After a while he proposed. My family opposed it at first, but eventually agreed. Ten days after our marriage, I discovered that my husband was married to another woman outside the camp. His wife suspected that he was married to a woman inside the camp."

- Razan, who ended up marrying a shop owner, later found out that he was already married.

"We registered for that trip, and I went at that time to hand over our identity papers, and then there was a discussion between me and the official, where he asked for my number and tried to approach me and establish a relationship through the mobile phone, but I blocked him, and for this reason my papers have not reached the archive office until now".

- Warda, from Syria, recalled how the official she went to register with attempted to "establish a relationship" with her.

"I am very afraid for my children due to the security situation in the camp, especially after I learned of a case of rape that occurred in the third sector, where two girls aged ten and eight years old were raped, and because of the assault, one of the girls died and the second was treated outside the camp. Now I live in constant fear for my girls... I suffer from harassment–sometimes by soldiers who stand at the gate of the seventh sector, and often when I go out with my daughters, we are subjected to bad or lewd words directed at my daughters by military men. This matter provokes me a lot: I feel enraged, but I cannot speak or object."

- Umm Tamer, a 45-year-old woman from Salah al-Din said she and her daughters were often harassed at the entrance to their sector.

There were several cases where women reported harassment to the Asayish, who launched investigations into the allegations. In some cases, the perpetrator was arrested. For example, one woman working in a clothing store was sexually harassed by the owner. She said the Asayish arrested and fined him when she reported him. At least one other respondent had a similar experience. However, many other women did not feel comfortable reporting harassment, especially when an Asayish member was implicated. Most women who discussed harassment did not report it, or they found ways of dealing with it from within their communities.

"There were also many cases of harassment against women by Asayish elements inside the camp, particularly against younger women. I was one of those who experienced verbal harassment, and of course, I couldn't respond out of fear of being arrested, especially since they had no fear of God."

A young woman named Reem described how women remained silent out of fear of being arrested.

Rape

The incidence of rape in Al-Hol is unclear as reportedly, cases are covered up by families or the hospital. However, 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. Researchers who worked on this study said there were four publicly known cases of rape in the camp: an eight-year-old girl, a ten-year-old girl, a 16-year-old girl, and an 18-year-old woman. The 8-year-old and 10-year-old girls were raped in the bathroom and the perpetrators were never caught. The most well-known case was a 16-year-old girl in sector one who was raped by three men she did not recognize. The Asayish took her to the hospital, opened an investigation into the case and arrested the perpetrator. Months later, the girl's father received a letter from the perpetrator's family saying the rape was revenge for an alleged transgression by the girl's father. It is likely many more rapes have occurred and gone unreported. The Asayish has a protocol for investigating rape cases, although they were not always able to catch the perpetrators.

The Al-Hol market is a site where many respondents described being sexually harassed or exploited.

PHOTO: VICTOR J. BLUE

Intimate partner and family violence

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 under Sharia'a law men could easily divorced their wives[98], it was often difficult or impossible for women to divorce their husbands in situations of abuse. As previously discussed, a few women reported cases of harassment and sexual exploitation by non-family members to the Asayish, but none had considered reporting cases of family violence. Some accounts were very extreme, involving regular beatings, husbands preventing their wives from accessing medical care, and child abuse. The main recourse was for women to divorce their husbands, but this did not always happen.

"After a few months, he started hitting me for the smallest reasons, and I had no idea why. Even when I got sick, he wouldn't let me seek medical care or take medicine, forcing me to heal on my own."

Karima, a young woman from Aleppo, hoped getting married would improve her family's life because then they would have a man to support them. After the marriage, her husband became abusive, and she discovered he had romantic relationships with many other women.

"Abu Abd was a cruel man and would hit me whenever he was upset about something. Sometimes he would hit me twice a day. After I gave birth to my daughter, Abu Abd started hitting me again. He was beating me for trivial reasons, until I learned that he had married my best friend. I was very shocked and felt sad about everything that had happened to me. How could my friend accept to marry my husband? So I decided to divorce and remained adamant about it."

Mona, a young woman from Aleppo, lost her husband and baby daughter to an airstrike before she came to Al-Hol. In the camp, she married the imam from the mosque, Abu Abd, who soon became abusive.

98 In many jurisdictions where Shari'a-based personal status laws are applied, gender inequality is embedded in divorce proceedings. Typically, men can unilaterally initiate divorce (ṭalāq) without providing justification, while women face stricter conditions and legal barriers to obtain a divorce (such as khulʿ or judicial divorce), often requiring the husband's consent, financial compensation, or proof of harm.

Hana's story: intimate partner violence and a husband who was eventually murdered by ISIL/Da'esh

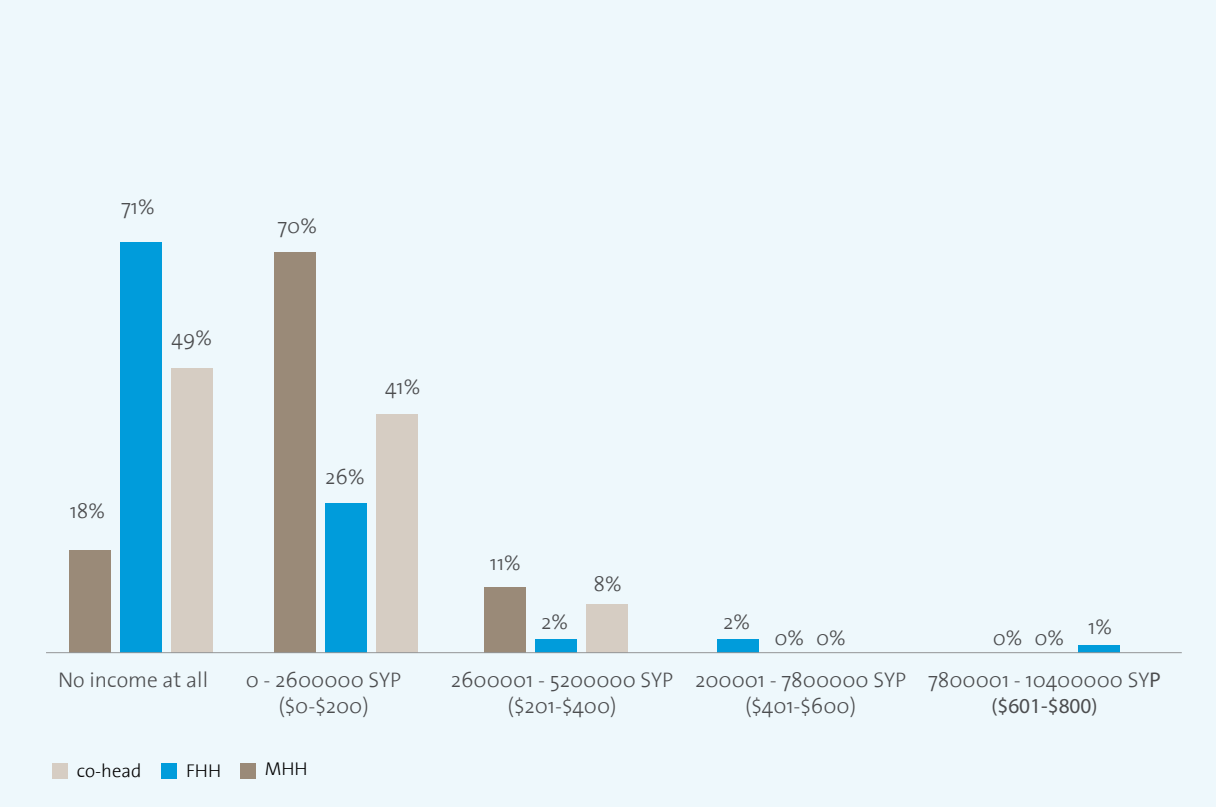
Hana, from Idlib, had already been married to two ISIL/Da'esh members who were killed. She decided to marry Adam, another detainee she met at the market, in hopes that it would improve her situation. Adam, who worked for the Asayish intelligence, became extremely abusive after the marriage. He lied to her about having a second wife and would tie up Hana's baby daughter inside the tent while he went to work. He also cut her off from being able to see her family**. "He used to threaten my mother by saying, 'If you get involved, I will send female Asayesh to kill you.' So I was forced to be with him and follow his orders. I was afraid that if he divorced me, he could convince someone to burn my mother's tent and kill her and my sisters, and no one would ever know… he constantly threatened to have my brother-in-law, who is Iraqi, imprisoned. Due to his harassment, my mother moved to another part of the camp."** She was several months pregnant when one night, two people entered Hana's chain of tents, that she shared with her husband and co-wife, in search of her husband, who was asleep in the last tent. **"I was in the salon and I heard a voice. I thought maybe it was Adam, but when I heard them asking, 'Where is Abu Hayder?' I knew it was Da'esh. I turned into a stone, terror-stricken. I tried to cover myself but couldn't because I was so scared…He continued to the second tent, my room, where Adam was sleeping. I heard my husband say, "please don't! May God point you to the light," but he didn't finish… I don't know why he was killed; people said maybe it was because he was with SDF intelligence… I returned to my mother's house, a pregnant widow."**

Livelihoods and work

The highly controlled and often exploitative economy dominated by male workers from the surrounding areas and near or total dependence on humanitarian organizations means most Al-Hol detainees suffer from extreme poverty. Three-quarters (77 per cent) of households reported they were experiencing some or a lot of financial difficulties and most (64 per cent) reported they had no income at all. Female-headed households (71 per cent) were far more likely than male-headed households (49 per cent) to report having no income. This suggests the majority of families, especially households headed by women, were entirely dependent on aid, and many women said they were selling portions of their assistance to survive. Half (52 per cent) of surveyed heads-of-households said they were in debt, with little difference between male- or female-headed households. In most cases (76 per cent) this debt was between 0-2,600,000 SYP (US$1-$200), The remainder of cases exceeded that amount. Most respondents said they received monthly assistance consisting of basic food items and cleaning materials. Bread was reportedly distributed on a weekly basis, although several respondents reported having their rations stolen, or having to pay fees in order to receive them. Some respondents also mentioned receiving cash grants. Kerosene was distributed in the winter.

FIGURE 15

Income levels for male, female and co-headed households



Al-Hol's economy was largely based on employment available through NGO services and a small market, although income was also sometimes earned from organized crime or intelligence services. The main ways women received income was through their own or relatives' NGO jobs, selling extra assistance, or receiving remittances from outside the camp, with many cases being a combination of all three. A few men and women also mentioned working in the market in an array of sectors, although business ownership was dominated by men who commuted from Hassakeh or other nearby towns. Men and women could be hired by the business owners as employees but none of the detainee respondents said they owned a business in the market. Some men also mentioned working as taxi drivers or selling phone credit. Often, entire families were dependent on the income of only one person. Households had an average dependency ratio of .895, meaning that for every ten family members, only one had an income. For female-headed households, the average dependency ratio was even higher (.92). Selling off portions of humanitarian assistance rations to survive was very common – and often an indication of extreme vulnerability.

"I now work in a market in the camp called the Thieves Market. It is a market located behind the main market in the camp, where some sellers sit on small stalls. They buy and sell used things, like food aid that is supposed to be distributed in the camp, used and new tents, iron bars on which the tent is built, and other things. It is called the thieves' market because most of the things in it are stolen from NGOs. I have a stall for items in which I buy and sell, and I go to work from seven in the morning and stay there until three in the afternoon. But the work is insufficient and my situation is not easy, and when I receive food and detergents, I sell them in order to support myself."

Umm Nabil, an older widow from rural Manbij, referred to the market for excess assistance as the "Thieves Market".

NGO employment was the best paid form of employment in the camp and highly sought after, but access to these positions was highly gendered, with roles distributed across traditional gender lines. Almost all women who worked with NGOs said they worked as teachers, in the orphanages, providing psychosocial services, or as cleaners employed by the camp management. Men worked in a variety of positions such as guards, tent engineers, and distributing assistance. A few male and female respondents said they were working in the medical sector. In general, women said they need approval from male relatives to work, and many women said their husbands, brothers or fathers did not agree. This was the case even when the men were not physically present in the camp. For example, a husband who was in prison would decide whether his wife in Al-Hol could work. Even when the family's financial situation was highly constrained, sometimes husbands- some present in the camp, some not- would not allow their wives to work. Women who had worked for NGOs usually said they were satisfied in their jobs and felt working was good for their mental health. On the other hand, some women felt the work was difficult and did not feel comfortable performing some of the tasks required of them.

"I tried many times to convince my husband to let me work to earn a monthly income since my family's financial situation was terrible. We had no steady income except for the food basket we received, half of which we sold to survive. But my husband warned me that if I worked for any organization, he would divorce me, so I dropped the idea of working."

Riham's husband prevented her from working even though he was in prison.

"Working in the orphanage has helped alleviate these thoughts, allowing me to mingle with others and change the monotonous routine of my life."

Imane, from Al-Qaem, said she felt overwhelmed with sadness due to the loss of her family.

"I now assist in organizations holding sessions on the dangers of early marriage, sharing my story to deter others from making similar mistakes."

One woman, Sahar, who married very young and had a difficult marriage, said she found meaning in doing early marriage prevention work.

Women faced multiple barriers to work, including threat of murder and violence, being disallowed by their male relatives, and NGO policies that impede their employment.[99] NGO work could be inconsistent and could be very dangerous. Many women respondents had received serious death threats because of their work and had to leave their jobs. In addition to the threat of murder, women had their tents burned down for staying in their jobs. This was particularly true during the surge in murders and extremist organized crime between 2020-2022. While fear of reprisal for involvement with NGOs has lessened since then, women remain cautious.

"My fear of being killed and my decision to quit my job at the association were due to a threatening message I received on WhatsApp. The message warned me to leave my job or be killed".

Salwa from Deir Ezzour was working in a kindergarten when she received a death threat.

"A mother of a child who also taught reading and writing to the children who came to me was killed. This event deeply distressed me; I started crying and became very frightened. I feared that they might come and kill me due to my continuous interaction with this woman."

Fawzia, a young woman from Salah al-Din, Iraq had started working as a teacher, gathering small groups of four children to her tent for their lessons to ensure social distancing during COVID.

Some men and women mentioned having jobs in the market such as clothing shops, grocery and vegetable stands, selling excess assistance, and small grills for restaurants. As previously discussed, several women were sexually harassed by the men they worked with in the market, which caused them to quit, and discouraged other women from working there. Some women had small business projects

99 According to UN Women's partner organization, in 2022, the SDF implemented a policy preventing NGOs from hiring camp detainees for work citing concerns around the income being used for terrorism. This further restricted livelihood opportunities available in the camp, especially for women. NGOs are still finding ways of employing detainees informally, usually through cutting deals involving payments and the exchange of information with the SDF.

they ran from home, most often sewing clothes in their tents. Another example of small businesses outside the market was a young woman from Deir Ezzour who bought a generator and started a small business doing laundry and selling ice cream. A few women had specialized skills they offered for a fee. For example, a woman named Umm Rania who had been trained as a nurse started offering her medical services to other women around the camp, providing childbirth assistance, first aid, and health education. However, for most women, work was highly informal and consisted of any income-generating activity they could identify. Some women were unable to find jobs and were extremely vulnerable as a result.

"The woman started teaching me sewing and everything related to it, and I continued learning for four months. After that I started helping her with her work inside the tent. We used to receive women who would bring cloth for sewing and we would take our wages from the sewing."

After she was harassed working in a shop in the market, Hazar started working with her friend as a tailor.

"The food aid I receive, I sell to buy clothes for my daughter and me. I also make beaded bracelets, cheap jewelry, and sell them to try to make money for our living."

Umm Shada, a 30-year-old woman from Aleppo

"I searched for a job a lot, but to no avail, as my life became hell. I cry all night after my child falls asleep because he cries so much from hunger most nights."

Mariam, a 35-year-old woman from Aleppo

For TCN respondents, their main means of supporting themselves was through receiving remittances from ISIL/Da'esh networks or from family members. Some also had sums of money or gold with them when they arrived which they were able to sell, although these resources quickly depleted. A few attempted to start projects like selling vegetables or other goods but such projects were not successful because of the level of restriction. Almost all aspects of economic life were considered illicit in the Annex and therefore negotiated through camp employees like cleaners and truck drivers. Respondents reported it cost approximately $10,000 to be smuggled out of the Annex to Idlib via water tanker trucks who collaborated with the SDF. At least three women had attempted, but their attempts were thwarted.

"The financial situations among the sisters varied widely. Some collaborated with the administration in exchange for money, others received external support through the Syrians or Iraqis, and some had nothing but food rations...Only Syrian cleaners could enter our area. We dealt with them to smuggle in prohibited items like Islamic attire, SIM cards, phones, Qurans, and money transfers, paying them for their services."

Umm Farah, from Central Asia

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Being detained has taken a great toll on men's and women's mental health. Almost everyone in Al-Hol ended up there because of immensely traumatic events, and for many, violence that happened since they arrived in the camp further traumatized them. Some women said they suffered from significant psychological stress and isolated themselves from others. Day-to-day life in Al-Hol was mundane for many detainees, especially those without jobs or with highly informal work. Women and men continued to be haunted by their experiences related to the uprising, ISIL/Da'esh, and Al-Hol. Most women had not had any professional psychosocial support, but two women said they had attended sessions that helped. Many detainees expressed a sense that being detained in Al-Hol had dashed any hopes of a future.

"I suffered from intense fear at night, alone with my two children, having not formed any social connections except with my neighbor in the tent next to mine, who cared for my children during my work hours."

Nadia, a young woman from Deir Ezzour, said she was unable to sleep at night and eventually passed out at work one day because of malnutrition.

"I became very isolated and seemed to be struggling with an internal conflict. I created problems with my siblings and friends, distancing myself from everyone to the extent that I deleted their numbers and stopped speaking to them."

Fawzia, from Salah al-Din, also said she isolated herself from others after her husband smuggled himself out to Türkiye.

"My life has returned to the boring routine of cleaning, cooking, and washing, and there are no developments in my life."

Sara, from Deir Ezzour described an average day.

"I live a miserable life inside this prison, where every day I go to the market in the morning, walk among people and shops and bring things home, and I do not like being with people much. I spend the afternoon in the tent, and sometimes in the evening, I go and sit at the playground to watch the children play for fun."

Abu Walid described a mundane daily routine.

"By entering the camp, my dream of becoming a doctor ended, and many of my dreams, such as working on a computer and having a job, also vanished."

Warda, a 21-year-old woman from Deir Ezzour described a deep sense of loss due to her arbitrary detainment.

Detainees board busses to leave al-Hol and return to Aleppo, their city of origin, where they were reintegrated into their families.

PHOTO: ARTHUR LARIE

7

SECTION IV: BEYOND AL-HOL

SECTION IV: BEYOND AL-HOL

Human rights actors have long emphasized that the indefinite and arbitrary detention of men, women, girls and boys in Al-Hol must come to an end. Under international law, states with nationals in the camp have an obligation to repatriate their nationals. The Syrian interim authorities, in coordination with the AANES, are obligated to ensure that all Syrian nationals in the camp are afforded fair and transparent due process in accordance with international human rights standards. All return and reintegration processes must also consider men and women's intentions, needs and aspirations, as well as the gendered barriers they may face. This section provides a brief overview of return movements from Al-Hol for men and women of different nationalities, followed by an analysis of critical social and environmental factors that should be taken into consideration in the design and implementation of return efforts.

Return from Al-Hol

Since 2019, several measures have significantly reduced Al-Hol's population, most notably the launch of Iraq's Al-Amal Centre and AANES-facilitated returns to previously AANES-held territories in Syria through tribal agreements. Between March 2019 and November 2024, approximately 32,000 individuals left Al-Hol. While no comprehensive data disaggregated by nationality, gender and age disaggregation is available, official figures indicate that at least 10,000 of those returned were Iraqis and around 3,365 were TCNs. Return processes and prospects differ substantively for TCNs, Syrians and Iraqis. These distinctions are discussed below.

Departures of TCNs from Al-Hol and Roj camps[100] have largely depended on bilateral negotiations between the detainees' countries of origin and the AANES. Since the beginning of 2019, at least 3,365 third-country nationals have been repatriated. Age and gender data is only available for 2,951 of these individuals: 74 per cent were children, 24 per cent were adult women, and only 2 per cent were adult men. The top countries repatriating their nationals include Kazakhstan (719), Kyrgyzstan (454), Tajikistan (at least 384), Uzbekistan (at least 339), and Russia (294).[101]

Prior to the fall of the former Assad regime, the return process for Syrian detainees in Al-Hol was managed through a sponsorship mechanism or through detainees directly appealing their case to the AANES. While some returnees reported long waiting periods or had their requests denied, others were able to leave with NGO support. A few respondents said they exchanged information with the authorities for authorization to leave the camp. Although most oral history participants did not report exploitation by sponsors, other research has highlighted instances of corruption and extortion, especially when sponsors were not family members.[102] However, one consistently reported abuse was the theft of belongings during exit searches by security forces.

100 Roj Camp is a detention site in northeast Syria, also operated by the AANES, that where primarily third-country national (TCN) women and children are detained. It is smaller and more restrictive than Al-Hol Camp, and detainees are subject to heightened security measures and limited access to services.

101 Rights and Security International, Global Repatriations Tracker, accessed November 2024.

102 Impact Research, Al-Hol Camp: Release, Return and Reintegration of Syrian Residents, 2021.

"Some men accompanied by soldiers started searching our bags and taking whatever they wanted. They stole most of our belongings. We could not object. After that, they made us sign the exit papers and we left Al-Hol camp at four in the afternoon."

Aida, a young woman from Deir Ezzour described being robbed while exiting the camp.

With the fall of Assad, the returns process in Syria is now likely to evolve. The future of Al-Hol is an important issue in the negotiations between the AANES and the Syrian interim authorities in as they work towards integrating their political and security organizations. As a result, existing AANES procedures governing the release of Syrians from Al-Hol and the handling of cases of alleged ISIL/Da'esh-related crimes may no longer function as they previously did. Key aspects of the return process, including the role of sponsors, the effectiveness of protection mechanisms, and the risks associated with return, are likely to change. At the time of writing, no definitive decision had been made regarding the camp's future.

Iraqis are mainly returning through a government-run repatriation programme through Al-Amal Centre, a camp-like facility located outside of Mosul. Since March 2021, a total of 10,241 Iraqis have been repatriated through official convoys, the vast majority of whom were women and children.[103] Those wishing to return must register and undergo a security clearance process against terrorism databases. An inter-agency Iraqi committee then conducts interviews and identity checks. Approved individuals are then transported to Al-Amal Centre, where they typically remain for several months before being released. Although the programme is intended for cleared individuals, there have been reported cases of arrest upon arrival. At the time of writing, return efforts have prioritized those who entered Al-Hol between 2016 and 2018. In addition to returns via Al-Amal Centre according to the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) researchers, approximately 2,000 Iraqis have returned from Al-Hol informally, primarily to their areas of origin in western Anbar Governorate.[104]

Return intentions

UN Women found that most men and women in Al-Hol wanted to leave the camp as soon as possible via official channels. On a scale of one to ten, the majority (73 per cent) of Iraqi and Syrian respondents rated their likelihood of returning as seven or higher. However, a significantly higher proportion of Iraqis (92 per cent) said they were highly likely to return compared to Syrians (51 per cent). This difference is likely because data was collected prior to the fall of Assad, which had been a main barrier to Syrian returns.

More Iraqis reported being likely to return because the security situation was generally more stable in their areas of origin and because of the Al-Amal Centre returns facilitation program. For both nationalities, male and female-headed households indicated similarly high rates of likelihood to return. Among the few Iraqi and Syrian households who said they were less likely to return, security concerns in their areas of origin were the main reason, with male-headed households (88 per cent) reporting security concerns at a slightly higher rate than female-headed

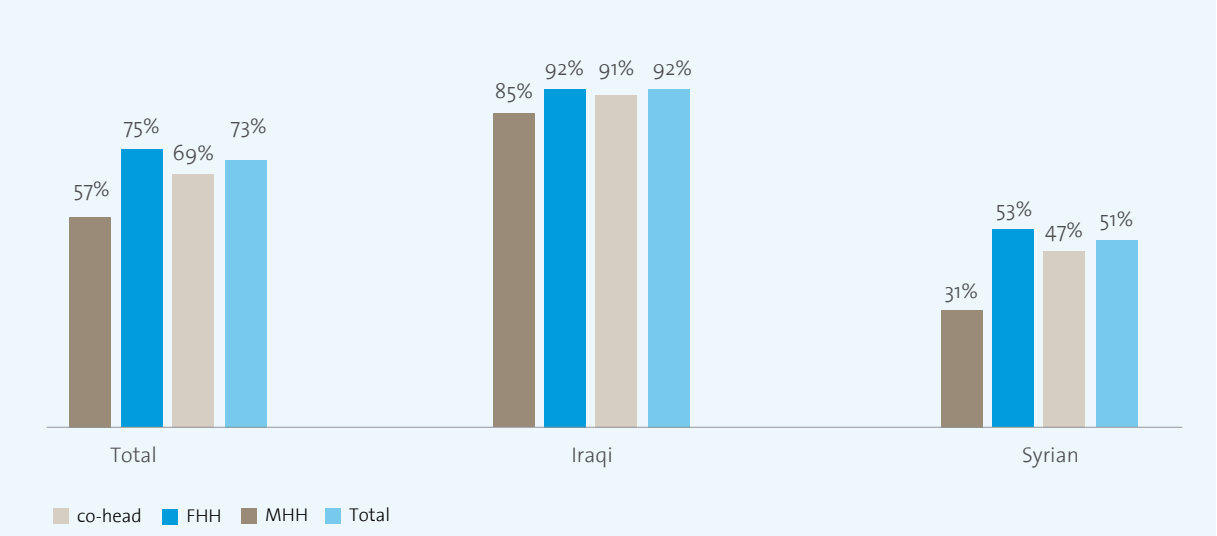
103 UN Women notes the particular challenges related to the first step for individuals being repatriated to Iraq, recognizes the legal processes in place for individuals in Al-Amal Centre to leave the camp, and underscores the importance of seeking to continue to refine and ensure compliance of any form of detention with guarantees of due process. Data from IOM Iraq as of 15 April 2024; sex and age-disaggregated data pending. See also, Parry, J., "The road home from Al Hol Camp: reflections on the Iraqi experience", MEAC Findings Report 24, United Nations University, 2022.

104 Interview with UNIDIR researcher, 4 April 2024.

households (82 per cent). Detainees' ability to leave the camp differed based on nationality, security background as assessed by the SDF, and the evolving security and political situation in their areas of origin, as discussed in detail in the sections below.

FIGURE 16

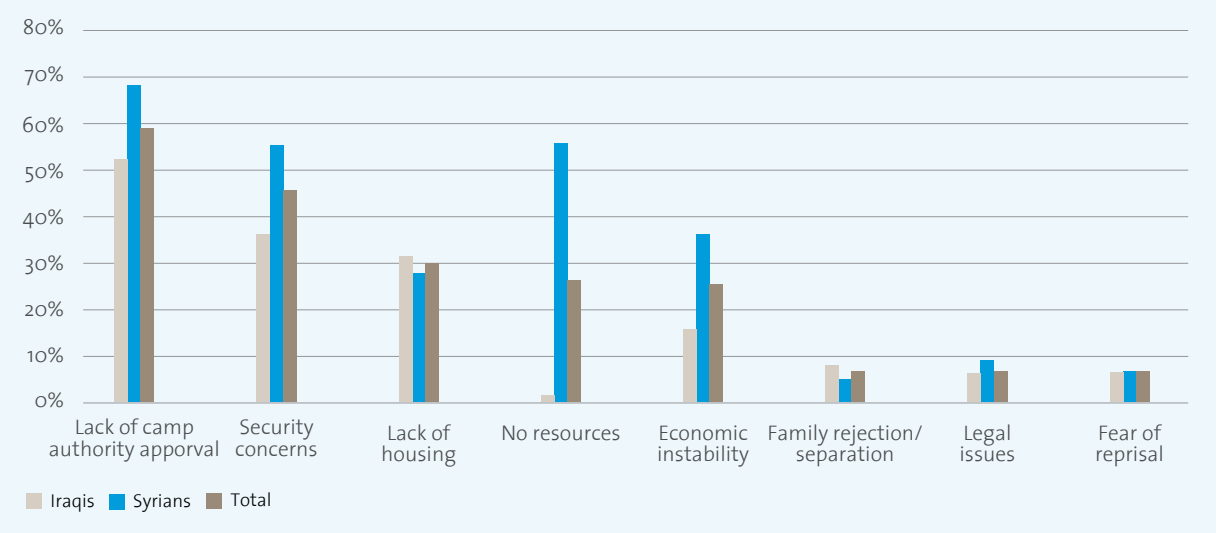
Iraqi, Syrian and total male, female and co-headed households that rated their likelihood of return as 7 or higher



Around two-thirds of survey respondents said they faced at least one barrier to return, with a higher proportion of Syrians (73 per cent) citing obstacles compared to Iraqis (55 per cent). The most commonly reported barriers were lack of approval from camp authorities (59 per cent) and security concerns (45 per cent). Both barriers were more frequently reported by Syrian respondents than by Iraqis.

FIGURE 17

Main barriers to return for Iraqi and Syrian households, with totals



Prior to the recent shift in Syrian governance, the prospect of return for Syrian households in Al-Hol was shaped by political fragmentation, insecurity, and the absence of clear return procedures. 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). In addition to Syrian detainees from the Euphrates Shield (19 per cent). Households from government-held and from the Euphrates Shield areas were the least likely to report intentions to return, largely due to fear of reprisal, arbitrary arrest, and uncertainty around the return process. As of the time of writing, discussions were ongoing between the AANES and the Syrian interim authorities on the repatriation of Syrian nationals from Al-Hol camp.

FIGURE 18

Percentage of Syrian households from the different zones of control prior to the December 2024 change in government

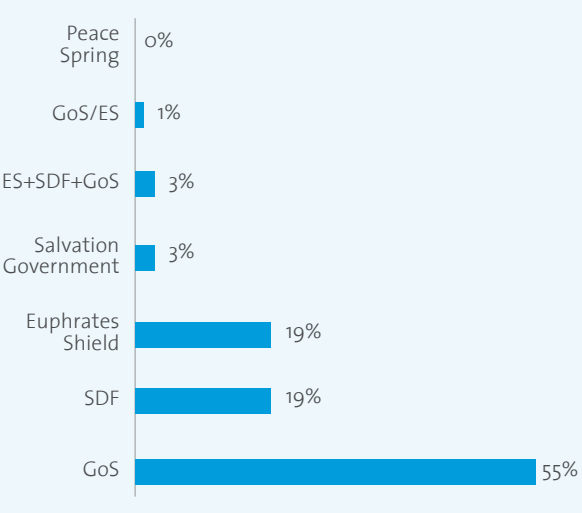
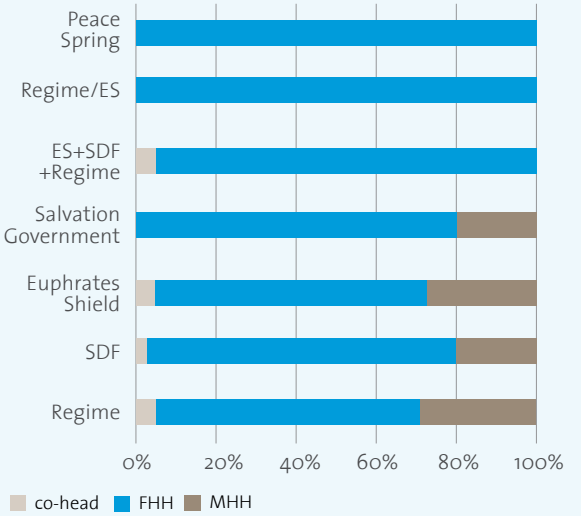


FIGURE 19

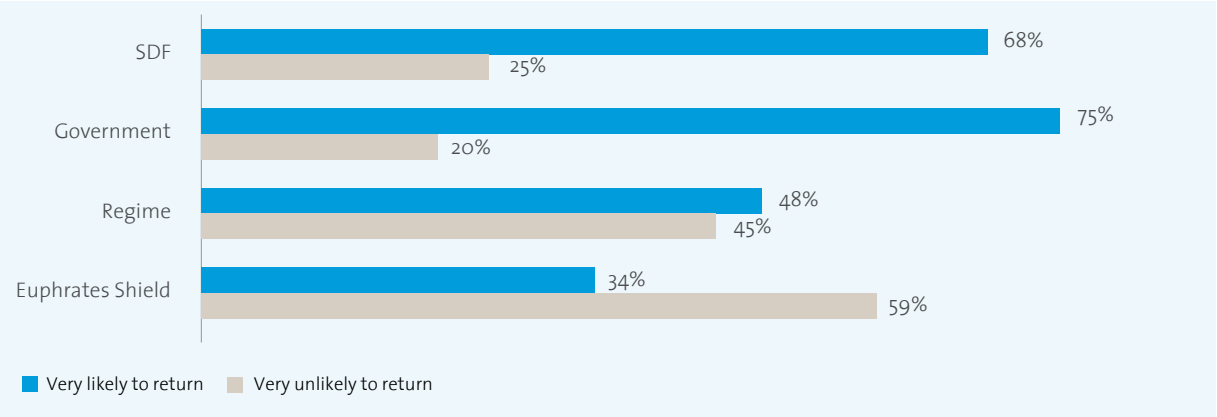
Proportion of male, female and co-headed households per zone of control prior to the December 2024 change in governmen



Prior to the fall of the Assad regime, a key barrier to return for Syrians was the lack of an official process for families from non-SDF areas. While the SDF had a structured mechanism to release detainees into their territory, there was little or no coordination with the former Assad regime and/or the armed groups in control of the other zones. Over two-thirds of Syrian households cited the lack of camp approval as a major obstacle to return, alongside fears over the security situation, economic hardship, and potential community rejection. Men commonly feared arrest or conscription by government forces, while women raised concerns about isolation, exploitation, family separation, and the absence of male relatives to support a safe return. As a result, even when families wished to leave the camp, many felt effectively trapped. While some of these constraints may shift in light of the new political realities, the legacy of distrust, lack of coordination, and socioeconomic vulnerability will continue to shape return dynamics.

FIGURE 20

Likelihood for Syrians to return by former zone of control as of July 2024



Iraqi respondents were less likely than Syrians to cite return barriers, largely due to the improved security situation in Iraq at the time and the existence of the Al-Amal Centre repatriation programme. Iraqi women who participated in the oral histories were very eager to return via Al-Amal Centre, saying their friends and relatives who had already returned via the Al-Amal Centre reported positive experiences.

"Some friends who went to al-Jadaa camp told me that the educational courses there were much better and that everything was provided. They even sent me videos showing the nursing, sewing, computer, and language courses, and how they were honored. Everything was different and better there, making me want to leave al-Hol camp badly. Al-Jadaa camp had better services according to the families who left before us, and all the Iraqis wanted to return to their country."

Jumanah, a young woman from Hit, along with many other women, said they had heard Jedda 1 (now known as Al-Amal Centre) was much better serviced than Al-Hol.

While most Iraqis expressed optimism about returning via the Al-Amal Centre, approximately one in ten (eight per cent) Iraqi households rated their likelihood to return as five or lower on a scale of one to ten. The majority of those hesitant to return were female-headed households from Anbar, who cited ongoing security concerns in their areas of origin. Several Iraqi men interviewed for the oral histories also reported reluctance to return via Al-Amal Centre due to fears of arrest. These fears were not unfounded, particularly for men. According to the UN, since Al-Amal Centre began operations in 2021, 80 individuals have been arrested upon return from Al-Hol, including 74 men and six women.[105] Given that only about 1,000 adult men have returned via the Al-Amal Centre program, this suggests that approximately one in ten male returnees have been arrested upon return. Several Iraqi interviewees also shared accounts of male relatives who were wrongfully imprisoned despite having no affiliation with ISIL/Da'esh, including at least one case involving a returnee processed through the Al-Amal Centre.

105 Data provided by IOM in July 2024.

"As for Al-Jadaa camp, I know it well. This camp is located near Mosul in Iraq, and families are transferred to it from Al-Hol camp. I have some of my relatives who went on a recent trip to Al-Jadaa camp, and I communicate with them constantly, and they said that the camp as a service is good, but the apostate security forces arrest people there. As for me, I prefer to leave the camp through smuggling and not through the Iraqi government for fear of arrest."

Abu Ahmad, from Hit, had fought in an ISIL/Da'esh combat battalion and knew he would be arrested upon return.

Although most detainees preferred to leave Al-Hol through official channels, several women and men said they intended to attempt smuggling. Smuggling routes and costs were widely known in the camp and were reportedly run by SDF-affiliated networks. Almost one in five (17 per cent) households in Al-Hol reported they had previously attempted to leave the camp via smuggling and failed, figures that showed no significant difference between Iraqis and Syrians, or between male- and female-headed households. Several oral history respondents recounted failed smuggling attempts that usually resulted in getting caught and losing money. Some expressed continued distrust in the official returns process and said they intended to attempt smuggling again. Several women also said they saw marriage as a possible means to escape, raising serious exploitation concerns. In the absence of transparent legal pathways for leaving, some detainees may feel compelled to pursue risky or exploitative alternatives like smuggling or strategic marriages as they see them as their only viable options for leaving the camp.

"There is an employee from outside who proposed to me and I agreed to marry him after I leave the camp."

Layal, a young woman from Aleppo, intended to marry a camp employee who would smuggle her out.

"I do not want to leave the camp through official trips; I prefer to escape. I don't know where I will go, and I can't return to our city because the regime controls it. I don't think any of my family or relatives want me to return to them, but that doesn't matter."

Umm Ayman, from Aleppo, did not seem to trust the process for the official trips and also seemed to have nowhere to go.

Among oral history respondents, a small group of women and men expressed that they did not want to leave the camp, citing a range of personal, economic, and relational reasons. Some wanted to wait to make contact with, or for the release of their male relatives in prison before deciding, while others cited poor relationships with their families outside the camp. A few women said they wanted to stay or had relatives who wanted to stay due to concerns about the economic conditions outside, noting that the assistance provided within the camp was better than what was available outside. These accounts highlight that even when viable pathways out of Al-Hol exist, individual decisions to remain are shaped by complex personal, logistical, and social factors.

"I have no intention of leaving the camp despite the precarious nature of the safety situation here. This is due to the fact that I am unable to afford the standard of living outside of the camp. Inside the camp, I don't have to worry about paying rent at the end of each month, and there are free relief supplies and water available for consumption as well."

Umm Rania, a 29-year-old woman from Deir Ezzour

"I have no intention of getting out of the camp, in fact I have nothing outside, at least I will wait for my children to get out of prison so we can decide after that."

Anas, an older man from Hayyan, Aleppo, felt he had nothing outside the camp to return to.

"As for my family and my father-in-law's family, they do not talk to me, do not want me to return to them, so I do not want to leave the camp and I do not have any future plans. Rather, I will stay here waiting for my son to return."

Afnan, a 35-year-old woman from Qala'in, Aleppo

"I do not want to stay a single moment in the camp, and every humanitarian organization that enters, I talk to them and ask them to help me return to my country in any way possible and as soon as possible."

Umm Zaina, a third-country national from the MENA.

"I am terrified to stay here. I want to go home by any means possible, because my children are growing up and they will remove them from me. I will not calm down, I will not keep quiet, and I will keep trying to get out to ensure that my children stay with me. I don't know what my life will be like when I return, but I am ready to rebuild my life and my children's lives."

Umm Mohammed, a TCN from Western Europe, said she was desperate to leave for her country because she feared her boy being taken away.

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. For example, Umm Shadi from a MENA region country, said she once hoped to be included on a repatriation list to her country but has since lost hope, believing her country will never accept her back. Umm Farah, from Central Asia, said she was waiting for news about her husband, with whom she lost contact with in 2019. Similarly, Umm Faris, also from Central Asia, said her country refuses to accept her return. One TCN woman voiced concern about her boy growing older, fearing the SDF's policy of separating boys from their mothers once they reach puberty. These accounts underscore the uncertainty, fear, and stagnation many TCN women face as they remain trapped between stalled repatriation policies and deep personal concerns about their families and futures.

Family estrangement and return

While concerns have been raised about the potential for Iraqi and Syrian women to face rejection by their families or communities upon return, only five per cent of Syrian and seven per cent of Iraqi respondents in Al-Hol cited family rejection as a primary barrier. This suggests that, while not insignificant, the overall risk may be relatively limited. However, strong family ties are critical for women's successful return and reintegration, as women often relied on relatives outside the camp to serve as guarantors, secure housing, and provide financial or emotional support. Oral history interviews showed that women who were estranged from their families, unable to re-establish contact, or who had lost most of their relatives anticipated significantly greater challenges in returning and rebuilding their lives.

Many women in Al-Hol reported being estranged from their own families and their husbands' families, often because of the stigma associated with their perceived or actual affiliation with ISIL/Da'esh. In many 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. Some women also faced pressure from their families to divorce, a difficult choice because of their children. While some women expressed deep pain over this abandonment, others claimed to have severed ties with their families in response, either out of feelings of betrayal or because their families rejected ISIL/Daesh. This estrangement has had profound consequences for women's emotional wellbeing, their ability to access support, and their prospects for repatriation and reintegration.

"I contacted my husband's family pleading for help but they did not have anything to help me with. They were afraid of what they heard about the camp, and that they would be harmed if anyone knew that they were in contact with someone inside."

A 23-year-old woman named Layal from a village in Aleppo governorate

"The same applies to my husband's family, who told me that they have no relationship with me and that they do not have a son named 'Abu Hamza.' They suggested that I send my children to the orphanage and get married again, as I am 'used to getting married.'"

Umm Ziad was abandoned by both her family and her husband's family, who callously suggested she get remarried to remedy her situation.

"I told him I had disowned my family since they abandoned me to face my fate alone, as I was young and ignorant of life. I had worked hard to strengthen my personality and had learned to live without my family, so I did not want to return to them, and I do not care about them."

Jana felt violated by her family because they had forced her to marry an ISIL/Da'esh member and did not want contact with them.

"After I had entered the camp I got in touch with [my family] to tell them what had happened to me, only to find that they still insisted on their position, which was that I either needed to divorce Laith or stop communicating with them, despite everything that I had gone through."

Umm Ibrahim, from a village in Deir Ezzour

Respondents were generally aware of the risks involved in returning to their areas of origin and often hoped to relocate elsewhere if they had received threats or anticipated rejection. For example, one Iraqi man said he did not expect acceptance from the people of his neighborhood and would prefer to live in the Kurdistan Region if he returned. A few respondents noted they did not want to return because they had received serious threats, although such cases were relatively rare. More commonly, women anticipated difficulties in rebuilding family ties that had been strained or broken during the conflict, although they did not necessarily fear violence from their families.

"My cousin reported to the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) that my husband was affiliated with Da'esh and that my children were the offspring of Da'esh members. He said that if I ever decided to visit my family's area, the PMF would kill all of my children, and I would either be imprisoned or forced to abandon my children and go alone to my family."

A 37-year-old woman named Umm Hamed from Anbar recounted how her cousin had threatened her family should they attempt to return.

Perspectives on ISIL/Da'esh

Only a few Iraqi and Syrian women and men who participated in the oral histories were explicit about ISIL/Da'esh ideology continuing to be particularly central to their identities and life journeys. Most of these women were middle-aged or older, from particularly impoverished backgrounds, and had not attended any school. They were also rejected from their families. Two middle-aged Iraqi men who came from families that had long been affiliated with resistance movements continued to profess hopes for the return of ISIL/Da'esh but expressed feeling that the organization had become misguided at some point. It was common for the remainder of the respondents to express sadness and bitterness about the failure of the Syrian uprising or Iraqi resistance and frustration about their situations, but not necessarily support for ISIL/Da'esh. Many Syrian respondents were not necessarily still professing support for ISIL/Da'esh as much as they were disappointed that the uprising failed.

"All we asked for in the beginning was freedom, and this is what we got in the end."

Zain, a 30-year-old former ISIL/Da'esh fighter from Manbij

Many respondents had come to see ISIL/Da'esh as the root cause of their pain and expressed anger at their male family members over their decisions. Some women said they grieved the loss of their male relatives to what they saw as a deeply flawed ideology, and some men expressed similar regret over the parts they played in the destruction of their families. Several women and men said they feared their time in Al-Hol would lead to the radicalization of their children and destroy their futures in the same way their family members' futures had been destroyed. Almost all respondents spoke of leaving Al-Hol, reuniting with their families, educating their children, finding jobs and living peacefully.

BOX 4

DETAINEES REFLECT ON DA'ESH IDEOLOGY

"My grief for my brothers was profound, especially for my eldest brother. This experience shifted my perspective on the faction; I began to see their oppression, their lack of mercy for the youth, and how they killed many men, broke mothers' hearts, and left many children orphaned. I also saw how naïve I had been to marry for wealth and power without considering the consequences or the end. I believed it would be a life of eternal happiness, forgetting that fate had other plans."

- Sahar, from Al-Safira, spoke for many young women

"Our experiences had been harrowing, filled with loss. The ideology we had known was flawed, leading us to this. No father, no home, no husband, no future—just lost years filled with fear, hunger, and terror. Society viewed us as terrorists, understandably so. If I could turn back time, I would have continued my studies and graduated like my cousins who had left the country and become doctors and engineers. But regret is useless. My childhood and youth were spent in fear, bombing, and death, images still vivid before my eyes. This is my life.

- Layla, who was only twenty-two and had spent her teenage years in Al-Hol spoke for many young women.

"I did not forget my husband, whose life was wasted because of these oppressors, these infidels who were supposed to raise the banner of Islam, but in reality just wanted oil, money, and the blood of our youth."

Nur grieved the loss of her husband to Da'esh.

"If I had known that things would end up like this and that I would experience all these hardships and pains, I wouldn't have participated in anything and I wouldn't have lost my brother."

- Tears filling his eyes, Rabiya, a 33-year-old man from Homs regretted his participation.

"My fear for the future of my children consumed me, as I was terrified that one of them would join these cells, and their fate would be like the fate of their father who was lost and of whom we know nothing–I desperately didn't want to lose them as I had lost my husband."

- Hala, a 41-year-old woman who returned to Manbij

"Unfortunately, [my children] will be more susceptible to deviation than others, and they will be inclined to steal and obtain money in ways that neither religion nor society approve of. They'll be like a memoryless mobile phone, accepting anything you put into it."

- Abu Bassam, a former Da'esh fighter from Manbij shared fears that his children were being raised in an immoral environment.

A detained woman gives directions to Zomia staff.

PHOTO: ZOMIA

8 CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUSIONS

The following section presents the findings and conclusions of the study, rooted in the evidence provided through the lived experiences, constraints, and motivations of those arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol. The findings aim to support a human rights-based and gender-responsive approach rooted in the lived experiences of individuals and communities as necessary for long-term peace and security in Syria and Iraq.

Many women and men arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol have no links to ISIL/Da'esh. Despite this, each of these individuals has experienced broad stigmatization for such links, disconnected from the evidence.

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 "links" with ISIL/Da'esh, providing further evidence of the overall lack of legal basis for their detention.

Many of the respondents were, in fact, victims of ISIL/Da'esh brutality, while others were civilians fleeing forced conscription, conflict, or the collapse of governance in their areas. This is especially true for families who arrived before the 2019 battle of Baghouz, and likely also applies to some who fled during the chaotic and overlapping displacement patterns around Baghouz. In other cases, women were detained solely because of their family members' presence in the camp, or due to bureaucratic errors and misinformation.

The vast majority of individuals detained came from poor suburban and rural areas in Syria and Iraq, characterized by strong conservative family norms and a history of political and economic marginalization. Arbitrary detention in Al-Hol thus represents a continuation of the cycle of violence and poverty that initially brought their families into contact with ISIL/Da'esh. Few women had education beyond primary school due both to financial constraints and to conservative gender norms. Younger women who had begun schooling often had their education interrupted by the conflict. Most women were married before the age of 18, typically through traditional marriages with cousins or distant relatives. These patterns illustrate how early marriage and disrupted education compound to limit young women's opportunities, autonomy, and participation in public life. Understanding detainees' educational backgrounds is crucial for informing and designing future interventions, particularly those aimed at supporting children since parents with limited education face significant challenges in compensating for the lack of formal schooling in the camp, an issue with long-term implications for the wellbeing and development of the next generation.

In cases where respondents reported prior affiliation 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 radical beliefs. For Syrians, engaging with or joining ISIL/Da'esh was primarily 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. While religious motivations sometimes influenced support, it was more often driven by fear, poverty and widespread forced conscription. Even when men joined, or women became "linked" to ISIL/Da'esh through male relatives, these connections were also frequently marked by reported coercion and fear. This complexity has been largely overlooked, including during Al-Hol's expansion in 2019, when men were systematically imprisoned, leaving an estimated 70 per cent of the camp's adult female population widowed or separated from missing or incarcerated husbands.

For detainees with alleged links to ISIL/Da'esh, the nature and extent of these connections varied widely. Women's support for their male relatives' involvement was often

influenced by financial incentives, social benefits, and improved social status – factors that must be understood within the context of a wartime economy. While a few women were attracted to ISIL/Da'esh for religious reasons, they were a minority. Women engaged with ISIL/Da'esh ideology in diverse ways. Only a small number held active roles, often driven by poverty and necessity. Many women described how their understanding of ISIL/Da'esh evolved over time, expressing regret, anger and resentment for the suffering caused by their male relatives' involvement. Some women resisted ISIL/Da'esh by influencing their families, creatively discouraging male relatives from joining, and sometimes even through public acts of defiance. Regardless of the marginal roles many played in ISIL/Da'esh-related decision-making, their profound personal journeys, and their efforts to deter violence, these women remain indefinitely and arbitrarily detained alongside a small but active minority of women who pose real harm.

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. 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 sought to travel in order to join ISIL/Da'esh, others seemed unaware of their destination or what was happening. 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. 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.

Many men, women and children detained in Al-Hol are survivors of serious violations of international human rights law, have experienced extreme trauma, and must be treated as survivors with a right to effective remedy and reparation. Women recounted witnessing heinous brutality in the lead-up to their detention, including bombings of guesthouses, use of chemical weapons, and widespread targeting of civilians – actions that may amount to war crimes. All had lost family members, with some women losing their entire families. Some became disabled during this period or became caretakers for family members with disabilities or orphaned children. The lasting psychological impact of such extreme violence has deeply affected the individuals detained in Al-Hol. While some had accessed some form of psychological support during detention, most continue to suffer from severe, largely untreated trauma. None have had access to remedy or reparation.

Al-Hol houses a significant number of women who were married as children under ISIL/Da'esh rule—some in accordance with pre-existing cultural and religious norms—while others were forced into marriage.[106] Most women who reported marrying ISIL/Da'esh members were under 18, with some as young as 13. Such marriages were often seen as strategic alliances or forms of protection for the girls and their families during this time, although some women reported seeking such marriages for financial, social, or religious reasons. Some women were confined in guesthouses until they agreed to marry ISIL/Da'esh members, while others endured extreme sexual violence, including enslavement and rape. UNITAD has presented legal findings regarding ISIL/Da'esh commission of crimes against humanity and war crimes, including forced marriage.[107] Women subjected to forced marriage and other forms of gender-based violence must be recognized primarily as victims and provided with access to their rights to remedy and repair, including through medical and psychosocial care and support.

106 Noting prior discussion of the crime of enslavement, which "may encompass the commission of several other article 7(1) acts such as forced marriage as an inhumane act, forced pregnancy and rape." Office of the Prosecutor, *Policy on Gender-based Crimes,* International Criminal Court, December 2023.

107 See for e.g., UNITAD, *Report on sexual violence against women and girls committed by ISIL in Iraq*

In addition to conflict-related violence, many women in Al-Hol have endured extreme violence at the hands of their partners, family members, or both, 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. In cases where 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. Some families continued to ostracize women for decisions made during the war, and some women retained deep resentments against family members who had caused them harm. Since family support is a critical factor in a woman's ability to successfully reintegrate, the legacy of family violence and division profoundly affects women's return and reintegration process.

For most, detention in Al-Hol has been a continuation of the violence that has irreversibly marked their lives for the past decade or more. 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. 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. 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. Violence perpetrated by women detainees against other women requires a meaningful response to ensure the full protection of the rights of individuals detained in Al-Hol. In addition, this study, like others before it, further demonstrates the necessity for individualized and gender-responsive screening processes in compliance with international human rights law, particularly due process standards. Such an approach is essential both for the protection of victims and for ensuring accountability in cases where women may have committed serious crimes.

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. Initially, women benefited from employment opportunities with NGOs, which 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 financing terrorism. Such restrictions not only prevent women from engaging in meaningful work and push them deeper into poverty, but also risk reinforcing dependency on informal or illicit financial networks, including those linked to ISIL/Da'esh.

Poverty, degrading living conditions, and prison-like structural power dynamics have created an environment for numerous forms of exploitation. 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. Many women were not comfortable reporting harassment and abuses 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, without meaningful changes to the underlying power structures, sexual harassment and exploitation are likely to continue largely unabated.

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 the limited communication, men outside the camp still had significant control over their female relatives and often dictated whether they could work, remarry or leave the camp. 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. Polygamy was already a relatively common practice in many of the communities represented in Al-Hol, but because of the absence of adult males and the perception of marriage as an important form of social protection, the practice became even more prevalent – 57 per cent of male-headed households in Al-Hol were polygamous. The significant gender imbalance and violent environment has contributed to women entering difficult marriage arrangements, with little protection from abuse or recourse against it.

A woman's marital status has a profound impact on her life, both in the camp and after return. It can determine whether she can leave the camp, remarry or divorce, and whether she can obtain documentation for her children. The vast majority of women had either lost their husbands during the conflict, had husbands who were in prison, or were unaware of their whereabouts. Securing the necessary legal documentation that accurately reflects their marital status is a significant struggle for many women who are unable to take action on resolving personal issues while in detainment or lack the resources to do so upon return. Women should be supported in making informed decisions about their marital status, and in accessing the legal documentation that grants them – and their children – access to basic services.

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 out have largely done so, meaning that those remaining in the camp are generally 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 repatriation programme. Prior to the fall of the former Assad regime, the lack of clear repatriation procedures, limited coordination with Damascus and relevant armed groups, and fears of insecurity and potential arrest have been key reasons Syrian male- and female-headed households were unable or unwilling to return. While arrangements for Al-Hol are part of the 10 March agreement, discussions on camp management and repatriations do not appear to have been a priority for either side,[108] Given the dire humanitarian situation in Al-Hol, establishing a transparent procedure for releasing families with no criminal charges should be a top priority for the interim authorities.

Family networks played a central role in supporting women's successful reintegration following their release from Al-Hol. The risk of family or community rejection was relatively low, but still higher for women without strong family networks, especially for those with few or no male relatives to support them, and in cases where family members were suspected of having caused harm. While it is difficult to measure the rate of community rejection, approximately one in ten households expressed fear of rejection or reprisal

108 On 25 May 2025, representatives of the interim authorities in Damascus visited Al-Hol for the first time. They met with AANES officials and representatives from the US-led coalition to discuss the return of Syrian nationals in the camp to their home areas. The co-chair of AANES's Displaced Persons and Refugees Office, clarified that there are no plans to transfer camp administration to Damascus, countering recent reports. AANES urged the Syrian interim authorities to coordinate closely on the safe and voluntary return of Syrian Al-Hol Camp residents, and highlighted the need for UN supervision.

upon return. This estimate is further supported by the rate of Iraqi female-headed households who repatriated through the Al-Amal Centre programme but struggled to secure a sponsor facilitating the return to their home areas. These patterns suggest that around one in ten households may face this serious barrier to return and reintegration.

Few men and women expressed that ISIL/Da'esh was central to their identities or life journeys. Rather, many 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.

Considering the diversity of backgrounds and trajectories of those detained, there is an urgent need for a formal, transparent process to assess individual statuses.[109] Such a mechanism is essential to ensure that humanitarian responses and legal pathways—whether repatriation, release, or other forms of rehabilitation and reintegration—are based on evidence rather than broad assumptions of guilt, and fully compliant with international human rights law.

109 A key issue identified during the 2022 Al-Hol Task Force *Brainstorming Exercise* was the "lack of common, international law-compliant standards for various screening processes, including needs-, risk- and criminal justice-assessments," amidst the reality that for the majority of individuals within the camp populations there is "no evidence of or relevant status of "association," and an overwhelming majority of children make up the caseload of individuals caught up in this situation of extended mass arbitrary detention."

9

RECOMMENDATIONS

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 UN Country Teams (UNCTs) in Iraq and Syria focused on advocacy, policy, and programmatic initiatives.

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

Consider establishing UN principles of engagement with the AANES and the Syrian interim authorities to advocate for a comprehensive approach to Al-Hol, including the establishment of an Individual Status Determination Mechanism.

Today's moment of transition offers an important opportunity to make real progress on the return and repatriation of the remaining population in the sites of detention in northeast Syria. As UN agencies establish or re-establish their presence in Syria, and under the framework of the March 10 integration agreement between the SDF and the interim authorities, Task Force members should discuss coordination efforts within the UN, and between Damascus and local authorities, to ensure appropriate screening processes, legal documentation, repatriation support, community reintegration, and accountability processes are in place. Based on the findings of this report, UN Women raises the below points on a status determination mechanism for consideration:

- **The UN approach to repatriation efforts and individual status determination must be properly coordinated among the relevant agencies.** Task Force members should support the interim authorities in Damascus as well as the SDF/AANES in northeast Syria to establish and implement a repatriation plan with a timetable, as well as formal, transparent procedures to assess individual detainees' status in accordance with their mandates. This process should be done in a coordinated manner, primarily through inter-agency mechanisms within the UNCT, and in consultation with legal experts, to ensure human rights-compliant and gender- and age-sensitive common standards for screening, needs-, risk- and criminal justice-assessments in line with best interests of the child.[110]
- **Procedures for screening, processing and reintegrating individuals who may have committed violations must be in place.** As articulated in the UN brainstorming exercise, the pathway forward may require a connected programme that draws directly upon lessons learned in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration; rehabilitation; screening and processing of individuals who may have committed grave violations of international law, specifically international crimes, and/or terrorist offences.
- **Decisions around release or continued detention must be evidence-based and in line with international standards of due process.** The clearance process must avoid subjective or coercive practices such as ideological "tests of conscience" or demands to denounce family members, as seen in practices like ikhbar and tabriya'a in Iraq.
- **UN agencies should advocate for the urgent release of all men, women and children arbitrarily detained.** Task Force members should advocate that the AANES prioritize the release of families, especially women and children, who remain detained solely due to family ties through male relatives or reported administrative errors. Individuals with no criminal

110 These standards were addressed by the UN entities engaged in the brainstorming exercise as central to the UN, national authorities, and international community's efforts.

charges should be released immediately and, in line with relevant mandates, the UN should provide them with the necessary logistical support to return to their areas of origin or relocate.

- **The UN should ensure human rights due diligence and close compliance with the principle of non-refoulement, as well as advocate with relevant authorities to uphold the principle of non-refoulement for non-Syrian nationals who remain arbitrarily detained.** The UN should unequivocally call for the inclusion of independent human rights observers and monitors to be engaged in all stages of the process, in line with recommendations made by the UN Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights.

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

The recent change in government is likely to reduce fear of reprisal that previously prevented many Syrians from returning to their areas of origin. This shift represents a significant opportunity for the UNCT in Syria to support the relevant authorities in accelerating the release of Syrians from Al-Hol who can be cleared for return to their areas of origin in line with obligations of human rights due diligence. However, according to UN agencies and NGOs, there is a continued gap in funding and operational capacity for agencies, hindering efforts to facilitate safe and voluntary returns.

Task Force entities and agencies with relevant mandates should scale up support for coordinated, organized, voluntary, and human rights-based returns for individuals who have been cleared to leave the camp, including by providing logistical and financial support such as relocation grants, along with referrals to ensure access to psychosocial and community-based support services. Such processes will require cooperation with the interim authorities, camp management, and likely third States engaged in security operations.

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

Support and expand the capacity of Iraq's return programme while ensuring compliance with international standards.

The Government of Iraq has been among the most proactive in repatriating its citizens from Al-Hol and other sites of detention in northeast Syria. The Al-Amal Centre has successfully repatriated more than 10,000 Iraqis, but even at the current rate, it will take several years to complete the repatriation of all Iraqi nationals. Task Force members should advocate for increased funding and technical support to expand the capacity of Iraq's return programme to accelerate repatriations and bring an end to the prolonged arbitrary detention of Iraqi nationals. In considering updates to the Al-Amal Centre policy, Task Force should bear in mind:

- **Fear of arrest is the main barrier preventing Iraqis in Al-Hol from registering for return via Al-Amal Centre.** Given the extent of reported arrests of returnees to Al-Amal Centre with no due process, Task Force members should reiterate Iraq's compliance with its obligations under international human rights law as a pre-condition for funding the returns program.
- **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 lack restricted access to essential services.** Lessons learned from this context must inform gender-responsive programming approaches for other repatriation and resettlement schemes.
- **Procedures in place for families to leave Al-Amal Centre should be clarified and improved.** In the absence of a transparent departure process and given that Al-Amal Centre is a "closed" facility, it risks being perceived as another site of arbitrary mass detention similar to Al-Hol.

Recommendations for the Al-Hol Task Force members, UNCT and government counterparts in both Iraq and Syria on the meaningful inclusion of women in transitional justice and reintegration programs

Socioeconomic marginalization, political disenfranchisement, coercive recruitment, and wartime displacement are among the root causes of radicalization to violence and have placed many individuals in a complex situation that resulted in their detention in Al-Hol. Therefore, Task Force members should support long-term investments in inclusive, gender-responsive accountable governance and locally-led social services in both Iraq and Syria, particularly targeting areas of return.

1. **Address the root causes of violence and radicalization by supporting inclusive, representative governance and strong social safety nets.**
   National and local governments, with international donor support, should develop and implement participatory and rights-based reintegration strategies that engage returnees—especially women and youth—in peacebuilding, social cohesion, and local governance initiatives. These efforts should aim to restore trust in state institutions, reduce the appeal of armed and extremist groups, and foster alternative pathways to social mobility and belonging. Strengthening accountability and investing in equitable service provision are essential to breaking cycles of radicalization, exclusion and displacement.

2. **Women should be meaningfully included in formal and informal reconciliation processes at the national level, including through platforms of engagement led by or involving women, such as the Women's Advisory Board**.[111]
   Their engagement could help bridge social divides, inform community-based reintegration approaches, and support efforts to ensure that returnees are not ostracized. At all levels, members of the UNCT in Syria should consider this recommendation as a priority for inclusion in any engagement with the interim authorities and ensure that women formerly detained in Al-Hol are recognized as stakeholders in shaping a more just and sustainable post-conflict future. Likewise, in Iraq, formerly detained women should be meaningfully included in national transitional justice initiatives.

3. **Support family reunification, tracing of missing persons, and legal assistance programmes in Iraq and Syria**
   Because of patrilineal personal status laws, the fate of missing and imprisoned male relatives has a lasting impact on women's ability to reintegrate. Holistic reintegration programs in areas of return should therefore include dedicated support for family reunification and tracing efforts, particularly for women who are unaware of their husbands' or children's whereabouts or status. At the same time, legal assistance for returnees should be scaled up to help individuals navigate documentation challenges, establish legal identity for themselves and their children, and resolve any outstanding legal issues, including in relation to housing, land and property. Such services are especially critical for women and children, who often face additional legal and administrative barriers. In addition:

   - Dedicated initiatives to achieve the reunification of boys who have been separated from mothers and caregivers due to their presumed ISIL/Da'esh affiliation are needed.[112]
   - Such efforts should be well-coordinated with dedicated organizations and mechanisms such as the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the newly-established National Commission on Missing Persons, which will investigate and determine the fate of missing and forcibly disappeared persons throughout Syria, document cases, build a national

111 A core component of UN Women's contribution to the Syria response is its work in support of the Syrian Women's Advisory Board (WAB). Established in 2016, the WAB facilitates women's participation in the Syrian political process at all levels. It holds an important role as an advisory body to the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria. It is recognized as one of the most inclusive structures in the political process and a source of expertise on a broad range of gender equality and women's empowerment issues.

112 A/HRC/42/51, para. 82.

database, and provide humanitarian and legal support to affected families.
- Family reunification initiatives should, whenever possible, support the return and repatriation of the whole family unit and support the right to family unity in line with the best interests of the child.

4. **Support the reintegration of women in Iraq and Syria through education, health, and MHPSS services, and livelihoods opportunities.**
   Most women who have left Al-Hol express great relief, but also report facing serious challenges such as psychological trauma, poverty and lack of access to basic services. To support the sustainable reintegration of women and children, Task Force members should prioritize multi-sectoral support packages focusing on livelihoods, education, and community-based services. Key actions include:

   - Scaling up cash grants for returnees to address immediate needs.
   - Support job training and other livelihoods projects for released women.
   - Fund remedial education programmes for children who missed schooling in Al-Hol.
   - Provide foundational literacy and numeracy programmes for women affected by conflict and early marriage.
   - Ensure sustained livelihood support and psychosocial services for women and children, with a focus on those facing extreme poverty, limited family support, or social stigma.

   To foster social cohesion and reduce community tensions, awareness campaigns, small grants, and dialogue initiatives should be directed toward communities receiving returnees, in collaboration with supportive local stakeholders. For women who face community or family rejection or lack family support networks, Task Force members could consider investing in dedicated programming such as transitional shelters to ensure protection and a dignified path to reintegration. These women should also be prioritized for reintegration support packages, as the absence of community and family support has been shown to be a major barrier to successful reintegration.

Recommendations for international diplomatic and humanitarian missions with advocacy platforms

1. **Task Force members should continue raising awareness on Al-Hol at international fora (UN Human Rights Council, Security Council, etc.) to ensure global attention and diplomatic pressure on all States with nationals detained in the camp to fulfill their obligations and repatriate their nationals.**
   Advocacy efforts should likewise encourage States to address the humanitarian crisis, improve detention conditions, and uphold the rights of detainees. The findings of this research should be used to challenge the pervasive stigmatization of women in Al-Hol and to promote a more nuanced understanding of the complex reasons behind men's and women's detention. It is especially important to highlight a distinction between a majority, who were victims, coerced, or detained solely due to family ties, and the smaller number of individuals who may have committed terrorist offences. Grounding advocacy in this distinction can help ensure more just, effective, gender-responsive and human rights-based policy responses.

2. **Include women who were arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol in international reconciliation and transitional justice processes.**
   Women have the right to full, equal, and meaningful participation in any national reconciliation or transitional justice processes. This study offers observations on how pre-existing forms of gender-based violence transformed during and after the conflict, underscoring the need for transitional justice and reconciliation processes to address these underlying forms of discrimination and violence, as well as attend to the specific forms of rights violations experienced by women and girls. In addition, some women arbitrarily detained in Al-Hol actively resisted ISIL/Da'esh and, thus, could play a valuable role in contributing to prevention programming, including the development of counter narratives. Their lived experience provides unique insight into the strategies for resilience and community-based approaches to countering extremism and reintegration.

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

1. **Strengthen oversight and accountability mechanisms for human rights violations in Al-Hol.**
   This study, along with several others, documents patterns that may amount to serious violations of international law. Task Force members and other UN representatives and entities, as relevant, should urgently advocate for accountability with respect to the detention conditions in Al-Hol. This includes supporting the establishment of an independent complaints and monitoring mechanism with a mandate to investigate and report on abuses, such as arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and other forms of ill-treatment, looting, and gender-based violence, allegedly committed by SDF and Asayish forces, in line with prior recommendations of UN Special Procedures. The mechanism should include a confidential and accessible process for current and former detainees to safely report abuse and seek redress. Task Force members should also advocate for the implementation of due process guarantees, including the right of detainees to be informed of the charges against them, access to legal representation, and the prohibition of collective punishment. In addition, as recommended by the UN Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights, and the IICI-Syria, unconditional and independent human rights observers and monitors must be granted meaningful access to all places of detention.[113]

2. **Protect survivors of human rights violations and gender-based violence through trauma-informed psychosocial services and community-based response mechanisms.**
   Task Force member entities and agencies should consistently advocate for the recognition of individuals who experienced forced marriage, sexual slavery, trafficking, and other forms of gender-based violence in Al-Hol as victims and survivors, not as "affiliates" of designated terrorist groups. In line with international standards and medical best practices, these individuals should be prioritized for trauma-informed care and safe release pathways in the following ways:

   - Gender-responsive MHPSS services should be significantly scaled up both within the camp and in places of return and repatriation with targeted support for survivors of sexual violence, widows, and children exposed to violence and trauma.
   - Given the widespread sexual exploitation and abuse documented in the camp, Task Force member entities and agencies should support efforts to strengthen accountability and institute robust protection systems. This could be done through establishing a dedicated camp monitoring presence to document and respond to incidents of violence, including intimidation, attacks, and gender-based violence. As findings show, the main perpetrators include market vendors, security personnel, and humanitarian actors. Safeguards should ensure all partner NGOs enforce a zero-tolerance policy for inappropriate relationships between staff and detainees, with clear monitoring, accountability, and enforcement mechanisms. Confidential, accessible, and survivor-centred reporting channels must be established both within the camp and in return areas, preferably with third-party oversight. Survivors must be guaranteed safety, anonymity, and access to comprehensive services, including medical care, psychosocial support, and legal assistance. Clear procedures should be in place for investigation and disciplinary action, and all staff and stakeholders must be trained on prevention, safeguarding, and survivor-centred care.
   - Given the high prevalence of child and early marriage among Syrian and Iraqi women, there is an urgent need for Task Force member entities with relevant mandates to implement age-appropriate awareness programmes for girls and boys, as well as their parents, to challenge harmful gender norms and address the lasting impact of negative coping mechanisms within affected communities. Child marriage prevention strategies should be implemented in coordination with education and protection actors, with special outreach to young mothers to ensure they receive

113 UNSRCT, Technical Visit to the Northeast of the Syrian Arab Republic, End of Mission Statement, July 2023.

the support, information, and services necessary to break intergenerational cycles of early marriage and gender-based harm.

- Community-based responses to family and intimate partner violence should be supported (alongside criminal justice responses to domestic violence, when appropriate) since this is likely the preferred modality for survivors to report and seek support. This can be done by equipping trusted community members with the skills to provide trauma-informed counseling and integrating MHPSS programming that includes safety planning, and the activation of supportive networks when abuse is disclosed.
- Task Force member entities and agencies, and NGOs with relevant mandates should support women in Al-Hol in exercising greater autonomy over decisions related to marriage and divorce. This primarily involves advocating for mechanisms that help women determine the status of their husbands who are missing or imprisoned. Programmes should also facilitate secure, affordable communication channels with imprisoned or displaced family members to re-establish contact, help clarify marital status and reduce the prolonged legal and personal uncertainty many women face.

3. **Ensure basic services in Al-Hol are adequately resourced.**
   If Al-Hol is expected to remain operational for the foreseeable future, it is imperative that donors—particularly states with nationals detained in the camp—significantly increase funding for the provision of essential services. Urgent support is needed to strengthen critical sectors such as health, WASH, and child protection to reduce preventable deaths, especially among children. Livelihoods and education programmes must be scaled up, with a focus on accessible, contextually-appropriate programming that addresses the barriers to participation. Investing in community-based schooling and protection initiatives will also help safeguard children from early marriage, child labor and abuse, while upholding their right to education despite conditions of protracted detention.
4. **Restrictive policies that prohibit detainees from engaging in paid NGO work should be reviewed and revised.**
   Allowing such work not only offers women a source of income but also improves mental health outcomes and reduces their vulnerability to exploitation.
5. **Provide adequate MHPSS services.**
   As many women and children have been subjected to extreme violence, trauma-informed mental health and psychosocial support services and community support mechanisms are also crucial. For example, agencies could facilitate the establishment of safe spaces and peer support groups that reduce isolation and provide pathways to healing, empowerment and eventual reintegration. Such efforts, which can contribute to rehabilitation and deradicalization, should start in the camp and continue in areas of return.

Al-Hol is located in a desertous area with tents situated on muddy ground, creating dangerous conditions for detainees.

PHOTO: ZOMIA

ANNEX 1: SAMPLE ORAL HISTORY

Name: Nur
Age: 25 years old
City: Deir Ezzor - Al-Mar'iyyah
Marital status: Widow with one child

My name is Nur from Deir Ezzor. I am 25 years old. I have a child and my husband is deceased. I currently live with my family.

I was living in the village of Al-Mar'iyyah in Deir Ezzor. My family consists of 4 girls and 8 boys, my father, mother, grandfather and aunt; we all lived together. I was a student and my life's dream was to complete my studies to get a job with my degree, just like any girl who dreams. I used to go to the city to learn because my studies were in vocational school for women.

I reached the eleventh grade, then the Syrian revolution and demonstrations began. Our village was next to the Deir Ezzor military airport. The youth started to go out in demonstrations in our village. The weapons suddenly appeared without anyone knowing, and the airport began to be targeted and clashes occurred. The situation started to get very bad as a result of the bombing, which led to the martyrdom of some people.

After a year, we moved to several villages, such as Al-Bulail, where we stayed for several months. The village got targeted, so we left for Al-Shuhail, where we stayed for about a year. Of course, the targeting was from the regime and the Free Army. After that, Jabhat Al-Nusra was formed, and they took control of Al-Shuhail. Previously, the shelling was by artillery, but it developed into shelling by warplanes. We saw the shelling in front of us; we would wait to see where the missile would fall, whether on us or someone else. It was the first time we lived through this situation. I never imagined that I would leave my home, my school and my dreams.

In Al-Shuhail, we lived in a school and suffered a lot because it was winter, as there was no water, diesel or electricity. Life was bad in every sense of the word, as we were 5 families together. The situation became worse because of the shelling and clashes. Because of that, we were displaced to Al-Busayrah. We again lived in a school. I was still with my family; I had not married yet. After a few months we went to Khasham because Jabhat Al-Nusra started to take over the schools. In Khasham, we also slept in a school and discovered we'd returned to square one, with stronger bombing and shelling than before. Khasham village is close to my home village: between them is only the river.

Fear became unbearable because the airport was next to us, and there was no place we could escape. We had been displaced so often, and we were desperate to return home. Whenever my little brothers heard the sound of planes or bombings, they would start crying and screaming. We continued to live in this state of terror until Da'esh entered and began to take one city after another.

Our region was the first one they entered. They treated us well: their words were convincing and comforting in order to make people love them. There were no problems and we were convinced that after they entered the situation would improve. There were young men from the Islamic State who used to come to the school in order to help the displaced families. They befriended my father, and one of them proposed to me. He was a man from the city of Hatla, and I agreed to marry him. Our married life was beautiful, and my husband worked with the Organization in an office job, without carrying a weapon.

After eight months, when I was four months pregnant, the clashes started and we moved to another city. They asked my husband to go to Al-Shaddadi because there were people trying to leave the Organization territory and this was forbidden. The clashes were between the Organization and the Free Army. My husband told me that he would go for a few days and then return. They brought his body bleeding as he had been shot in the chest and in the foot. I received the news of my husband's death and it caused me a great shock. He was my world. I stayed in the mourning period without leaving the house. I lived the most difficult days and started thinking about how to take revenge for my husband. I thought about joining the Islamic State because the other faction was the one who killed him. I do not know why they killed him, as my husband did not harm anyone. Then I started to quarrel with anyone who spoke against the

Organization. I became very committed and wanted to continue on my husband's path, but my family was against everything I thought about or said, especially my father who was afraid of all the factions.

My son was born when I was in the last days of mourning period. I became better after giving birth to Ahed. I wished his father was alive but that was my fate. After a year of my husband's death the State began to tighten on people a lot. I went back to live with my family at a school. One day at 1 o'clock in the afternoon, I was sitting in the schoolyard when I saw people running. There was a sound from the loudspeaker but I did not understand anything because it was far away. I went to see what was happening. There was a person wearing Pakistani clothes, ordering people to gather. I thought that they wanted to distribute something to the families. When I got closer, I saw a person kneeling on his knees blindfolded. There was another person with a huge body wearing black and he was holding a large machete. The one who was talking suddenly shouted "God is Great", then the executioner cut off the head of the kneeling person and separated his head from his body. When I saw this scene, I felt off balance, started vomiting, and rushed inside. I had never seen such a horrific scene before. It made the bombing seem like nothing compared to the horror of what I witnessed.

I remained in shock for a week, not talking and eating. Because my health deteriorated, they put me on a serum for nutrition. I started thinking, is it possible that my husband was like them and would be such a brutal person? After this shock, my view of these dogs changed completely. I could not believe that there existed people who would kill someone with such brutality and criminality. After this, beheadings became more frequent, hanging heads on a roundabout or on an entrance arch of the city.

Life got worse, and my family tried to help me escape, as my son was affected by my situation. We were displaced over and over. I saw unending bombings and clashes between the regime and Da'esh on the riverbank. The Hisbah were roaming around with their patrols, ready to take anyone to kill or to imprison women and release them in exchange for money. They showed their savage nature. There was a large number of immigrants in Khasham, including Egyptians, Pakistanis, Chechens, Saudis and Gulf nationals, and they were going to schools looking for women to marry. If they saw a woman not wearing black, the Hisbah would immediately arrest her and flog her. There were other acts of torture besides beheading, such as flogging, stoning or burning with fire. The violence was morale-shattering and I did not imagine we could endure this level of torture. I even wished to die in my home from an airstrike, because no one could bear this situation.

The siege tightened on us and we no longer had enough food. We didn't even dare to leave the school because of the constant shelling. Da'esh used people as human shields, while we were getting shelled by artillery. People started fleeing for safety. My mother's relatives were in the Mabrouka camp and we went to them. We did not go to al-Baghouz like everyone else did.

We stayed for a month in the camp, then we went to the Al-Hol camp at the beginning of 2017. When we entered, there were Iraqis and Syrians living as if this were another world, without bombings or sieges. We lived in the first sector in a cement room because my family has a disabled person, my sister, who is 12 years old and could not walk. There were no difficulties in camp life. There were large yards where women went for walks and spaces for children to play. They gave us aid as there were many organizations. Life was beautiful. We lived far from the bombing, the population was small, and we were also far from Da'esh. There was no requirement that the women wear the niqab. After a while, they started giving us $40 checks to buy things from the shops. Of course, this made things easier for us, and there were awareness sessions by the organizations. We really felt comfortable and safe.

We remained in this situation until the Baghouz group arrived. They started giving them aid. There were injured people and sick children. They began to distribute food and clothing to them because their situation was terrible and tearful. I had been trying to forget the scenes of blood and horror, but they came

back to me because of the Bahgouz group. I cried, affected by their miserable stories.

The number of camp residents increased significantly, and the situation got much worse, as now there were women interfering in other women's clothing, looking at them angrily when they went to the market. They began to cause many problems. Indeed, Da'esh returned after we had gotten rid of them previously. Another group of people came and began to provoke residents with their words. They threatened people and even burned tents. After a while, they began to use knives as if they were taking revenge on us. The camp became a terrifying place.

We tried to escape the camp by smuggling, but our family was too large. I adhered to the Islamic dress and no longer interacted with people much because of fear. Most of the dead were Iraqis, some of whom were innocent, and some of whom deserved to be killed because there were a lot of bad things happening, such as prostitution and drinking alcohol. I saw terrifying things and heard about finding a child's body tossed in front of a tent, or an Iraqi or Syrian woman killed. We thanked God every day that passed without something happening.

Despite all the security measures, they could not stop these Da'esh cells. One day, because I could not sleep that night, I heard footsteps near our house and I heard voices talking. Of course, I could not look because this would be suicide. But I couldn't help my curiosity, I just wanted to take a peek to know who they were. I turned off my mobile phone and looked out the window. There were three people. One of them had a knife, the second had a small laser light, and the third was also carrying a knife. Their faces were covered. I lowered my head and asked myself, who will be killed today? I could not sleep until the morning. I told my mother what I saw. She said, "if they saw you, they would have killed you!" I told her that I had not done anything. She said, "And what did those who were being killed do?"

The camp situation began to deteriorate in terms of services. Hospitals began to diminish in number, and people fought over water and bread. Murders continued to increase. They even started daring to kill people in broad daylight. There was no security in the camp: perhaps the Asayish liked this situation, that we were killing each other. After a while, the crimes evolved into murders with pistols.

On the first day of Eid al-Adha, we received news in the morning that one of our villagers, a relative of my father, had been beheaded. They left his head in one place and his body in another. I had a nervous breakdown and cried intensely. I was even afraid that one day I would go crazy, running through the streets screaming. I thought we would live a beautiful life after everything that had happened to us but I was wrong. However, the events repeated themselves inside the camp, and perhaps for the worse, because outside the camp we could flee elsewhere, but here we were stuck. We could not talk about anything for fear of a calamity that might befall us.

They began to kill everyone who dealt with the Asayish, as there was a channel on Telegram called the Nightmare of Hasakah. Indeed, this channel was a nightmare. One day I was checking this channel. I saw a picture of my older brother but under the name of my younger brother. I felt very scared and did not know what my father and mother would do if they knew about this threat. I thought that my brothers were not cooperating with anyone, but I remembered that my older brother had joined them (SDF) for a month and someone had posted his picture on Telegram. I was very afraid for my brother, his wife and his child who had not yet completed a year. How would they come and kill him? This was all I could think about because of the many scenes of killing, blood, threats and fear I witnessed. I no longer even thought about my four-year-old son.

My brother talked to my father, told him that he would go to the Al-Salam camp at night with my other brother because every person who was threatened could have safe haven there. Indeed, after the Maghrib prayer they prepared their luggage and left with four other young men. Here I felt great joy because my brothers were now safe, but I was in terror at the thought that they would come looking for them.

The first week passed and thank God no one came. To whomever asked about my brothers, we said they were at work and would return late. Two days later, at

2 after midnight, I was in the room with my brother's wife, who was sleeping. My family was in the other room. I heard the sound of cloth tearing, then I saw a dim light. I could not wake up my brother's wife. Two people entered. One of them was saying to the other don't make a noise. It was clear that their accent was Iraqi. My tears started to fall but without me speaking or making a sound. They entered my family's room and I asked myself "is it possible they would kill my father if they did not find my brothers?" I was waiting to hear screams or gunshots from where I was because I could not move. They searched the room and did not find anyone. I heard one of them say "the dogs escaped", then they left. I looked through the window, saw that they had gone towards the market.

I went to the room where my family lives –- because we live in two rooms and a tent — to check on them. My father had sensed their presence but he did not say anything because he was afraid for my mother who suffers from high blood pressure and diabetes. My father came out of the room to talk to me. I told him what happened. He told me that they would not come back again. I asked him to leave the camp because I could no longer bear what was happening.

After a while I applied to work with Save the Children and my brothers would come to the camp every now and then to visit us as they would stay at the camp gate and we would go to see them. We knew that Al-Salam camp is worse than Al Hol camp where prostitution is widespread and there is much backwardness among people.

My brothers lived in Al-Salam camp for five months, then they were smuggled out with 12 young men. In the end, they traveled to Türkiye, and we sent them money, as my mother and I were working. After I got a job, my state improved, especially when I met new people. For me, Al-Hol camp had become full of Da'esh members and pigs who did not fear God. We kept hearing about a murder every day.

The last campaign was difficult as well: they pressured us, treated us badly as if we were all Da'esh and terrorists. They even insulted innocent people, searched all the tents, destroyed some of them, and said terrible things about us. But I excuse them because what was happening in the camp was unfathomable. The fifth, sixth, and eighth sectors were the most affected by the campaigns because they humiliated them a lot, but at the same time, the people of these sectors wronged many people, to the point that they were trampling on the aid, which was a big mistake because it is a blessing from God. There was also the spread of prostitution in these sectors and people would get rid of their newborn babies. In the end, I told my family that we had to leave the camp after staying there for six years. What we saw in this prison was uglier than the regime prisons we hear about.

We registered our names for an exit. I did not think about what awaited me outside the camp, how people would treat me, or how my life would become. We contacted my aunt in Deir ez-Zor to rent a house for us. I was waiting impatiently for us to leave. I was telling myself that I would take off my niqab when I left, and I would forget all about camp life. If someone asked me where we were, I would mention any place other than the camp. The important thing for me was to forget the camp and the life I had lived there for six years. Yes, it took six years of my life, my health, my psyche, my son's childhood, and my future, but I had decided to start a new one.

Finally, the promised day came when they told us about the exit trip. It was one of the most beautiful days of my life. I started planning for the future, what I would do, and how our life would be in a house with walls, nature, streets, and cars. After two months of interviewing, they told us about the departure day. We packed our bags and went to the reception. Of course, I cried because I would be leaving my friends and neighbors. Despite the tragic life in the camp, there were beautiful moments. My family and I spent the night at the reception. The next day, cars came, and my friends and neighbors came to say goodbye to us. There were organizations filming. I was very happy to leave because I would see my aunts, uncles, and sisters after a long time. We entered a large tent in preparation for leaving after they called our names. Then we got into the cars. I could not believe what was happening. We left the camp at four in the afternoon.

When the cars left the gate, there were people on the camp fence waving their hands at us. I was affected

and cried. Here, the journey of living in Al-Hol camp ended. I thought that I would not leave the camp until I died. I started to remember my life in the camp, how the days passed, how I came, how I lived with beautiful and painful events, so I prayed to God to get everyone out because freedom is priceless, and everything is different outside. I waved my hand to the people and prayed to God to send me a new, beautiful life.

I was focused on the streets, the shops and the people all the way through the trip after I forgot what the world was like outside. I also forgot how I lived outside, and I did not want to miss the opportunity to see everything on the road. We arrived at night and they gave us personal documents. At 8 pm, we took a car and went to the house we rented. I was very tired but at the same time very happy that made me forget my fatigue. We unloaded the bags from the car, and I asked my mother to leave work until morning.

That night, I slept on the roof of the house with relief after all the years of fatigue. I hugged my son and I did not feel anything until the sun had risen. I opened my eyes to the scenery of nature, water, people and houses. I could not believe what I was seeing. I felt that I was dreaming because the house we were renting was located in the Muhaimidah town on the Euphrates River and I could see the suspension bridge. I remained absent-minded for an hour. Then I cried until I understood the new transition in my life. Before preparing breakfast, I walked inside the house to get to know it, because when we arrived home it was nighttime. After I woke up my parents from sleep, we started talking about how we started our new life. They also could not believe that we had left the camp.

The house consisted of three rooms, a living room, a kitchen and a bathroom. While we were having breakfast, my aunt and cousin came to visit us. They rented the house for us because they had lived in the town four years after they were displaced from their original village. It was an emotional meeting, especially since my mother had not seen her sister for nine years. We ate breakfast, talked, laughed, remembered the past and thanked God that life has become beautiful.

Our neighbors came to visit us, men and women. Of course, it became known that we came from Al-Hol camp, a fact that we could not hide or deny. There were also families who left the camp with us and lived in towns close to us, such as Al-Hussan and Al-Husseiniya. After I prepared coffee for them, I went into the rooms to arrange and chose one to sit in alone with my child. I did not forget my husband, whose life was wasted because of these oppressors, these infidels who were supposed to raise the banner of Islam, but, in reality, just wanted oil, money, and the blood of our youth. I remember once when I was going to the store - before we went to the camp. I heard two immigrants talking, one of them said to the other, “Here in Syria there is a lot of money, beautiful women, and cowardly men”. Indeed, his words were true because the young men here believed that as soon as they carried weapons they became mujahidin and would be a martyr. If my husband had lived and seen the life of the camp, he would have left the country entirely, just like his brothers did, who were also Da’esh members. When they saw that Da’esh was just a lie, they fled from Syria to Türkiye.

My brother’s wife went straight to her family because she missed them a lot. I arranged the house and started planning my new life, thinking about what I would do in the coming days. Of course, the establishment of my home will be in stages but I hope it will not be more difficult than what I lived before.

Sometimes, I sat with my neighbors listening to their talk about what they heard about life in the camp. They believed that there is a lot of money and everything a person wants he gets, asking us why we left as long as life there is good. Of course, I could not remain silent. I told them that goodness is present everywhere but comfort is not. One of them asked me if I will continue to wear the niqab. I answered her no! I will be free to live my life as I want. Then I went inside the house and started crying because they didn’t know how bad life had been in the camp.

The first week was wonderful. I heard that there are nursing classes in town, and I could work in that field, so I registered for this course. After the course started, there were some people who welcomed me, and others who did not want to deal with me because I was in Al-Hol camp. Of course I do not care, at the

same time I do not blame them because I hate Al-Hol camp more than them.

I asked my father not to let my brothers deal with the young men in town, because there are many bad ones among them. It is better for them to find work and to live our lives as strangers, better than living it with problems and disputes with neighbors. Especially since there are cells and factions that we do not know about.

Anyway, we are now living in the town temporarily, because we are thinking of leaving for Jarablus city. Everyone says that life there is better, especially since problems occur every now and then between the SDF and the regime or the Da'esh cells. Meaning that things are complicated here, and I feel that we will not be very comfortable because everyone will look at us on the basis that we are from Al-Hol camp, a name that will never make me start anything new in my life or my son's life.

Speaking of my son, no one will agree to register him in school because there is racism and there is a lot of change in people's thoughts, each person sees himself as an important one, each faction considers itself a state and this depresses us a lot. So we will go to a better and safer place, start our lives anew because I believe that the suffering of Al-Hol camp will be repeated here again. All I want is to take my family from here and leave with the least losses.

ANNEX 2: QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

I. Introduction and Informed consent

- Thank you for participating in our survey. Your contribution is essential as we seek to collect basic demographic information to understand the lives and situations of the residents of Al-Hol camp. This effort is part of a collaborative initiative between the data collection partner and UN Women, designed to inform UN policy and improve the support provided to the camp's population.
- The survey will begin by asking some questions about your background to help us understand the demographic composition of the camp. We will then proceed to questions regarding your household's financial situation and how you manage any difficulties you encounter. Further, the survey includes inquiries about engagement in paid work or other income-generating activities.
- Please be assured that your participation is completely anonymous and voluntary. Your privacy is our priority, and while your name will be initially used to ensure coherent data collection, it will not be attached to the survey results. You are free to omit any questions that you do not wish to answer.
- The insights gained from this survey will be used to paint a clearer picture of the circumstances and needs of women in the camp, which will guide UN policy and the development of tailored programs. The survey is brief and should take approximately 12 minutes of your time.
- We appreciate your honest feedback, which is crucial in helping UN Women and [partner] enhance our understanding and strengthen our interventions in Al-Hol camp. Thank you for your valuable time and participation.

II. Respondent data

1. Name: _____
2. Date of birth
3. Gender
   - Man
   - Woman
   - Other _____
4. Are you the head of your household?
   - Yes
   - No
   - I am the co-head
   - Prefer not to say
5. If no, what is the gender of the head of household?
   - Man
   - Woman
   - Other_____
   - Prefer not to say
6. What is your nationality?
   - Syrian
   - Iraqi
   - Other _____
   - Prefer not to say

7. What is your current marital status?
   - Single
   - Married
   - Widowed
   - Divorced
   - Other
   - Prefer not to answer
8. What is the highest level of education you attained?
   - None
   - Primary school
   - Secondary school
   - Vocational school (BT/BP)
   - University +
   - Don't know/No response
9. Are you able to read and write well, with difficulty, or not at all?
   - Read and write well
   - Read and write with difficulty
   - Not able to read or write
   - Don't know/No response
10. We would like to ask questions related to whether you have difficulty doing certain physical and mental tasks. Please answer:

No difficulty
Some difficulty
A lot of difficulty
Cannot do at all
Refused to answer
Don't know

Questions:

1.	Do you have difficulty seeing, even if wearing glasses? Would you say...
2.	Do you have difficulty hearing even if using a hearing aid? Would you say...
3.	Do you have difficulty walking or climbing steps? Would you say...
4.	Do you have difficulty remembering or concentrating? Would you say...
5.	Do you have difficulty with self-care, such as washing all over or dressing? Would you say...
6.	Using your usual language, do you have difficulty communicating, for example understanding or being understood? Would you say...

11. What kind of shelter do you live in?

- Prefab unit
- Tent
- Built house or a room
- No shelter (homeless)
- Other (Please specify)
- I don't know
- Prefer not to say

III. Household demographics

We are now going to ask you about each individual in your household.

Note: A household is "a socio-economic unit consisting of individuals who live together." A one-person household is where an individual makes provision for their own food or other essentials for living, independently of others. A multi-person household comprises two or more persons living together who make common provision for food or other essentials for living.

Household member's first name	Age	Gender Man Woman Other	Nationality Iraqi Syrian Other	How are they related to you? Spouse of head of household/ co-head of household Son/daughter Brother/Sister Father/Mother Son/Daughter-in-law Grandchild Grandfather/Grandmother Father-in-law/mother-in- law Brother-in-law/Sister-in-law Nephew / Niece Extended family (uncle/aunt/ cousin etc) Other relative Friend Roommate Guest or non-relative Other (specify)	Does this person have an income?	Are you their primary caretaker?

IV. Camp conditions

1. When did you arrive to Al-Hol?
   - Month:
   - Year:
2. [For Syrians] Where in Syria, specifically, do you consider your hometown?
   [dropdown menu of provinces and districts of Syria will be provided]
3. [For Iraqis] Where in Iraq, specifically, do you consider your hometown?
   [dropdown menu of provinces and districts of iraq will be provided]
4. Where were you before you came to Al-Hol?
   [dropdown menu including all provinces/districts of Iraq and Syria]
5. On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate your access to healthcare services within the camp?
   - 1 - No access at all
   - 2 - Very limited access
   - 3 - Moderate access
   - 4 - Good access
   - 5 - Excellent access
6. How often is clean drinking water available to you in the refugee camp?
   - Always available
   - Usually available (most of the time)
   - Sometimes available
   - Rarely available
   - Never available
7. If you have children of school age, how would you rate the availability of educational services for them in the camp?
   - 1 - No educational services available
   - 2 - Very limited educational services
   - 3 - Moderate level of educational services
   - 4 - Good level of educational services
   - 5 - Excellent educational services

V. Financial situation

1. How would you describe your household's financial situation over the past three months?
   - Experiencing a lot of difficulty: we can't afford necessary items such as food often or all the time
   - Experiencing some difficulty: we can afford food but are struggling to afford some essential non-food items
   - Experiencing a little difficulty: we can afford the food and essential non-food items we need, but have to spend less on them or purchase fewer items
   - Not experiencing difficulty: we can afford almost everything we have typically needed in the past
   - Prefer not to say
2. Approximately what is your household's total current monthly income?
   - No income at all
   - 0 - 2,600,000 SYP
   - 2,600,001 - 5,200,000 SYP
   - 5,200,001 - 7,800,000 SYP
   - 7,800,001 - 10,400,000 SYP

- 10,400,001 - 13,000,000 SYP
- 13,000,001 - 15,600,000 SYP
- 15,600,001 - 18,200,000 SYP
- More than 18,200,001 SYP

3. Approximately how much debt does your household currently owe?
   - We do not owe debt
   - 0 - 2,600,000 SYP
   - 2,600,001 - 5,200,000 SYP
   - 5,200,001 - 7,800,000 SYP
   - 7,800,001 - 10,400,000 SYP
   - 10,400,001 - 13,000,000 SYP
   - 13,000,001 - 15,600,000 SYP
   - 15,600,001 - 18,200,000 SYP
   - More than 18,200,001 SYP
   - Prefer not to say
4. In the past 30 days, to what extent was your household depending on the following practices to support yourselves?

Options for all of the below responses	We did not do this at all We did this sometimes/a little bit We did this a lot We mainly or only did this to get by Prefer not to say
Received donations from relatives, the community or religious organization	
Limited portions at mealtime	
Sent household members to eat elsewhere	
Restricted the food consumption of adults in order for small children to eat	
Bought food on credit or borrowed money to purchase food	
Begged or sent children to beg	
Spent savings to purchase food or basic goods such as hygiene items, water, baby items	
Reduced essential non-food or basic need expenditures such as hygiene items, water, baby items etc	
Sold household items or assets (car, jewelry, sewing machine) in order to buy food or basic goods	
Sent children (under 15) to work	
Skipped paying rent to meet other needs	
Changed accommodation location or type to reduce rental expenditure	
Relied on money received from remittances and family abroad	
Male family members were forced to work in dangerous, degrading, exploitative, risky or illegal jobs	
Female family members were forced to work in dangerous, degrading, exploitative, risky or illegal jobs	
Children were forced to work in dangerous, degrading, exploitative, risky or illegal jobs	

VI. Return and reintegration

1. On a scale of 1-10, how likely are you to return to your area of origin within the next year?
   - 1 - Very unlikely
   - 2 - Unlikely
   - 3-4 - Somewhat unlikely
   - 5 - Neutral
   - 6-7 - Somewhat likely
   - 8-9 - Likely
   - 10 - Very likely
2. When do you anticipate being able to return to your area of origin?
   - Within the next 3 months
   - In 3-6 months
   - In 6-12 months
   - In 1-2 years
   - More than 2 years
   - Unsure
   - No plan to return
3. What conditions would need to change in your area of origin to make you feel comfortable returning? Rank the importance of each condition.

Condition for return	Not important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Essential
Improved security					
Economic opportunities					
Availability of housing					
Reconstruction of community relations					
Availability of services					
Other conditions (specify and rank)					

4. Do you face any of the following barriers preventing you from returning to your area of origin?
   - Security concerns in AoO (Yes/No)
   - Lack of approval from the camp authorities (Yes/No)
   - No financial resources to leave (Yes/No)
   - Economic instability in AoO(Yes/No)
   - Fear of reprisals (Yes/No)
   - Lack of housing (Yes/No)
   - Separation from family (Yes/No)
   - Legal issues (Yes/No)
   - Other barriers (specify and indicate Yes/No)
5. Have you attempted to return to your area of origin in the past?
   - No previous attempts
   - One previous attempt
   - Two previous attempts
   - Three or more previous attempts
6. How do you perceive the current level of security in your area of origin?
   - Very unsafe

- Somewhat unsafe
- Neutral
- Somewhat safe
- Very safe

7. Do you possess all the necessary legal documents required to return to your area of origin?
   - Yes, all documents are in order
   - No, missing some documents
   - No, missing most or all documents
   - Unsure about legal requirements
8. Is your property in your area of origin intact, confiscated, or destroyed?
   - Response Options:
   - Intact
   - Confiscated
   - Destroyed
   - Not applicable/I don't have property
9. Are there family or community members currently living in your area of origin?
   - No family or community there
   - Yes, some family or community there
   - Yes, many family or community members there
   - Family or community ties are the primary reason for return

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