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NOT OUR PROBLEM?

Christina Lamb
meets the British
Isis brides and their
children struggling
to survive in Syria's
hell camps

A young boy is walking away from the camera down a dusty path in a refugee camp. He is wearing a black cap, a green t-shirt, blue shorts, and blue sneakers. He has a large, colorful backpack with a Disney Cars theme. To his left is a wall made of corrugated metal. In the background, there are tents, a red satellite dish, and utility poles under a clear blue sky.

“I made a mistake.
Why should
my son pay?”

Years after the fall of Isis, Britain’s “jihadi brides” and their children still languish in northeast Syria. Other countries have repatriated their citizens. We have not. *Christina Lamb* reports from the world’s most dangerous refugee camp

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CLAIRE THOMAS

The body was female and had been beheaded — the 19th woman murdered in the camp since April — then left on a dirt track as a warning. It was one of 109 murders in the al-Hawl camp in the gritty desert of northeast Syria over the past 18 months, many of them women. One was kidnapped in front of her ten-year-old son, her body left for him to find. Three children have died of gunshot wounds. Others die weekly of malnutrition and disease.

A sprawling camp of tattered white tents behind razor wire, al-Hawl is considered the most dangerous refugee camp in the world — a place the United Nations special rapporteur on the protection of human rights, Fionnuala Ni Aolain, refers to as “a human rights black hole”.

Few venture out in the 45C heat of the day, and those who do are mostly swathed in black, picking their way between rubbish and stray dogs. There is an unnerving sense of being watched.

Climbing up the security tower to its viewing platform gives some sense of the scale — white tents stretch as far as the eye can see. More than 55,000 people from 59 countries are crammed inside the camp, the overwhelming majority of whom are women and children. There are also about 12,000 Isis fighters detained here and in separate prisons nearby.

Al-Hawl may be called a camp but it is actually an open-air detention centre — some call it a concentration camp — and most of its inhabitants have been held here since early 2019, when the last remnants of Isis in Syria were defeated. Thousands of fleeing fighters and many thousands more women and children were rounded up by the forces of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), the de facto Kurdish governing entity. There are double layers of razor fence all around, but inside the Kurdish



militia guarding it say they have no control. “They are killing each other,” says the Kurdish head of security, who introduces herself as Nasrin Hol (a pseudonym for security reasons) and wears a T-shirt proclaiming “Not your angel”. “There are Isis sleeper cells and their women report on more open-minded women and they end up executed,” she says. “Sometimes we take them to prison, but it’s so hard as the killings all happen at night and in the day no one will talk. We are trying to keep it under control with patrols in our armoured vehicles, but it’s getting harder. We know many have weapons and there are tunnels.”

Recently the authorities banned water trucks from entering the camp after discovering they were being used to smuggle weapons in and people out.

The heavily armed guards are visibly nervous as they show us the annex where the foreigners live. A row of shops at the entrance has been burnt down. The main camp, home to Syrians and Iraqis, is even grimmer. The guards refuse to let us go deep

into the camp, but a group of boys appear and complain they have nothing to do.

Of the 56,537 people in this single camp, 36,279 are children. Makeshift schools are run by Save the Children, one of the few charities working in al-Hawl, but its staff have been pelted with stones and many mothers are too afraid to send their children there. One school was burnt down and had to be rebuilt.

“I’d like to go to school but my mum doesn’t let me,” Ashraf, ten, tells me. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Almost every child has seen people killed, including family members,” says one of Save the Children’s local staff. “They left one of the women’s bodies by our school so all our students saw it.”

“We just sit in tents all day,” says Abdallah, 15. “Whenever people try to make a football field, someone comes and destroys it. No one goes out in the afternoon, it’s too dangerous.”

“We have no football, no school, no TV, just old phones,” says Walid, 16. “You can’t

breathe in the tents because it’s so hot. If I tell you what really goes on here, my body will be found in two days.”

Three and a half years after the fall of the self-proclaimed Isis caliphate, no one knows what to do with these people. Their countries are reluctant to take them back, but the Kurdish militia guarding them does not have sufficient resources to hold them indefinitely. The longer they leave them, getting more and more bored and resentful, the more likely they are to be radicalised.

“It’s like a Guantanamo in the desert,” says Maya Foa, director of Reprieve, a human rights charity that represents more than 30 of the foreign families detained. “But it’s worse because it is much bigger and full of children.”

Among them are some of the 60 or so British women and children who say they have been abandoned by their own government. Most are in Roj, a smaller camp about three hours’ drive away, near the Iraqi border. Often referred to as the widows’ camp, it holds only women and children, and currently has about 2,600 detainees from 62 nationalities, according to the camp administrator Noura Abdul. About 1,700 of them are children. All are foreigners.

Conditions in Roj are marginally better than in al-Hawl — some have TVs in their tents — but it is also surrounded by fences and armed guards, and plagued by snakes and scorpions. Sandstorms regularly blast holes in the tarpaulin and the tents are like saunas in the extreme summer heat. “It is no place for a child,” Abdul says.

I meet Amira, a young British woman in a long maroon dress. She tells me that she grew up in a close-knit family in the



Layla, from London, sits with her son, Haroon, in their tent in Roj. She suffered burns when their last tent was burnt down by boys in the camp

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north of England and is very passionate about her home town. Now she is stuck in Roj with her five-year-old son.

Once they were in their tent watching the film *Alvin and the Chipmunks* and rain started to fall in one of the scenes. Her son’s forehead creased in puzzlement. “Mum, how come the walls are not shaking like ours do in the rain?”

“Darling, it’s a house,” she replied. “One day you’ll live in one.”

“I don’t want my child to live like this in this horrible place,” Amira tells me. “He asks me, ‘Mum, why aren’t we in our own country? I want to go to school, a nice school where we can paint and go outside.’ I want him to be educated, to go to the funfair. I used to love funfairs.”

The camp’s most notorious resident is Shamima Begum, who ran away from home to join Isis at 15 with three other schoolgirls from Bethnal Green, east London. She was discovered in al-Hawl by the *Times* reporter Anthony Loyd in February 2019. Then aged 19 and nine months pregnant by a Dutch Isis fighter, she begged to come back for the health of her baby, having lost her two previous children. But she also seemed unrepentant, casually

admitting she had known that the jihadist group was beheading its captives. Her baby boy died of respiratory failure when he was just three weeks old.

A week after she was discovered in al-Hawl, Begum had her British citizenship stripped by the home secretary Sajid Javid using a controversial law introduced after the 2005 London bombings that allows the government to remove citizenship from dual nationals if doing so “is conducive to the public good”. Appeals against the ruling have so far failed. Although Begum was born and raised in the UK, a tribunal concluded that as “a citizen of Bangladesh by descent”, removing her British nationality would not make her stateless.

Begum is one of the first women I see when I am given permission to enter Roj camp. Her black hijab has been swapped for jeans, a T-shirt and a baseball cap, under which are long plaits.

“I don’t want to talk to journalists,” she says. In fact she has been signed up by Netflix and a BBC podcast series — though she does tell me about a large black snake that was near her tent the previous night: “Everyone was running around screaming. We are not allowed hammers, so were trying to find a rock to hit it.”

I have not come to meet Begum, however. Most of the other British women and children in the camps have also had their citizenship stripped. Fearful of eliciting a similar reaction to Begum after she spoke to the media, they have remained silent. Now, for the first time, some want to tell their stories. Identities have been changed as all the women are involved in legal appeals against having their citizenship revoked, requiring anonymity, and fear reprisals from other women in the camp for speaking out. One has already had her tent set on fire.

“We’re all seen as monsters because of Shamima,” Amira says. “I don’t blame ►

Above: children wander between rows of tents at al-Hawl. From left: a woman carries a child to a makeshift hospital; more than 60 per cent of the people held in the Roj and al-Hawl camps are children



CLAIRE THOMAS FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE



people back home for labelling us as Isis wives, but I just want them to know our story, to know there are girls here who were taken at 12.”

A parliamentary report published in February said it had “received compelling evidence that British nationals, including children, were trafficked by Isis to and within Syria and Iraq”.

“The All Party Parliamentary Group on Trafficked Britons is extremely troubled by evidence indicating that, of British nationals currently detained in northeast Syria who were not born there, almost half were children at the time of travel and therefore especially likely to be victims of trafficking,” the report stated.

Maya Foa from Reprieve has carried out hundreds of interviews in the Roj camp and says she has seen striking patterns. “Isis worked as a trafficking agency, grooming teenagers and selling them on the idea they were coming to this wonderful paradise,” she says. “We can all say these women and girls made bad choices, but I’m convinced many did not know what was going on.”

In the case of Amira, that seems unarguable. She was barely out of primary school when she was taken from Britain to Syria by her family in 2014. They had been invited there for a holiday by a relative but it turned out to be a trap. After flying to Turkey, they were driven across the border to Syria and ended up in an Isis guesthouse. “I remember being sick in the car and then being scared because my mum was having a panic attack,” she says.

The guesthouse was kept locked from the outside and the only way out was to get married. Amira thought it would be “like having a friend”, but her husband was a much older Afghan man with whom she could barely communicate and who abused her.

“I never knew what Isis was,” she insists. “My husband was very controlling and jealous, so I couldn’t go out on my own.”

Eventually he was killed, but Amira says she found it impossible to escape as everyone was watched. “I didn’t ask to come here. I was never a member of Isis. I don’t understand why the British government won’t come and speak to us and at least hear my story. But it’s been four years and no one has come.”

She says to make up for all the school she has missed she tries to teach herself maths and English with books provided by NGOs.

“I’ve had a horrible time but I try to keep hopeful and positive. At night I cry myself to sleep. I try to bottle it up, to be strong, but recently it has been hard. My young years are being wasted here and those of my child. He’s growing up. He asks me, Mum, why are there guards, why do they have guns, will they come in our tents?”

Conditions inside Roj are grim. As well as the perimeter fence, each group of 48 tents



From top: blocks of tents fenced off within the bleak Roj camp; a boy buys provisions at a small shop

is fenced off. The women are allowed to go to camp shops only on specific days and can make just one three-minute phone call a week. Everything is dusty and dirty.

Life is particularly hard for Layla, who was badly injured in an airstrike and needs crutches to walk. She speaks slowly with immense effort, but is precise and eloquent — she is university-educated and older than most of the others.

“I can’t speak properly,” she apologises, “because of shrapnel in my neck. Sometimes it hurts so much it blocks my throat and I can’t swallow. All my right side is paralysed.”

After collapsing several times she was taken to hospital where “a CT scan showed blood clots in half of my brain”.

Like most of the British women, Layla wears a hijab outside her tent, but removes it inside to reveal western clothes and a wide, pleasant face. She says she does not remember how she was injured or even how she ended up in Syria, only that she came here because of her husband.

The memory lapse may be convenient, but what is clear is her devotion to her own little boy, Haroon, as she watches him playing on the floor of the tent with a plastic dinosaur and a toy car. He watches her just as carefully. “He’s five but already acting the adult,” she says. “I feel so sorry for my son, watching him suffer. He’s watching me and crying. I try to put on a brave face in front of him, but just being here, it’s not

a normal childhood. I don’t let him play outside because the kids all fight and say disgusting words.”

They used to have a TV, but last year their tent caught fire and everything was destroyed. Fires are common in the camp, often set off by electrical sparks, but in her case some boys set it alight, apparently because she allows her son to go to school.

“The tent had petrol [rubbed] on it to stop rain coming in and within a minute everything was on fire,” she says. “I was without my crutches and couldn’t walk.”

A neighbour dragged her out but she shows me a large burn on her leg. Since then her son has been disturbed. “He sees fires everywhere,” she says.

They were moved to a different part of the camp but life, she says, is almost intolerable. “He and I are on our own and every day I have to ask someone if they will cook for me, bathe me, wash my hair. It’s so humiliating. I lived in London all my life and was really independent. I went to university, had a good job... Now I don’t remember people’s names, places... The doctor said that if I stay here I will die, and I don’t know what will happen to my son.”

She cannot understand why the UK will not take her back. “I’m not a threat to anyone. I was never a threat. I am a disabled woman with a small child.

“Even when I was living with Isil I was always scared. I was mostly in the home and I don’t know what my husband was doing. I really regret coming here. I am prepared to face trial. I just want to go back and my son to have a family. He is my first priority. I just want him to have a normal childhood.”

Some children have died of malnutrition and disease, but there is another risk too. As soon as boys reach their teens they are put in detention centres to undergo deradicalisation. From there they go to prison. Last month Yusuf Zahab, a 17-year-old Australian boy, died in an overcrowded, makeshift prison where he’d been detained without charge for the past three years. He was just 11 when he was taken to Syria.

“I made a mistake, why should my son pay?” Layla says, tears spilling from her eyes. “I just want to take him to parks.”

I find myself holding her hand. Over the years I have covered a number of barbaric Isis terrorist attacks and interviewed many Yazidi girls held as sex slaves by Isis fighters. In many cases the girls told me that the fighters’ foreign wives had also mistreated them. I am therefore not necessarily inclined to sympathise with these women. But everyone deserves justice and no one, particularly not children, should be living in such harsh conditions.

“The refusal of countries like the UK to take them back is a big mistake,” says Abdulkarim Omar, a foreign spokesman for the AANES. “These people, especially the children, are victims of the war and the international community must assume



Left: Shamima Begum with her baby in 2019. She had fled the UK from her home in Bethnal Green to join Isis in Syria in 2015. Right: Begum as she is today in Roj camp



responsibility for them. Also, these kids staying in inhumane conditions risk being radicalised, forming a whole new generation of terrorists. It is a ticking time bomb.”

At first no countries took back their citizens but now the UK is increasingly an outlier. Under the radar we have repatriated

ten orphaned or unaccompanied children — but no women or mothers and their children. While I am speaking to Layla, Belgian officials arrive to collect some of their women and children. Over the past year dozens have been repatriated to countries including the US, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Austria, Finland and France.

“I see others leave,” Layla says. “All the German ladies have gone apart from a few. I am happy for them but it saddens me. If they can go, why won’t our government take us?”

“Our priority is to ensure the safety and security of the UK,” said the Home Office. “Those who remain in the conflict zone include some of the most dangerous, choosing to stay to fight or otherwise support Daesh. Many of these individuals represent a serious and credible threat to our national security and the direct threat they pose would be significantly higher should they return to the UK. It is vital we do not make judgments about the risk someone poses based on their gender or age. Women can pose as significant a risk to our national security as returning male fighters.”

In other words, say critics, leave them there and hope everyone forgets about them. UK officials even have a name for it:

“strategic distance”. They argue that the Kurdish region is a place no one recognises in a country with which the UK has no diplomatic relations. The civil war in Syria may have disappeared from the headlines but 11 years on it continues for its people, millions of whom have had to flee the brutal

suppression by President Assad’s regime aided by Russian and Iranian forces.

This part of Syria, sometimes referred to by its Kurdish name, Rojava, is one of the most complicated places on earth. Driving through its capital, Qamishli, you suddenly see a huge billboard of Assad: his regime controls a small stretch, known as Security Square, Russian forces control the main airport, Iranian militias are active in many of the villages and American and British

troops patrol in armoured vehicles from a base near Hasakah, an hour’s drive to the south. Turkish forces recently occupied some towns in the region and have threatened further advances. During my visit a senior Kurdish politician was killed in a Turkish drone strike.

Explaining the refusal to take back Shamima Begum in February 2019, the security minister Ben Wallace told the BBC: “I’m not putting at risk British people’s lives to go looking for terrorists or former terrorists in a failed state.”

The Sunday Times has learnt that at least one senior Foreign Office official objected to the government’s approach, pointing out that even if these women were Isis members, they had been “born, bred and radicalised in the UK and we should therefore be responsible for them”. ►

“I don’t blame people back home for labelling us Isis wives, but I just want them to know our story, to know there are girls here who were taken at 12”



If nothing else, they are all witnesses and may have useful information, particularly amid reports that Isis sleeper cells are planning fresh attacks. “There is a huge risk and huge danger in leaving them there,” another Foreign Office official said. “But there’s no political appetite for bringing them back and public opinion is very much ‘leave them there and throw the key away.’”

Britain is not the only country in which public opinion has been overwhelmingly unsympathetic, but other governments have changed their view and have taken their people back.

“It has been a terribly difficult issue for every government,” says Jussi Tanner, who is in charge of repatriations for Finland. The country has so far brought back 35 of its estimated 45 citizens — 26 children and 9 adults. In 2019 its government decided that all children should be repatriated.

“It was the least bad choice,” Tanner says. “We have a legal obligation to protect the rights of our children and visiting the camps it was clear these were a prolonged violation. Eventually these people would return to Finland as all their family and social networks were there, so it was better to do it ourselves in a controlled manner. We did not find a legally sustainable way to separate the children from their mothers, so let them come along too and investigate them.”

He admits it was not easy. While the Kurdish authorities publicly call for countries to take their citizens back, in practice they see them as leverage in their own battle for legitimacy. They have argued for an international court to be created in

From left: President Assad’s regime still has a presence in the region’s capital, Qamishli; US troops patrol a nearby town

their territory so they can try the detainees themselves. Negotiations, Tanner says, were “lengthy and complicated”. The first repatriation — of two orphaned children — prompted an outcry, but with each one, he says, reaction has been more muted. “Now the debate is really non-existent.”

Once Tanner gets the citizens back to Helsinki, social services, child welfare, police and intelligence services take over. It was decided it is in the children’s best

interest to keep them with their mothers while the women are under investigation. So far there have been no prosecutions or “any significant issues”.

Tanner is convinced that taking them back is the right thing from both a humanitarian and national security standpoint. “Doing nothing like the Brits is a choice,” he says, “and there will be consequences.” He cites Camp Bucca, a detention centre at a US base in southern Iraq that became a breeding ground for Islamic

extremism. One of its detainees was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who went on to become the leader of Isis.

Other European countries have come to the same conclusion. Manja Kliese took over as head of consular services in Germany in July 2019. A job that usually involves helping citizens who have problems on holiday in places such as the Algarve, she found herself dealing with possible Islamic terrorists in no man’s land.

“In the beginning we didn’t really know what to do,” she says. “How to deal with a country where we have no diplomatic presence and a body not recognised by any Nato partner? But on the other hand we had kids who are German living in absolutely dire conditions. We quickly decided we had to get them out.”

A German court ruled that children in al-Hawl camp had to be repatriated and that, given the constitutional right of family to be together, their mothers could follow.

“I went there in August 2019 and picked up three orphans and one toddler who needed life-saving treatment,” she says. Women and children from Roj camp have also been repatriated since.

“We are bringing back children and mothers are in the luggage,” Kliese says, speaking figuratively.

She has now brought back 22 women and 69 children from the two camps, almost all those who want to return. She estimates there are five more families who want to come back and 15 who do not. “They want to live in a Muslim environment, are afraid of losing their kids and of course are afraid of investigation,” she says. “And maybe there is a silent group who are still under the ideology of Isis.”

There has been little public reaction, perhaps, she suggests, because Germany has suffered fewer terrorist attacks than France or the UK. The biggest criticism has come from the far right about the costs. But with true German efficiency, those brought back are made to pay — “We issue them invoices,” Kliese says. There have also been a number of convictions, mostly for membership of a terrorist group. The women have received sentences of three to five years on average.

Even poorer countries such as Albania and Kosovo have taken back all their citizens, helped by the US, which wants all countries to do the same.

Last month France started bringing back its citizens after some family members went to the European Court of Human Rights. This brings the total number of repatriated

women to 550 and repatriated children to 640. It also leaves the UK and Australia as outliers on the issue among western countries, although the Australian families are confident of a breakthrough after the recent change of government and outcry following the death in custody of the 17-year-old citizen. A recent report by the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion shows that the UK has revoked citizenship on more occasions than all other Nato countries combined. Second to Bahrain, it is a “global leader in the race to the bottom”.

Samira, a thirtysomething British woman who married very young, tells me she fought to get citizenship reinstated for herself and for two of her children. However, her youngest was born while her citizenship had been revoked. “So if they do ever let me back, he won’t be able to come,” she says. “How does that make sense?”

To Reprieve’s Maya Foa it is clear. “It’s racism. All the women are from black and minority ethnic communities, so the government has argued they can claim nationality in other countries, even though all but one were born in the UK.”

Some of the British women in Roj are angry that the government did not do more to stop girls going to Syria. I meet Naila, who arrived as a schoolgirl in 2012 believing she could help victims of the civil war.

“I was a normal teenager living my life,” she says in a London accent. “I wasn’t religious, I didn’t wear the hijab. I wanted to go to uni, I had plans and dreams.”

Known as the widows’ camp, Roj is home to about 2,600 detainees, of whom 1,700 are children. All are foreigners

After posting on Twitter her anguish at the brutal suppression of the uprising against Assad, she was contacted by a man who said he could arrange for her to go and help. “People can say that I took a wrong decision and that’s true, but I feel I was taken advantage of and that the British government failed us. No one warned us at school you can be tricked by these kind of people.

“I’d never heard about Isis before I came to Syria,” she insists. “Once I was in, I didn’t have the contacts to get out. I was watched all the time, my calls monitored.

“I wouldn’t wish what I went through on anyone,” she adds. “I don’t think it’s a solution leaving people like me here. We could be part of the solution by educating others. If you asked any of my teachers, they would never have imagined I would go. It could happen to anyone.”

Today, the situation is volatile. The AANES says Isis influence is spreading again and it is running out of patience.

“We fought with you to defeat Isis and now you have betrayed us,” says Elham Ahmed, the region’s most senior official, who speaks to me from a secret location. She is constantly on the move because of Turkish drone strikes.

The parliamentary group report accused the government of “handing a propaganda gift to Isis” by leaving British women

“There is a huge risk in leaving them there,” one Foreign Office official said. “But public opinion is very much ‘leave them there and throw the key away’”

and children in these camps. As with Guantanamo, Isis uses the detention camps for propaganda both as a literally captive audience and a source, describing their continued detention as a symbol of the West’s abuse of Muslims. “It’s one of the most pressing security issues of our time,” says Dr Shiraz Maher, who runs the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King’s College London.

It’s also growing more urgent. In January

Isis militants set off a truck bomb that blew a hole in a perimeter wall of al-Sina prison in Hasakah, which houses thousands of their comrades. The attack sparked a ten-day battle that spilt into the surrounding streets and drew British and American forces back into combat to help their allies in the Kurdish-led Syrian Defence Forces. By the time it was over, the prison was destroyed, 500 people were dead and scores of prisoners had escaped

— hundreds, by some estimates.

Isis propaganda has already warned that al-Hawl camp will be next and it is running a social media campaign called Breaking Down the Walls, reassuring the inmates to “be resolute — we will come”.

“We’ve stepped up security, doubled checkpoints and increased patrols, but nothing is impossible,” says Nasrin Hol, the Kurdish security chief. “Americans have given us help with armoured vehicles, but that’s not the solution — the solution is for their countries to take them back.”

Perhaps the last word should go to one of the victims of Isis. Diane Foley is the mother of Jim Foley, the American war correspondent who was kidnapped in Syria in 2012 and whose execution on video in 2014 by men in black first revealed to the world the depths of their barbarity. “Getting that call was the worst day of my life,” she says, referring to how she was informed of her son’s death by an Associated Press journalist, who was sobbing. “But it doesn’t serve anybody forcing thousands of people to live in such primitive crowded situations, many of whom may be totally innocent. We must give attention to the children who can become the next generation of haters and fighters. It’s a powder keg and we are once again making the mistake of not wanting to look at it until it becomes a huge problem.” ■

The names of women and children detainees have been changed



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