

New York Times 29 mar 2019 In a Crowded Syria Tent Camp the Women and Children of ISIS Wait in Limbo

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/29/world/middleeast/isis-syria-women-children.html?searchResultPosition=9>

SYRIA DISPATCH

In a Crowded Syria Tent Camp, the Women and Children of ISIS Wait in Limbo

Video

The Syrian Detention Camp Holding the Women and Children of ISIS

By Ivor Prickett

0:40 The Syrian Detention Camp Holding the Women and Children of ISIS

The Al Hol camp in northern Syria holds more than 72,000 people from various countries. Many of them fled the last strip of territory held by the Islamic State.

By Ben Hubbard

- March 29, 2019
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-

AL HOL CAMP, Syria — She left the Netherlands to join the Islamic State in Syria, and married a fighter here. He was killed, so she married another, who got her pregnant before he was killed, too.

Then this month, as the Islamic State collapsed, she surrendered with her son to United States-backed forces and landed in the sprawling Al Hol tent camp, which has swollen to the breaking point with the human remnants of the so-called caliphate.

“I just want to go back to a normal life,” said Jeanetta Yahani, 34, as her son Ahmed, 3, clung to her leg and shook with a violent cough.

The announcement a week ago that the Islamic State had [lost its final patch of territory in Syria](#) was a milestone in the battle against the world’s most fearsome terrorist network. But it also raised urgent questions about what to do with the tens of thousands of people who had flocked to join the jihadists from around the world and now have nowhere else to go.

[Continue reading the main story](#)



Image

Women and children who fled the last area of the Islamic State's control arriving at a screening point in the desert last month. Credit...Ivor Prickett for The New York Times



Image

Women and children leaving the last area controlled by the Islamic State by bus to reach camps run by Syrian Kurdish militias. Credit...Ivor Prickett for The New York Times



Image

An injured woman waiting last month to leave the last area controlled by the Islamic State. Credit...Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

More than 9,000 of Al Hol's residents are foreigners who are kept in a special section, which I visited with a photographer on Thursday.

As soon as we entered, women approached us to ask if we could help them return to their countries or find missing loved ones.

"Are you from the Swedish Red Crescent?" a woman asked, trotting away after I said no.

"I am from a country that no one knows about, so I will never get out of here," said a woman from the Seychelles.

Spotting strangers in the camp, Lisa Smith, a [former member of the Irish Defense Forces](#), said hello but declined to be interviewed.

Some women still clung to the jihadists' ideology.

A 22-year-old Chechen woman who identified herself only as Um Aisha described life in the caliphate as "all very good."

"There were brothers who believed in Shariah, an Islamic state, and it was not like this," she said, pointing disapprovingly at two female aid workers wearing pants.

The woman's husband was killed in an airstrike on the Islamic State's final pocket this month, she said, but she did not think the jihadists' project was over.

"Our brothers are everywhere, in Germany, in Russia, in America — we believe that al-Dawla al-Islamia will come back," she said, using the group's Arabic name.

Others expressed regrets.



Image

As the ISIS families flooded in, camp workers scrambled to put up enough tents to house them, crowding families together to protect them from an unseasonably cold and rainy winter. Credit...Ivor Prickett for The New York Times



Image

The women and children in the camps are considered less dangerous than the men, but there are still fears that Islamic State ideology will spread. Credit...Ivor Prickett for The New York Times



Image

Children make up about two-thirds of the camp's residents. Credit...Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

Galion Su, from Trinidad, stood near the camp's gate with her face uncovered, hoping to get out and look for her teenage son, who had been [arrested by Kurdish forces in January](#).

Her husband brought them to Syria in 2014 and the couple divorced soon after, leaving her struggling to care for her son.

"I was like a whore in the Dawla," said Ms. Su, 45. She had married four men, she said, each on the condition that they let her keep her son.

When the jihadists tried to force him to fight, she dressed him as a woman and fled, but Kurdish forces arrested him when they discovered the ruse, she said. Now, she had no idea where he is.

"I just want to be normal and go back to a normal society, sleep in a nice bed, eat nice food, watch TV and laugh," she said.

Children make up about two-thirds of Al Hol's residents. Some are orphans. Many described in detail and with little emotion how their fathers had been killed. All had witnessed violence, and some had been taught to practice it.

Camp officials say they are too busy scrambling to provide tents and food to offer schooling or other activities, much less to deal with people's psychological problems or to re-educate children trained by the jihadists. The challenge is intensified because some parents still endorse the jihadists' ideology.

"The mentality is the same. Nothing has changed," said Mr. Bashir, the camp administrator. "The children are innocent, but when they end up in the camp, they will learn what their parents teach."

As the sun set after a rare sunny day on Thursday, we found ourselves surrounded by hordes of children playing. A group of Turkish boys played a rowdy game of soccer while children from Iraq, Egypt, Russia and elsewhere pelted one another with fistfuls of gravel.



Image

Most of the home countries of the camp's residents do not want them back, so they are stuck in a stateless, unstable swath of northern Syria. Credit...Ivor Prickett for The New York Times



Image

Determining the exact backgrounds of the women and children in the camps is difficult, since many lack identification. Credit...Ivor Prickett for The New York Times



Image

Women and children who fled the last ISIS-held area in southeast Syria waiting to be screened last month by Kurdish and coalition forces in the desert near the village of Baghuz. Credit...Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

Standing atop a latrine, an Iraqi boy with a toy rifle shouted, “The Islamic State has invaded!” Training his sight on another child, he threatened, “I’m a sniper. I’ll shoot you in the head right away.”

Nearby, two toddlers got into a fight and fell to the ground punching each other while a 10-year-old boy who was missing his right leg looked on. He declined to give his name or say where he was from, and responded to questions with short answers.

How did you lose your leg?

“A plane. Shrapnel.”

What do you want to do now?

“Get a tent and stay in it. Or maybe a house.”

Where?

“I don’t know.”

Mustafa Ali contributed reporting.