
Between two fires

Danger and desperation
in Syria's Al-Hol camp



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Acknowledgements

MSF would like to acknowledge the many people who contributed to this report.

To our staff in Syria, and elsewhere, and especially to the people of Al-Hol, we would like to sincerely thank you for sharing your time and stories with us.

Art direction, design + infographics

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Boundaries and place names on maps in this report do not reflect any position by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) on their legal status.

Executive summary

Under the auspices of the global fight against the Islamic State (IS) group, exceptional policies have been implemented involving the indefinite and arbitrary detention of women, children and men in Al-Hol camp in northeast Syria.

The responsibility for implementing these measures was devolved by the US-led Global Coalition against IS to the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES), a de facto autonomous region in northeast Syria, and to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – the military branch of AANES. Members of the Global Coalition, as well as other countries whose nationals remain held in Al-Hol, and other detention facilities and camps in north east Syria, have failed to take responsibility for protecting their nationals or for identifying long-term solutions to their indefinite containment. Instead, they have delayed or simply refused to repatriate all their nationals, in some cases going so far as to strip them of their citizenship, rendering them stateless. Overall, no measures have been taken to ensure that the fundamental rights of the camp's population are protected.

Left to manage the largest camp in northeast Syria and its more than 53,000 detainees of 60 nationalities, AANES and SDF have been ill-equipped and poorly guided to manage these processes in a way that is in keeping with international standards and law. Repeated breaches of human rights and recurrent patterns of violence and exploitation have been observed in Al-Hol camp. These have an enormous impact on people living in and around the camp, affecting their

safety, security, dignity and access to humanitarian aid. They also impact the providers of humanitarian aid, who are increasingly constrained and exposed to violence and criminality.

Rather than taking steps to address the pervasive insecurity and dire living conditions in Al-Hol, the Global Coalition has outsourced the management of the situation by providing funding to AANES and SDF for securitisation and containment measures – measures which have so far failed to ensure safety and security for people in and around Al-Hol. Residents have described themselves as being trapped “between two fires”: on the one side, the persistent threat of extreme violence committed by armed groups in the camp, and on the other, the increasingly harsh security measures implemented by camp authorities in an attempt to manage the situation in Al-Hol.

The containment of thousands of men, women and children in Al-Hol is a short-term security measure which is unlikely to address the threat posed by the IS group until the immediate safety, protection and long-term welfare of the people inside the camp are addressed.

MSF calls on the all relevant parties – including the Global Coalition, local authorities in northeast Syria, and states with nationals in Al-Hol – to assume responsibility for the welfare of



‘Counter-terrorism policies have trapped thousands of civilians in Al-Hol camp in a cycle of indefinite detention, danger and insecurity’

people in Al-Hol. It also calls on the Global Coalition to support local authorities in taking immediate steps to guarantee people's wellbeing, protection and fundamental human rights. This includes investing in measures to reduce violence, insecurity and criminal activity, in accordance with international law, and strengthening capacity for providing humanitarian assistance in the camp, improving living conditions and identifying sustainable long-term solutions for the camp's population that are in keeping with international standards and law.

Purpose and scope of the report

Counter-terrorism policies have trapped thousands of civilians in Al-Hol camp in a cycle of indefinite detention, danger and insecurity, which permeates every aspect of their daily lives and deprives them of their fundamental human rights. This report documents and reflects on the impact of the pervasive violence, exploitation and lawlessness in Al-Hol camp on its population through their voices and experiences. It draws on the testimonies of population of the Main Camp and Annex, the first-hand observations of MSF frontline humanitarian staff, and medical data from MSF health facilities in the camp collected between July 2021 and March 2022.

The report describes the personal experiences and accounts of our patients, the wider population of Al-Hol and our staff testimonials. Through these accounts, Al Hol is portrayed as a detention camp, more than a humanitarian camp setting, where movement in and out of the camp is restricted, rights and entitlements are stripped from people. They lack access to livelihoods, and continue to be held in prison-like conditions with very limited access to basic services and with no way out.

MSF activities in Al-Hol camp

MSF launched a response in Al-Hol camp in January 2019, initially providing emergency medical care in the reception area for new arrivals and providing essential relief items. Currently, MSF runs a clinic for patients with non-communicable diseases and provides home-based medical services to the population of the Main Camp who are unable to walk to a health facility. MSF also provides outpatient consultations, women's health services and mental health support in the Service Area adjacent to the Annex, where foreign nationals are held. MSF teams also run mobile clinics within the Annex. MSF also provides emergency water trucking to areas of the Main Camp and supplies water, via a water network, to the Annex and to one of the most densely populated sections of the Main Camp which houses more than 20,000 people.



A child runs through the streets of Al Hol camp in northeastern Syria, where around 53,000 people displaced by the conflict in Syria, the majority of them children, are detained.

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Context and legal framework

Al-Hol camp is situated close to the Syria-Iraq border. It was initially set up by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) during the 1991 Gulf war to house some 15,000 Iraqis,¹ and was expanded further during the US invasion of Iraq in the early 2000s.

Al-Hol town was controlled by the IS group in early 2014, when it was on the main corridor and most prominent supply route for IS from Iraq to Syria, specifically towards southern Hassakeh and Raqqa. In October 2015, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)² launched an offensive to capture the strategic town of Al-Hol and the surrounding countryside from IS. On 13 November 2015, SDF forces captured Al-Hol town. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) reopened Al-Hol as a refugee camp in April 2016 to accommodate Iraqi refugees fleeing IS advances. In 2018, the camp hosted some 10,000 Iraqi refugees, but between December 2018 and March 2019 its population increased to some 73,000 people after the fall of Baghuz, the last stronghold of IS,³ and the resulting mass influx of displaced people.

After the battle of Baghuz, thousands of alleged IS fighters were detained by the SDF in makeshift prisons, including many foreign nationals. Families of suspected IS fighters, including some 11,000 foreign women and children, were evacuated from Baghuz and taken to Al-Hol, where they were kept in a separate annex of the camp, which had more restrictions than other areas. The Baghuz influx brought the total number of Iraqi nationals in the camp to around 30,000,⁴ making Iraqis the dominant nationality within the camp.

Currently, Al-Hol camp is divided into the Main Camp, comprised of eight sections (known as ‘phases’) for Syrian and Iraqi nationals; and the Annex, housing foreign nationals (neither Syrian nor Iraqi) from 60 different countries. The Main Camp and the Annex are separated by a fence with little to no movement allowed between the two areas. Following some returns and repatriations, the total camp population now stands at around 57,000,⁵ of whom 11,000 are foreign nationals.⁶ A total of 64% of Al-Hol’s population are children, while 50% of the camp’s population are under the age of 12.⁷

The Global Coalition has recognised that the 11,000 foreign nationals held in Al-Hol are an “international problem”. As a result, it has provided the SDF with financial support and

equipment amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars to manage the camp, and helps train local security forces and improve facilities in the camp.⁸ Despite this, conditions in Al-Hol are characterised by severe overcrowding, while its population live in inadequate makeshift shelters with limited access to food, clean water and basic services such as healthcare and education. People in the camp are exposed to high levels of violence, exploitation and abuse on a daily basis, while children and other vulnerable groups bear the brunt of the insecurity and deprivation.

Legal landscape

This section touches briefly on the various bodies of public international law that may be relevant to the situation in Al-Hol camp, and illustrates in broad terms the different standards, rights and obligations that exist in relation to deprivation of liberty. What follows is therefore not an exhaustive presentation of the existing legal framework. The question of whether SDF has the authority to detain individuals is beyond the scope of this section.⁹

International humanitarian law (IHL)

The conflict between SDF and the IS group in northeast Syria could be classified as a non-international armed conflict within the meaning of Article 3 common to the 1949 Geneva Conventions.¹⁰ IHL would thus be applicable provided that a link exists between the situation of such armed conflict and the deprivation of the liberty of relevant individuals.

As per paragraph 1 of Article 3 common to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, each party to the conflict is obliged to, as a minimum, treat humanely persons in detention in all circumstances and “without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria”.¹¹ It should be noted that “[...] the meaning of humane treatment is context specific and has

to be considered in the concrete circumstances of each case [...]”¹² Violence to life and person, in particular torture, murder, and cruel treatment, is prohibited at all times and in any place, while the wounded and sick must be collected and cared for.¹³

Other guarantees for persons deprived of their liberty include:

- Persons deprived of their liberty must be provided with adequate food, water, clothing, shelter and medical attention;
- Persons deprived of their liberty must be held in premises which are removed from the combat zone and which safeguard their health and hygiene;
- Pillage of the personal belongings of persons deprived of their liberty is prohibited;
- The personal details of persons deprived of their liberty must be recorded;
- Persons deprived of their liberty must be allowed to receive visitors, especially near relatives, to the degree practicable.¹⁴

When it comes to internment,¹⁵ certain general principles apply, including that: internment (i) is an exceptional measure; (ii) is not an alternative to criminal proceedings; (iii) can only be ordered on an individual case-by-case basis without discrimination of any kind; and (iv) must cease as soon as the reasons for it cease to exist.¹⁶

Women deprived of their liberty must be held in quarters separate from those of men, except where families are accommodated as family units, and must be under the immediate supervision of women.¹⁷ The specific protection, health and assistance needs of women affected by armed conflict must be respected.¹⁸

Children affected by armed conflict are entitled to special respect and protection.¹⁹ Children deprived of their liberty must be held in quarters separate from those of adults, except where families are accommodated as family units.²⁰ In this regard, family life must be respected as far as possible.²¹

The United Nations Security Council, through resolution 2427, “[...] emphasise[d] that children who have been recruited in violation of applicable international law by armed forces and armed groups and are accused of having committed crimes during armed conflicts should be treated primarily as victims of violations of international law, and [...] encourage[d] access for civilian child protection actors to children deprived of liberty for association with armed forces and armed groups” (emphasis added).²²

International human rights law (IHRL)²³

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment, which is a non-derogable right applicable at all times.²⁴

Everyone has the right to liberty²⁵ and security of person,²⁶ and no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention or deprived of his/her liberty except on such grounds and in accordance with such procedures as are established by law.²⁷ All persons deprived of their liberty have to be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person,²⁸ which is a non-derogable right applicable at all times.²⁹ This encompasses that persons deprived of their liberty may not be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, nor may they be subjected to “[...] any hardship or constraint other than that resulting from the deprivation of liberty; respect for the dignity of such persons must be guaranteed under the same conditions as for that of free persons.”³⁰

States have recognised the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger and to enjoy the highest attainable standards of physical and mental health.³¹

Regarding women, access to healthcare services on a basis of equality of men and women must be ensured, as well as appropriate services in connection with pregnancy and adequate nutrition during pregnancy and lactation.³²

With respect to children, several additional considerations apply. Firstly, the best interests of the child must be the primary consideration in all actions undertaken by, among others, administrative authorities and courts of law.³³ In addition, children must not be deprived of their liberty unlawfully or arbitrarily; any arrest, detention or imprisonment must be in conformity with the law and be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time.³⁴ If a child is deprived of his/her liberty, he/she must be treated with humanity and in a manner that takes into account the needs of persons of his/her age.³⁵

Children deprived of their liberty must not be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.³⁶ They must be separated from adults unless it is not in their best interest to do so;³⁷ in that regard, it is important to note that children must not be separated from their parents against their will except in specific circumstances.³⁸ They have the right to education, to receive adequate physical and mental healthcare throughout the period in which they are deprived of their liberty, and to maintain contact with their family and the wider community.³⁹ Children must be registered immediately after birth and have the right, as of birth, to a name and a nationality.^{40,41}

Other documents that reflect generally accepted standards relating to deprivation of liberty can be found, for example, in the Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment (A/RES/43/173 (1988)), the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules) (A/RES/70/175 (2016)), the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (A/RES/40/33 (1985)), and the United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty (A/RES/45/113 (1990)).

International refugee law (IRL)

IRL applies to refugees who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, [are] outside the country of [their] nationality, and [are] unable to, or owing to such fear, [are] unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”⁴² Although Syria is not a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the convention may serve as an illustration of rights granted to refugees with respect to, among others, rationing, housing, public education, public relief and freedom of movement.⁴³

Internally displaced people (IDPs)

IDPs are “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border.”⁴⁴ Generally, IDPs should be granted the same rights and freedoms as those granted, under international and domestic law, to other persons in their country.⁴⁵



“Everyone here has a different story, not everyone is IS (Islamic State)”

Main camp resident



The journey to Al-Hol and the progressive containment and securitisation of the camp

Al-Hol was once a humanitarian camp, designed to provide safe, temporary accommodation and humanitarian services to civilians displaced by the conflict in Syria and Iraq.

Many camp residents came to Al-Hol on the basis that it was temporary and voluntary, and that the camp was humanitarian in nature. They were given assurances of safety and that they would be provided with basic necessities such as food, medicine, water and shelter. Many felt relief when they found a place of refuge in Al-Hol, but the changing nature of the camp left them feeling confused, frustrated and trapped.

● *“In one word, what we are living through here is horrible. We are in Al-Hol because they promised us freedom, they promised us good conditions if we left Baghuz and stopped the war. I was pregnant and I had five children, so I decided to leave Baghuz. Now I regret having left. I believed it would be true, that we would be free, but nothing. If I’d known, I would have preferred to die than come here.”*

Main Camp resident

The influx of civilians from IS-controlled areas to Al-Hol in 2019⁴⁶ led to the entire population of the camp being perceived as affiliated with IS. The wives, children and other relatives of thousands of killed or detained IS fighters were taken to Al-Hol camp, with many of them reportedly continuing to maintain IS ideology.⁴⁷ However, some female camp residents have told MSF staff that they followed their husbands to IS-controlled territories for non-ideological reasons, including the desire to remain with their children.

● *“Everyone here has a different story, not everyone is IS. My husband followed IS and took my children, and I was forced to follow him because my daughter*

was with him – what else could I do? I didn’t want to be separated from my daughter and I wanted to protect her. My family asked me not to go, and now they don’t even want to speak to me. I no longer have anyone outside Al-Hol. I was forced to come to this camp as our family abandoned us because we followed IS. I was living in Raqqa with my husband and my daughter. Then my husband took our daughter to Deir Ez-Zor. I went looking for him in Deir Ez-Zor and I found my daughter. I tried to run away with my daughter but they caught me and sent me up in front of a judge. I could leave alone but my daughter had to stay. So I decided to stay. Now I have a major responsibility for my children – they have no family, no father, only me. My family no longer accepts my children and me. At the end of IS, they told us: ‘Everyone that wants to leave, you can leave’. I got divorced and I took my daughter and we started to walk. It was cold and it was night-time and we didn’t know where the mines were. Finally we found a house, but the next morning a soldier found us and took us to Al-Hol [...]. When it was the end of IS, security forces asked all the civilians to go to Al-Hol. They told us it would be a better place to stay for a couple of days and after that we could leave, and that there would be medical care and food. They didn’t say it would be a place that we couldn’t leave. If I had known, I wouldn’t have come. It was good at the beginning; for the first month I was able to sleep a lot, and I slept a lot, as we couldn’t sleep during IS. Then the murders and the robberies started, as well as the burning of tents. They all started at the same time.”

Main Camp resident

The ideological demography of the camp's population is far more diverse than narratives regarding their affiliations with IS suggest. Many of the camp's population report having been displaced multiple times as a result of conflict. Far from identifying with IS ideology, many say they were arrested at checkpoints when trying to flee IS-controlled territories. Many report that they were living in areas that later came under the control of IS and were forced to leave their homes on IS orders. They say that if they chose to stay, they risked being bombed by coalition forces or being accused of supporting IS by dint of their location.

“We escaped Deir Ez-Zor in October 2017. The situation was bad there, there was lots of shelling and civilians were being targeted. Everyone was desperate to leave, everyone was waiting on the road for transport out of there, cars and mini trucks were taking whoever they could. I took 10 people on the back of my motorbike with me. It wasn't like we could leave people behind. It took us three days to get to Shadadi and then we were arrested at a checkpoint and taken to Al-Hol. Pretty much everyone who left Deir Ez-Zor at that time was arrested.”

Main Camp resident



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“People were forced to leave their homes because mostly they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. We were forced to leave our city and forced to stay in the city of IS, and we were forced to move from place to place by IS [...]. In 2015, I came back to Syria to collect my mum so we could go back to Turkey together. But IS was there, so I tried to run away with her and I was arrested. They put me in prison for one month and they took everything we had. I could not run away after that, and life was getting worse. IS forced us to go to Raqqa and then to Deir Ez-Zor. We couldn't stay in the city because the coalition was bombing everything and, if you stayed behind, the coalition forces would accuse you of being from IS, so we were forced to move with IS. Deir Ez-Zor is where we got to before eventually ending up in Al-Hol. And finally here we are, and we are still not safe. We thought we would be safe here, but no.”

Main Camp resident

Due to the lack of due process to establish the legality of their indefinite detention in Al-Hol, many camp residents say they feel they have been found guilty without a trial. They fear that both security conditions and living conditions will continue to deteriorate and that they may be stuck in Al-Hol forever, if not by restrictions on their freedom of movement, then by the crippling stigma they will face in terms of their perceived association with IS resulting from their stay in the camp. Such fears are an enormous mental burden and have brought about an atmosphere of hopelessness among the camp's population.

“In Al-Hol, we are in a detention centre – it is like Guantanamo, it is a death camp, a prison. Once my dad was at the main gate but they wouldn't allow me even to see him at the gate. This is when I thought: ‘Yes, we are in prison.’ We need people to be able to visit us, and we need to be able to interact with the outside world. The media are not putting out the right message about Al-Hol, with the result that one bad person affects all the people here.”

Main Camp resident

Despite the heterogeneity of Al-Hol's population, large-scale containment and securitisation measures were put in place after the arrival of people displaced from IS-controlled territories in 2019. Camp residents describe feeling the

environment shift around them: they note that the camp was once open, with people able to leave the camp and earn money, but gradually it became more contained and restrictive. Visits by family members, which were possible in the past, were also suspended in 2020 as part of COVID-19 precautionary measures implemented by authorities.⁴⁸ Now, the camp population are not allowed to leave the camp unless granted permission by the security forces, which rarely happens.

“In 2017, Al-Hol was a camp; in 2019, it became a prison. When we were first there, we could walk in and out, we could apply for permits to go to Hassakeh or even Raqqa. There was cash in the camp. If things had stayed the same in the camp, probably no one would have left. It was good back then. There was no problem with security at all, there were loads of resources and distributions [of relief items] were good. NGOs were really well accepted.”

Main Camp resident

Barbed wire and fences have been erected and deep trenches have been dug around the perimeter of the camp, while multiple checkpoints run by security forces control all movement in and out of the camp. Armoured vehicles frequently patrol the camp, with security raids and arrests a regular feature of life. Repeated security incidents within the camp have also justified more security investment from the Global Coalition against IS and increased restrictions on the camp's population, contributing to a spiral of security solutions that have progressively undermined the civilian character of the camp.

“I think we are in a punishment camp, it is a terrifying and horrible place. It is one big prison. The only thing we are asking for is to go home and be left alone. We can manage, even if we have to go back to Government of Syria territory. I have been in Al-Hol for three years now and it feels like 25 years.”

Main Camp resident

“We are between two fires:
the security forces and the
extremists. It’s a kind of prison”

Main camp resident

“Between two fires” – Violence and securitisation in Al-Hol

Forced to live in a violent and dangerous environment, people in Al-Hol are exposed to constant physical and psychological trauma and an atmosphere of fear which penetrates all aspects of their lives.

Al-Hol has effectively become a legal black hole, conducive to patterns of violence and exploitation, where criminal activities are treated with impunity. The indefinite detention of the camp population, and the lack of due process and review of the legality of such detention, have stripped them of their rights, entitlements and access to protection under international law, and have greatly contributed to their exposure to extreme criminality, violence and insecurity. Camp residents describe feeling caught between two fires: on the one hand the increasingly violent criminal groups, with opaque political and ideological affiliations and with access to weapons; and on the other hand the excessively repressive and violent measures implemented towards the population by security forces in charge of the camp and Global Coalition forces.

Extreme criminality and a pattern of killings

In 2021, the leading cause of mortality in Al-Hol was crime-related death, which accounted for 38% of all deaths in the camp.⁴⁹ In addition to those 85 crime-related deaths, 30 attempted murders were also reported in the camp.⁵⁰ The majority of murder victims were Iraqi nationals.⁵¹ Aggressive criminality and violence linked to extortion opportunities by networks of armed groups have contributed to this high incidence of killings. Between January and August 2022, there were 34 reported murders in the camp.⁵²



38%

In 2021, the leading cause of mortality in Al-Hol was crime-related death, which accounted for 38% of all deaths in the camp

“Al-Hol is the most dangerous place in the world because of the enormous number of [murder] cases here. Four months ago, I was walking with a friend at sunrise and we saw a blanket. In it there was a dead body. We didn’t do anything because we were too afraid of the security forces. But the body had no head. The head was in phase 5 and the body in phase 1.”

Main Camp resident

The underlying causes of the criminality in the camp vary, but contributing factors include a general sense of lawlessness in the camp, damaged social fabric, limited community structures, a lack of legitimate economic opportunities, and a returns and departure process littered with administrative obstacles and opportunities for exploitation.

“There are many different armed groups and sleeper cells in the camps. Some of them are just extracting money, some are religiously motivated, and some are looking for information and control [...]. I would estimate that around 90% of the killings in the camp are related to extortion and extraction of money, with only 10% related to religious beliefs. The thing is, if you are approached by one of these groups and asked to provide information, there is not much you can do. If you say ‘no’ you are going to be killed, if you say ‘yes’ then suddenly you are affiliated with these groups. You can’t win. You just have to get out, but then again, only people with money can leave.”

Main Camp resident

“We are between two fires: the security forces and the extremists. It’s a kind of prison. There is no freedom here. Why don’t they allow us to go outside the camp? These murders that are happening, many people don’t know why they are happening. And because it is unknown and can happen for any reason, it is very frightening. We don’t know why they are killing people, and we can’t lock our door – we don’t even have a door! They say they only kill the spies who are going to the security forces, but this is not true because sometimes there are killings for no reason at all.”

Main Camp resident

Almost everyone in the camp has a story of a neighbour or relative who has been directly impacted by these murders. Some of the violence is clearly targeted and relates to allegations of spying for the security forces, to extorting money for taxes, or to social control related to having a 'bad reputation'. Camp residents have reported killings of individuals who have been subject to extortion for money and have refused or been unable to pay. Other killings are perceived to be related to the provision of sexual services as a survival mechanism. Other instances involve individuals reportedly affiliated with IS who have been murdered due to their perceived lack of adherence to cultural or religious norms within the camp. However, other murders are seemingly random. The indiscriminate nature of some of the violence creates a pervasive atmosphere of fear and powerlessness.

“There is no safety here, we don’t feel safe. I have three other boys, and I’m always worried because we don’t know who is doing the killings or when they will happen. Three years ago, one of my sons went to the market one afternoon and never came back. After 51 days the security forces told me that eight people came to the tent and killed him and buried his body under the tent. I don’t feel safe because I’ve lost one boy and another one is in prison. The one who was killed was 14 years old and the other one is 30 years old.”

Main Camp resident

Extortion and threats

Camp residents, who already face debilitating economic difficulties and deprivation, are regularly threatened by armed groups renowned for using violence and intimidation to extort large sums of money.

“An armed group threatened me in the camp. They asked me to pay money, but I didn’t pay them. They accused me of working with the Kurdish authorities in Al-Hol and my name was shared [in an online group where names and details of threatened people are shared]. I tried to escape from the camp with my family after that. I wasn’t successful; the security forces arrested us as we were escaping.”

Main Camp resident

People who have been subject to threats are usually desperate to leave the camp, but protection pathways for them are limited. ‘Safe zones’ designated by camp authorities to house individuals and families specifically targeted by armed groups offer limited protection to people at risk. For instance, on 12 November 2021, a group of armed men wearing uniforms entered a designated safe zone – an area of the camp near the reception area, which at the time housed around 60 individuals who had been threatened. The men opened fire, killing two people and injuring several others.⁵³

Protection organisations, such as the UNHCR, provide some limited pathways out of the camp for people at imminent risk of being killed. However, even this protection mechanism is often too slow to save the lives of those who are threatened. In many cases, the only option for people being threatened is to find an illegal smuggling route out of the camp. These routes are rife with risk: people attempting to leave the camp in this way have been caught by the security forces and arrested or killed in “crossfire”. Smugglers charge extortionate fees to get people out of the camp, capitalising on their desperation and pricing safe passage out of reach of the most vulnerable in camp society.

“A female called me and told that I had to bring the money and meet her. I didn’t go to the security forces for two reasons: firstly, if they found out I was in contact with the sleeper cells, they would kill me; and secondly, I don’t think the security forces could help me. I went there and gave her the US\$300. She just took the money and didn’t say anything. I had no choice but to pay them, I needed to save myself and my family, I could have been killed if I didn’t pay. The same sleeper cell attacked my neighbour because she didn’t pay.”

Main Camp resident

Lawlessness and a lack of protection

Theft is a common occurrence for people living in the camps. Valuable personal items are often taken from tents, which lack lockable doors. Camp residents have described digging holes under their tents to hide valuable items. Female-headed households, in particular, are vulnerable to this pervasive criminality. When such crimes are committed, there are no avenues for legal recourse, which contributes to a mentality of self-protection and feeds into the economies of protection rackets. Many households started hanging blankets and sheets around their tents to gain some privacy and to create a safe space for their children to play in, but security forces have been removing these flimsy walls as part of their security procedures.

“Anyone can steal easily – they can open a tent and steal. There is no security. If people are stealing, there is no place to complain and ask for help. There was a woman in another section of the camp; two months ago they stole from her. She woke up at 2 am to find the thief in her tent. They told her they would rob her and she couldn’t do anything about it or they would kill her. No one can do anything.”

Main Camp resident

Faced with violence and crime, there is no one to turn to for help. Camp residents say that security forces do not intervene after a crime, do not conduct investigations and do not hold



Large View of Al-Hol Camp, Eastern Al-Hasakah Governorate, Northeastern Syria.

individuals accountable for acts of criminality – or if they do intervene, they come too late. If someone calls the security forces after a crime has been committed, the criminal groups in the camp may accuse them of spying, which would put their safety at greater risk.

“Twenty days ago, my brother was killed in front of me and we couldn’t do anything. There is no security and there is no safety here. Everything is difficult here. You are in your tent and you don’t know if you’re going to be killed for no reason. One night several people entered our tent and started to shoot at my brother. First one shot and then another shot to his head to kill him. He was 16 years old. Why did they kill my brother? Then they put a gun to my head and pushed my mother, who had been trying to protect my brother. The next day they called us and they threatened to kill our whole family. The authorities didn’t come to investigate; they didn’t even come to take his body.”

Main Camp resident

Many residents also report that inter-communal disputes are often 'sorted out' by one party telling the security forces that the other party is affiliated with IS, resulting in them being investigated and arrested. This has become a common mechanism for addressing internal disputes. The arrests in the camp often appear to camp residents as random and indiscriminate in nature, adding to the atmosphere of fear and lack of control.

“There are spies in the camp who help in the arresting of people, and a lot of those who are arrested are innocent. Tensions arise between people in the camp, so they point each other out to the security forces to settle personal disputes.”

Main Camp resident

Law enforcement practices and impact on health

In response to the pervasive insecurity and violence in the camp, authorities have at times reportedly resorted to law enforcement tactics that are not in keeping with international standards.⁵⁴ Al-Hol population report that security forces sometimes act and react to the insecurity in the camp with excessive use of force and frequently conduct arbitrary arrests.

“When the security forces are doing the patrols, they will take you, even if you have not done anything. And they will arrest you easily, you will be punished, you will be beaten and you will have to pay money. They were not like that before, but in recent months they have become stricter. I think the change of behaviour is because of the murder cases in the camp.”

Main Camp resident

Security operations by authorities and shoot-outs between armed groups and the security forces have on occasion resulted in casualties among Al-Hol’s population, including children.

“Four days ago, the security forces entered a tent and shot them. It was part of a raid, they were following someone in particular, but there were women and children in the tent who got caught in the middle and some of them are seriously injured in the hospital in Hassakeh now. I don’t understand why the women and children had to be hurt. In my opinion, if they wanted someone, then they should have surrounded the tent and taken the person they wanted.”

Main Camp resident

On 7 February 2022, following a fire in the Annex, a member of the security forces opened fire at a group of unarmed women and children.⁵⁵ One child died instantly, three children and two women were seriously injured and several others sustained less serious gunshot wounds. The five seriously injured patients sought treatment with MSF and required specialist medical follow-up care. The healthcare provision in the Annex is not suitable for such severe injuries and access to medical referral pathways to secondary health facilities out of the camp is limited and challenging.

System of detention in Al-Hol

Camp residents report arrests and transfer of individuals to detention facilities in and around Al-Hol camp. As a result of the lack of a formal criminal justice system governing these practices, there is no transparency around the fate of people who are detained. Camp residents say that such arrests are sometimes made in pursuit of ‘wanted people’ or as a result of infractions such as being caught with contraband items (money, phones in the Annex, and weapons in the Main Camp). In other cases, arrests have been made after attempted escapes. Notably, one resident told MSF staff that she and



her daughters had been kept in detention for six months as punishment for trying to escape from the camp. She reported that she and her children were denied access to healthcare for the duration of their detention, despite having ongoing health needs. Others have reported that, whilst detained, they have experienced or witnessed physical violence, rape, verbal abuse and solitary confinement for long periods in toilet blocks, while being denied access to healthcare.

“I was in the prison and it was terrible. When you are ill there is no medication, they don’t even care if you are dying. They also took our long dresses away. There are a lot of sisters in the prison, some have been there for more than a year. I stayed in the prison for four months. I saw one woman who had been in the prison for more than a year and she was locked in the toilet for four months because she wouldn’t speak.”

Main Camp resident

Relatives of people detained report that no information is shared with them for the duration of detention, while many report cases of family members ‘disappearing’ whilst in detention.

“There are many patrols around the tents by the security forces. It is frightening. They arrest women all the time and we don’t know why, and they raid the tents and take people away. One of my neighbours was arrested seven months ago and no one knew the reason. People are taken to the prison and no one knows where they are. Her relatives asked about her but no one gave them any answers. She has kids and they have been left at home without their mother. When we asked the security forces about her, they told us that she doesn’t exist. It is like she has disappeared. We are so mentally tired; it is exhausting to be constantly on edge and feel trapped and vulnerable all the time. Those people who are arrested and taken away by the security forces are tormented, some of them die and some are severely beaten. The women who are arrested have water thrown on them, their hair is pulled and they are locked in the toilet without food for a week or 10 days.”

Annex resident



Inside Al Hol Camp, Eastern Al-Hasakah Governorate, Northeastern Syria.

‘For the children, there is no future for them. There are no schools. Before there were two schools and the children were going there and dreaming about their future plans, but now there is nothing: no schools, no future plans, nothing.’

Main camp resident

Additional restrictions on people in the Annex

Additional restrictions on freedom of movement and access to services are imposed on the non-Syrian and non-Iraqi women and children held in the Annex. They cannot leave the camp at all. They can access a ‘Service Area’ where MSF provides healthcare services only after obtaining approval from security forces and passing through a security checkpoint, where they are photographed with their faces uncovered. The Annex’s population are not allowed to possess mobile phones or televisions and are forbidden from communicating with anyone outside Al-Hol.

“Phones are forbidden in the Annex. We want to know what is happening in the outside world, our children don’t even know what a TV is. All of these modern things are strange for them. The children see everything strangely; they live an abnormal life.”

Annex resident

The population in the Annex report regular and systematic raids throughout the Annex, often at night, when security forces routinely ‘confiscate’ items such as jewellery, food and money. People living in the Annex report often feeling that the security forces deliberately taunt them and treat them in a way that is derogatory and purposefully humiliating. They also report that being caught in possession of a mobile phone in the Annex would result in several months in a detention facility.

“Sometimes at night when you just want to go to the toilet and they see you, they take you to the prison. When we receive distributions, they beat us and take us to the prison. I have one friend who had a shop. One day the security forces took everything and now she is alone and poor. Another of my friends was sitting at night with her neighbours when the security forces entered her tent, took her bag, threw out the clothes and started to beat her. These were men with weapons so I could not defend her. They pulled her hair, made her lie on the ground and then took her to the prison for eight months. Now she is back in her tent. We are not afraid but it has been three years now and we are tired of being here. I’m 35 years old but I feel more like I’m 50.”

Annex resident

Violent separation of children and adolescents from their caregivers

The practice of forcibly separating male children and adolescents from their caregivers has become routine and systematic in the Annex⁵⁶. Boys who look as if they are over 11 are regularly arrested by security forces during patrols and separated from their caregivers. Large groups of boys are also frequently taken away by security forces from communal areas, such as the marketplace, during the day. The boys’ caregivers often find out later, through second-hand sources, that their child has been taken away. Women report that children are often taken away violently, without any of their belongings and with no opportunity to say goodbye to family or friends. In some cases, the arrests appear more targeted, with security forces going to specific tents and taking away specific children.

There is little to no transparency about where minors are being taken or what will happen to them in the long term. Caregivers have limited, if any, contact with their children after arrest. There are indications that children are being funnelled into the criminal detention system or being sent to ‘rehabilitation centres’ throughout northeast Syria; however, no official sources have been able to formally account for the whereabouts of these children. According to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, the boys are taken to SDF-managed detention sites “without adequate judicial guarantees in a legal and administrative limbo”.⁵⁷ The impact of this practice on the population of the Annex is profound, creating an atmosphere of fear, anxiety and anger.

“They are taking the adolescent boys from their mothers. What right do they have to take our children from us and then put them in prison? Two days ago, they took the 12-year-old son of my friend. They entered the tent at 2 am and they took the boy away. I can’t describe to you the state his mother was in. You speak about human rights, about children’s rights, but these don’t exist here. We are in a prison, why?”

Annex resident

“Mostly I worry about my nine-year-old boy and that the security forces will take him when he gets older. There are a lot [of mothers] whose boys were taken off to prison by the security forces when they turned 11 or 12, and they cry every day. I try as far as possible never to be away from my children. My children are always in my tent and I don’t want them to go outside.”

Annex resident

Mental toll of insecurity and containment

The years of trauma, violence and deprivation and the complete lack of prospects for a life outside Al-Hol are taking a toll on the mental health of people living in the camp and created overwhelming feelings of fear, hopelessness and frustration, with residents consistently referring to Al-Hol camp as a “prison”.

“When I look at my relatives outside Syria, they are living a normal life in a safe place. I had many dreams and everything has been destroyed. Al-Hol is a prison. Maybe according to the media it is a camp. But a camp is for people who don’t have homes, not for us. Everyone who is living here, their future has been destroyed, whether they are children or adults.”

Main Camp resident

Caregivers draw attention to the staggering mental impact of the insecurity on their children, noting an increase in negative coping mechanisms, such as violent behaviour and aggression. At the same time, mental health services in the camp are insufficient to meet the overwhelming needs of the population.

“The longer we stay here, the more it affects our mental health. Life in the camp is difficult and I want to leave. But the problem is that Raqqa is destroyed and everyone left, so there is nowhere to go. I don’t have family there, but we still insist on leaving the camp because the security here is really bad. There are murders going on in all sections of the camp and we don’t know where we should go. And it is not only us who are afraid – the children are too, because they know that this is happening. Now I have psychological problems: when I see people in the market with guns, and security forces in the market with guns, I’m afraid. The security forces are doing the rounds and going inside the tents and the children are afraid, and most of the people in the camp are women. And then there are the other people: the ones who kill you without any excuse, without any reasons, without any fear. We are living in the desert here, there is no education for our children, we are losing a generation here. And when we do leave Al-Hol, people will not accept us because we are from Al-Hol, so we’ll be forced to stay in the camp.”

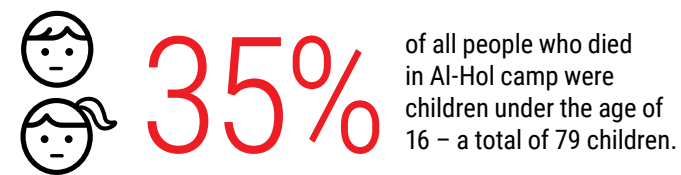
Main Camp resident

Devastating consequences of the lack of safety on children and adolescents

Parents and caregivers express profound concern for the wellbeing and psychosocial development of their children in the context of the overwhelming insecurity and extremely limited services in Al-Hol camp. In 2021, 35% of all people who died in Al-Hol camp were children under the age of 16 – a total of 79 children.⁵⁸ In the past six months, reported fatal accidents include children being run over by water trucks,⁵⁹ children fatally injured in camp fires⁶⁰ and children drowning after falling into trenches full of grey water.

“For the children, there is nothing. There is no education at all and this will affect an entire generation. I can’t control my children but I don’t want them to go outside. We need a place to educate them. Many children have been killed after being hit by water trucks and others have been arrested by the security forces. Also, there are the children who fall through the holes in the rusty covers of the septic tanks. We have complained a lot about this but nothing has happened.”

Main Camp resident



Many residents report feeling helpless to protect their children from the physical and sexual violence in the camp, from the risks of arbitrary arrest and from the destructive influence of violent groups within the camp on children’s behaviour. Camp residents consistently highlight the limited access to education services provided by humanitarian organisations as the reason for losing “an entire generation” of children.

“The situation is really affecting our children. I don’t know what it is happening with them: we can’t control them. They may be very tired of the situation. There is no education, only one level to learn how to write and read. For five years they are in the same level. The whole generation will be lost. We are also requesting education for adults.”

Main Camp resident

“They [the children] are also under a lot of pressure. They don’t have access to education, a place to play, they just stay in the tent. They are not getting to live the childhood they deserve. Even when there is a school, this is not education: the children come and are mixed between all the levels and all they do is play. Because of the situation, our children also feel a sense of responsibility and are already acting as adults. Most of the Syrians suffer from this. Maybe we all need psychological support. When sexual violence happens, they blame the mother, saying: ‘You need to take care of your children’. As for the boys, there is nothing for them to do, so they do bad things. If they were at school, they wouldn’t be roaming the streets. People are starting to feel bored. When the children are in the streets they see bad people around who may teach them bad things, for example that boys aged 10 and over should not sit with women. The daughters you can keep inside in the tent, because they take care of the cooking and the cleaning. But the boys can’t stay inside, so we are more concerned about our boys. They can become victims more easily.”

Main Camp resident

Caregivers also report the impossible dilemma they face on a daily basis: either they keep their children inside their tent in an effort to protect them from multiple dangers, while limiting their social interaction and access to education; or they allow them to go out into the camp and risk injury, arrest and even death.

“For the children’s sake, for my sake, I’m putting my children in ‘prison’, as I’m paying a woman to keep them in the tent. We feel really sorry for putting our children in this situation. Their mental health is affected; all the time they are tired and sad. The people here are also so different; they teach aggressively and accuse us of blasphemy. I don’t want my children to learn that. I’m always sad and depressed.”

Main Camp resident

“Because of the security situation, I don’t want my children to go outside. But you can’t control them all the time and you can’t force them to stay in all the time. But I don’t want them to be outside, it is a different society outside and I don’t want them to learn this. There are no jobs, no schools and there is nothing to do. I’m not making excuses for the young children but there is nothing for them to do.”

Main Camp resident



Limited access to healthcare

Due to the combination of weak health systems in northeast Syria after 11 years of war and a lack of specialist healthcare available within the camp, MSF teams report that a large number of people who are living with chronic illnesses are not able to access the necessary medication and care.

Despite the existence of a number of primary health clinics provided by other medical organisations, MSF has identified approximately 1,800 individuals in the Main Camp who self-identify as living with a non-communicable disease (NCD), such as hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular disease or respiratory disease. People in the camp living with NCDs (also known as ‘chronic diseases’) report inconsistent access to medication, often accessing drugs at their own expense, without a prescription and without medical oversight, via truck drivers or private vendors. If left untreated or with inconsistent and inappropriate treatment, NCDs can become more complicated and expensive to manage, resulting in increased morbidity and mortality. This creates substantial stress for people living in the camp. MSF has observed that the effectiveness and impartiality of medical aid in Al-Hol have been compromised by the prison-like conditions in the camp.

Obstructed referrals to health facilities outside Al-Hol

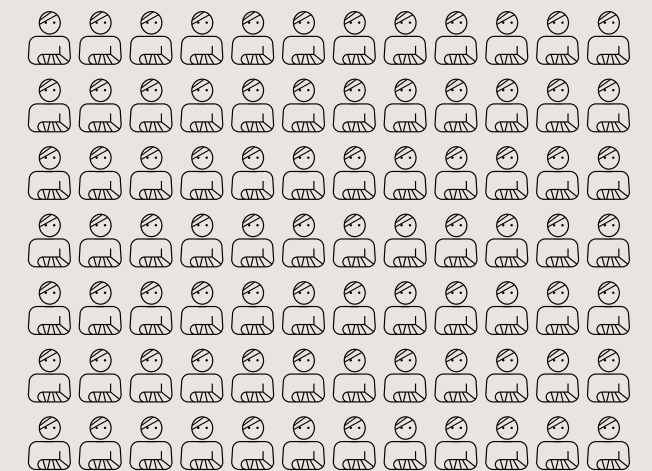
As a direct consequence of the securitised environment, MSF often struggles to facilitate external medical referrals for patients who require medical care beyond what is available in the camp. For much of 2021, only lifesaving cases were referred externally. This has persisted into 2022, often justified by security concerns. In 2021, MSF referred 381 patients, including 63 children, for secondary and specialist healthcare. Due to services being unavailable or to the authorities refusing to authorise a referral to an external facility, many of the patients MSF referred did not receive treatment, including patients in need of surgical, orthopaedic, dental and ophthalmology treatments. Across the camp, there are approximately 700 people on a waiting list for non-emergency referrals. In 2021, a total of 286 medical referrals to external health facilities were rejected by authorities, of which 205 (or 72%) were due to “security reasons”.⁶¹

Patients who are referred are often refused authorisation for a caregiver to accompany them. In addition, patients report to MSF that they fear leaving their tents after dark or during security operations, which causes delays in seeking medical care, even in cases of medical emergencies.

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“Medical care and services have decreased a lot since we arrived. With medical emergencies at night, it is very complicated because the security forces are doing rounds and they arrest and assault you if they found you out at night.”

Main Camp resident

“One other difficulty is access to healthcare. We don’t have treatment here so we have started to smuggle treatment in. It is so difficult to get medications in the camp and really it is hard for patients with chronic diseases because there are no drugs. Now referral outside the camp is almost impossible. It is for life-threatening conditions only. There are no drugs available for medical treatment. If they allow us to go out, we can manage to find and pay [for the medications], but we are not allowed outside and no one is providing treatment inside. They are not letting us out because they are afraid that on the journey out we will try to escape. Because there are a lot of people that are asking to leave the camp. They just hope to leave the camp.”

Main Camp resident

“For the children, there is no future for them. There are no schools. Before there were two schools and the children were going there and dreaming about their future plans, but now there is nothing: no schools, no future plans, nothing. And we can’t control the children all day, they leave the tent and are just out on the streets. Also, if they get sick, it is really hard for us to get them medication. The water trucks are also very dangerous for the children – some have been crushed by them. I know of one child who was run over and needed to go to hospital but the procedure for referral was too difficult and he died.”

Main Camp resident

Additional obstacles to accessing healthcare for the population of the Annex

The healthcare on offer in the Annex is particularly limited. There is just one static clinic, run by MSF in the ‘Service Area’ of the Annex, and three mobile clinics for a population of around 11,000. These mobile clinics are regularly interrupted in reaction to security incidents in the Annex and do not consistently allow full respect for patient confidentiality as consultations are conducted in makeshift settings. To access

humanitarian assistance in the ‘Service Area’, population of the Annex have to cross a checkpoint, where security forces register, body search and photograph everyone who passes through. MSF staff report that this acts as a dissuasive factor for patients wanting to access healthcare. MSF staff also report reduced patient numbers following security incidents in the Annex, as well as during distributions.⁶²

In addition, some services and take-home equipment, such as take-home blood pressure machines, which are available for patients living in the Main Camp, are not available to those in the Annex. There is also no access to healthcare services after 1 pm, which means that in medical emergencies patients have to walk through the Annex and approach security forces at the gates to request help. Patients also report that, due to an absence of transportation in the Annex (including an absence of stretchers), sick and injured people are often forced to walk long distances through the camp or be transported on makeshift stretchers or trolleys.

“I have been pregnant four times and every time I needed a caesarean. After three caesareans, you cannot give birth naturally. My fourth birth happened when I was here [in Al-Hol camp]. The doctor gave me a date and they sent me to Hassakeh National Hospital. There they told me: ‘It is not the moment yet’, so I came back. Two days later the signs of giving birth came back during the night and it was very painful. I went to the gate to ask the security forces and I was sent to the hospital in Al-Hol and then to Hassakeh. I waited from 1 am until 9 pm, in pain and threatening to give birth, but the doctor did not come. They told me: ‘You can wait’. Why? Two days after they did the caesarean, I was discharged from hospital. They left me at the gates of the Annex and then I had to walk one kilometre with my baby. The pain was horrible.”

Annex resident

For people living in the Annex, both internal and external referrals require prior approval from the security forces and the camp administration, meaning that the final decision for referral lies at the discretion of people who are not medically trained. This has led to unreasonable delays to lifesaving treatment. Patients who require referrals outside northeast Syria have also faced life-threatening delays to treatment as they wait for the appropriate paperwork. Patients have also reported being treated disrespectfully during external referrals; others have said that they cannot communicate with medical staff due to language barriers.

In February 2021, a seven-year-old boy was admitted to an MSF facility with second-degree burns on his face and upper limbs. MSF referred the child for treatment outside the camp. The referral took several days to complete due to security procedures. By the time the child was referred to Hassakeh it was too late to save him and he died alone, without his caregiver. In July 2021, MSF referred a wounded patient for amputation due to infection. The patient needed a referral to Damascus for surgery, which required additional paperwork from UNHCR. This caused unreasonable delays and, by August, the patient’s condition had deteriorated and he died before he received the documentation.

In addition, patients are accompanied by an armed escort for the duration of an external referral. Patients referred from the Annex are not allowed to be accompanied by a caregiver. This includes very young children and vulnerable adults, which presents an unacceptable safeguarding risk that has contributed to caregivers refusing to consent to the referral of a child in need of treatment. For instance, in September 2021, a woman from the Annex brought her six-year-old daughter, who was suffering cardiac problems, to the MSF clinic. A referral to Hassakeh for a cardiac consultation was organised, but when the ambulance arrived, the security forces did not allow the mother to accompany her daughter. Subsequently the mother did not give permission for her daughter to be taken to Hassakeh for the consultation.

As a result of this measure, children as young as two are frequently referred to external health facilities under armed escort without being accompanied by a caregiver.⁶³ A number of children referred without caregivers later died alone in health facilities, with extremely limited information shared with the bereaved caregiver. In May 2021, a five-year-old boy was hit by a water truck and was referred alone to Hassakeh. He died before reaching hospital. There was no formal information-sharing process between the referral hospital and the caregiver, meaning that the mother was not informed in a timely way of the death of her son.

“When they take the children to the doctor in Hassakeh, the child goes alone, no one from the child’s family accompanies them. How can they expect us to hand over our three and four-year-old children to be taken by soldiers alone to Hassakeh? This is too hard for us to bear. We wait for them at the main gate until they came back, asking for updates from the soldiers or NGOs.”

Annex resident



Al-Hol Camp - Eastern Al Hasakah Governorate

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Limited prospects for life outside Al-Hol and a lack of long-term solutions

Since October 2020, more than 1,300 families have left Al-Hol camp for their areas of origin, but waiting lists are long and the process for getting permission to leave is opaque.⁶⁴

Syrian returns marred by bureaucratic barriers and corruption

Initially, Syrian nationals hoping to leave Al-Hol needed to meet three conditions to be eligible: to be sponsored by a tribal leader in their area of origin; to be in possession of civil documents; and to return to an area within northeast Syria. The tribal sponsorship system was originally envisaged as a scheme to support those caught up in the war against IS to return to their home communities with guarantees from figures who knew them personally.⁶⁵ However, the implementation of the system has been sporadic, and the Syrian Democratic Council, the political wing of the SDF in AANES, announced in October 2020 that all Syrians could leave the camp through an official returns trip without the need for sponsorship.⁶⁶

Discussions with current and former camp residents have revealed some deep-rooted challenges related to returns from Al-Hol for Syrians, including significant bureaucratic and cost barriers to leaving, corruption within the process, and challenges integrating and surviving economically outside the camp environment.

“We have our documentation and we registered two days ago for a return trip. It is a hard process; you have to wait a lot at the main gate. And there is a second hand, an invisible hand, that is making the decisions. I registered my family in the proper way but we don’t know what the result will be. We registered for Raqqa. I know a man whose leg was amputated three months ago. He got a medical form to get approval to leave, and finally it was approved, and he was due to leave on the next trip, but we don’t know if it ever actually happened. I saw him going to the camp administration every day. Because he is an amputee and disabled, no one is responsible for him and his family. There are many people like him that need to leave. There are many people who are registering to leave but who then don’t get the approval. To be approved, you need to pass the military and the civil investigation. It is almost impossible.”

Main Camp resident

The chaotic nature of Al-Hol camp and the experiences of people prior to their arrival means that many people do not have access to formal civil documents. For example, documents may have been destroyed or lost during the fighting or when people were displaced from their homes; marriages that take place within the camp are not always officially recognised; and sometimes children born in the camp lack formal documentation. Without documents, Al-Hol population cannot leave, creating incentives to forge documents or pay bribes to bypass the bureaucratic hurdles. Gaining access to the camp administration to formally register to leave and to get information on the process is also

hard. Camp residents report waiting for hours outside the camp administration office and complain about a lack of clarity to the process. When these 'legitimate' processes fail, people may resort to using people smugglers to get them out of the camps in exchange for extortionate sums of money (reports vary from US\$1,000 to US\$13,000).

“I'm very angry about the process. It was really difficult and unfair. It was hard for some of us to provide the documents needed and it was really slow. For example, I couldn't prove that my children were mine to the camp administration, because not all of them had documents. I have eight children in total; four of them I managed to get registered in Damascus through a contact, but for the other four I had to pay one million SYP [approximately US\$300] in bribes so that the camp administration would let us leave without the documents.”

Main Camp resident

“For now, there is no plan for us to leave. None of us has any documents because when we fled, we lost everything. I entered the camp and now I can't leave it without documents. Also, if you leave the camp to live under Government of Syria territory, you'll definitely be arrested. At the beginning, when we first arrived in Al-Hol, they did an investigation and put a stamp with our fingerprints on a piece of paper. So now everywhere you go, they will discover that you are from Al-Hol and you will be treated as a terrorist. The solution needs to come from the international authorities that are supporting NES. And it needs to come quickly, because people are starting to fight each other more and more.”

Main Camp resident



A woman in the market of the Al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria, where around 53,000 people displaced by the conflict in Syria, the majority of them children, are detained.

© FLORENT VERGNES

Exploitation and protection challenges

According to camp residents, the returns process from Al-Hol resembles a mechanism for extracting resources from a vulnerable population. The current process does not prioritise departures for vulnerable people. Instead, it facilitates departures for desperate people who have access to resources and connections. This includes 'legitimate' fees such as paying for the trucks to transport people and their luggage, as well as bribes needed to access the camp administration and bribes needed to bypass bureaucratic hurdles, for example if you lack the appropriate documentation. 'Vetting processes' such as the tribal sponsorship scheme or security clearances have been described as opportunities for resource extraction.

“If you want to leave, you have to pay some money to a broker to even get to the camp administration. The official paperwork takes time, and the camp administration makes it difficult and slow. It's like they are doing it deliberately: the more time they take to process documents, the more people will find money to pay the brokers, especially if you fear for your safety. You don't really know where the money is going, you don't even get documentation in exchange for the money, you just get verbal approval that they will let you go.”

Main Camp resident

Many people seeking to leave Al-Hol are doing so in response to receiving death threats. Most are unable to access protection pathways to leave. Instead, they have to pay significant fees to convince the camp administration to wave bureaucratic barriers in order to expedite their departure and save their lives. There are multiple examples of people losing their lives due to protection failures in cases of threats and extortion.

“There was a 40-year-old man who was threatened by an armed group in May 2021 and asked to pay them US\$1,000. He went to the security forces for protection and to be listed on the departure trip and they asked him to pay US\$500, which he didn't have. He was shot dead in June 2021.”

Main Camp resident

Life after return: social and economic challenges

Some of camp population have discussed not having anywhere to return to. Cities like Raqqa were completely demolished in the fighting; many know that their houses are no longer standing or that they no longer have communities or networks in their areas of origin. Some camp residents report being disowned by their families due to their perceived affiliation with IS. Men in particular fear being arrested or killed if they leave the camp. For other people, returning to their areas of origin is fundamentally unsafe; if, for example, they came from a Government of Syria-controlled territory, they fear repercussions from the government if they return.

“About returns, for myself I don't think about it because I have no one outside. For me, the problem is that I have no documents and I don't know where to go. None of us can go back to Government of Syrian-controlled areas – we would be arrested for sure. We would be arrested by IS or by the Government of Syria's military. My family is in a Government of Syria-controlled area, but I can't go there. My family has been asked about me; people ask them: 'Why is your daughter in Al-Hol?'. The Syrian government went to them and asked them about me; they told them that I would never be able to leave Al-Hol.”

Main Camp resident

Former camp residents who have now left Al-Hol also report facing crushing economic challenges in their new lives. They experience difficulties finding work and struggle with high living costs. This is indicative of a severe economic decline in Syria due to the long years of conflict, which poses serious problems for many ordinary Syrians living outside camp environments; it is one of the pull factors for living in camps. There have been minimal efforts to meaningfully reintegrate people into society or support them with humanitarian resources after leaving Al-Hol.

“Sometimes I think that people in the camp are in a better condition than us here. I can barely afford day-to-day living costs outside the camp. It's really hard here, we have very little access to resources, particularly food, water and fuel.”

Former Main Camp resident

This situation has created resentment between the wider community and people living in Al-Hol. The humanitarian resources (food distributions, access to healthcare, clean water, fuel for heaters) made available to people living in Al-Hol far outstrip what is available to ordinary Syrians in the surrounding area.

People living in Hassakeh often perceive population in Al-Hol as affiliated with IS, and therefore a threat to them, and deeply resent the disproportionate distribution of resources. Meanwhile, people leaving Al-Hol often experience social challenges as a result of the stigma associated with the camp, finding themselves assumed to have links to IS and therefore dangerous.

Slow and inconsistent Iraqi repatriations

In 2019 the Iraqi government announced that it would repatriate Iraqi families from Al-Hol, but this plan was pushed back and delayed as a result of local and community opposition, indicative of the stigma surrounding the more than 30,000 Iraqis in Al-Hol and the perception that they are associated with IS. The first group of 381 individuals returned from Al-Hol in May 2021 to Jeddah camp, located south of Mosul in Iraq's Ninewa province. Up until September 2022, 766 Households (3090 individuals) were repatriated from Al-Hol to Iraq, according to the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement. While the recent increase of repatriations to Iraq is encouraging, it is still a drop in the ocean compared to the total number of Iraqis in Al-Hol. The process so far has been slow and inconsistent, with many Iraqis reporting challenges in registering, including corruption, lack of information and exploitation by brokers. Many Iraqis have also reported hesitancy about returning to Iraq due to fear of the Iraqi security forces and concern over stigma.

● *“My sister’s daughter-in-law tried to register for a departure with US\$1,000 that she paid to a broker. After he took the money, he told her that her name is on the list as an IS member, so he asked for US\$13,000 to delete her name from the list on the computer so that she can register for a departure. They [the family] didn’t agree because they didn’t have the money, and now the broker comes with a patrol to her tent every day. He began to threaten them, saying that he would take them to Qamishli and would make them ‘disappear’. The family went to the camp management and complained about the threats they were receiving. The management of the camp said that this was unacceptable, and that when they carry out raids and arrest people, they always take female security officers with them to enter the tents. They said that what this person was doing was not part of the camp management and*

that, if he came to the tent door again, the family should tell them immediately. Anyway, my sister’s daughter-in-law ran away and tried to escape to another section of the camp and no one has heard anything from her since. These things are happening all the time: people are being forced to pay money for registering for departure trips and yet no one seems to leave the camp. It just seems like a kind of exploitation; it is all under the table.”

—
Main Camp resident

Repatriation of foreign nationals from the Annex

Foreign nationals in the Annex of Al-Hol camp face a different and complicated set of challenges in terms of their future. Many of the women in the Annex say that they have no reasonable option for repatriation: that either their countries of origin would not accept them back, or they fear they would face prison, torture or death if they returned. Countries such as the United Kingdom have stripped a number of their nationals held in northeast Syria of their citizenship, leaving them without documentation and with no opportunity to challenge this measure.

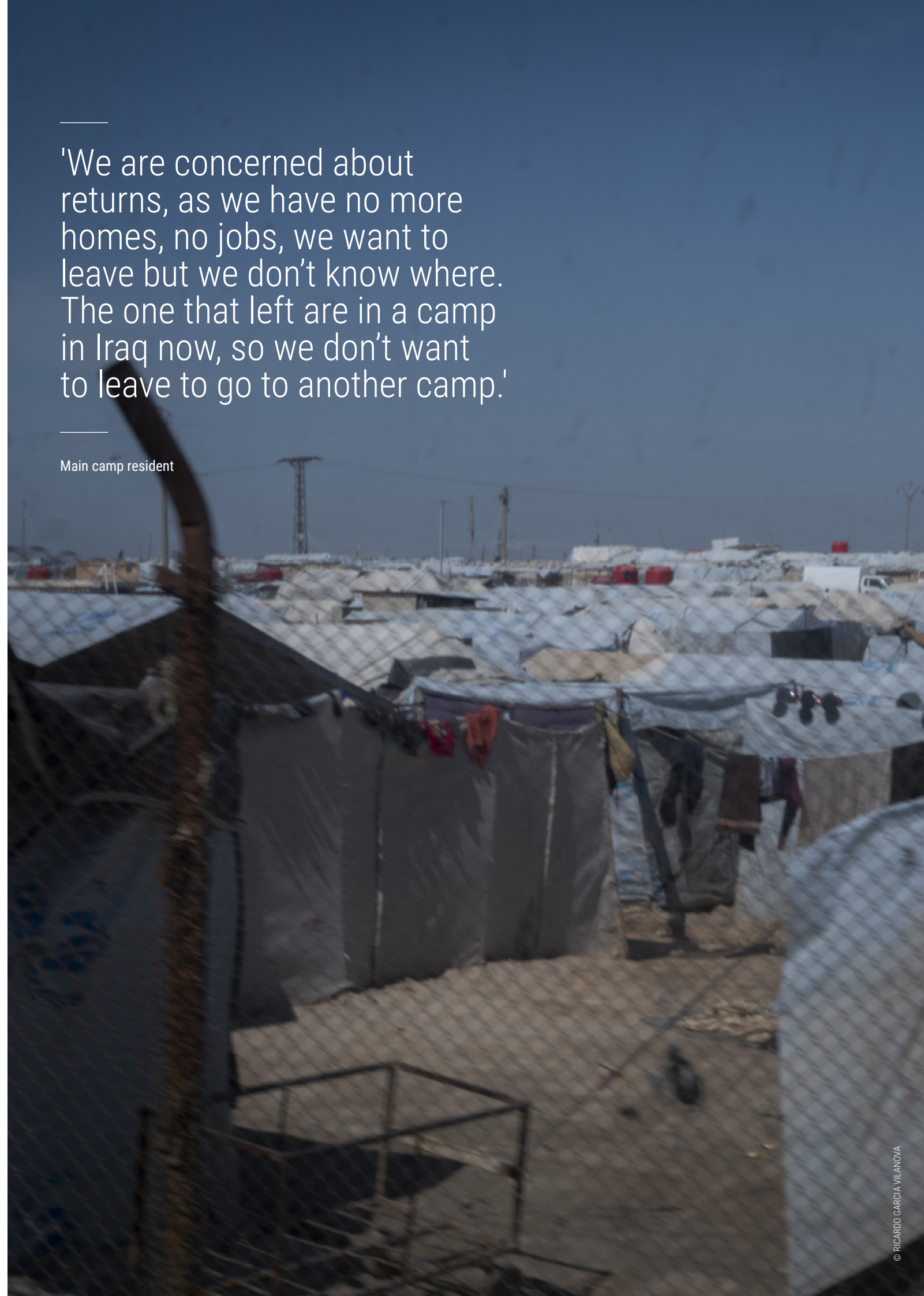
Often the women in the Annex have husbands, fathers and male children who are detained in northeast Syria, or they have female relatives who have been taken to other camps, and even if repatriation was offered to them, they would not accept leaving without their family. This contributes to growing resentment and frustration amongst both the detained women and the detaining authority; the former see a bleak and hopeless future for themselves in Al-Hol, the latter is increasingly uncomfortable with the risks and security threat posed by their indefinite detention.

● *“When we arrived from Baghuz, the security forces told us: ‘We will take you to your country’, and we said: ‘No’, and so they told us: ‘We will keep you in prison and we will kill you’. We know our future will be prison in our country or else death, so we don’t want to go back. They come to us in the camp and they threaten us, saying: ‘We will kill you if you don’t go for departure’. As for repatriation, the issue is that we have no information about my husband and I don’t want to leave without him.”*

—
Annex resident

‘We are concerned about returns, as we have no more homes, no jobs, we want to leave but we don’t know where. The one that left are in a camp in Iraq now, so we don’t want to leave to go to another camp.’

—
Main camp resident



Challenges of providing humanitarian aid in Al-Hol camp

Currently, decisions pertaining to the camp and to the management of the people within it are made first and foremost from a security perspective, rather than from a humanitarian perspective, and ultimate authority rests with those in charge of the camp's security.

The evolution of Al-Hol from an open camp into a place of detention has happened gradually. Although NGOs have noted and protested the increasing securitisation, there has been no moment of collective recognition of the shift that has taken place. As a result, operational modalities, security analyses, and approaches to community engagement and protection have not been adapted to reflect the change in the environment.

One of the consequences of the changes taking place in Al-Hol is that the camp's population often perceive humanitarian organisations as extensions of the detention apparatus, particularly as security incidents are often followed by reductions in the presence and activities of NGOs. For example the IS attack on Hassakeh prison in January 2022⁶⁷ and the swathe of security operations that took place in March 2022 were followed by a reduction in NGO services to 'essential lifesaving only'.

“Lots of NGOs have decreased their activities; many are not running at full capacity due to security incidents. The refugees are vulnerable and they need NGO services but the security situation in the camp doesn't allow them to reach the services.”

MSF staff member working in Al-Hol camp

The reductions in humanitarian services contribute to worsening living conditions and frustrations amongst the camp population. This is accompanied by a decrease in community acceptance of aid providers, which in turn affects the protection and security of NGO workers, particularly in the Annex. In the aftermath of security operations, camp residents have responded with aggression towards NGO staff, speculating that they are passing intelligence to the

security forces, linked to subsequent arrests in the camp. The conflation of NGO staff with security activities puts humanitarian staff in the camp at direct risk and means that community engagement activities need to be carried out with extreme sensitivity.

“Normally the population reacts aggressively to these [security] measures. They link NGOs with the security forces. Sometimes people even think that NGOs are behind the security measures. For example, one day when we had to go into the Annex to close the valve on the water network, and some boys trapped us inside the water tower and told us that they were holding us hostage. We talked with them and eventually they let us go. The children in the Annex think that some of the NGO staff have a connection with the security forces when they use their phone during their work – like when they are carrying their phone, making a call, taking a photo to document their job – so they have a violent reaction toward the staff.”

MSF staff member working in Al-Hol camp

“Mostly I worry about my nine-year-old boy and that the security forces will take him when he gets older. There are a lot [of mothers] whose boys were taken off to prison by the security forces when they turned 11 or 12, and they cry every day.”

Annex resident



A view of Al-Hol camp, in northeastern Syria. Al-Hol was once a humanitarian camp, designed to provide safe, temporary accommodation and humanitarian services to civilians displaced by the conflict in Syria and Iraq. However, the nature and purpose of the camp has long deviated from its humanitarian purpose and has grown increasingly into an unsafe and unsanitary open-air prison due to its residents' perceived affiliation to IS.

Conclusion

MSF teams working in Al-Hol camp regularly witness acts of violence and exploitation towards the camp's population that are completely unacceptable. The camp has become an environment characterised by hopelessness, fear and danger.

There are no formal legal policies and practices in place to govern the indefinite and arbitrary detention of women, children and men in Al-Hol. This leaves them vulnerable to widespread criminality and creates an environment that is conducive to violent abuse by the security forces who are not held accountable for their actions. Under the auspices of the global fight against IS, policies of containment and extensive securitisation have been put in place, many of which inhibit the provision of, and access to, humanitarian assistance and impartial care. This impacts community acceptance of humanitarian organisations, which are increasingly seen by the camp population as part of the system of detention. This in turn affects the quality and accessibility of the aid on offer and the safety and security of humanitarian staff.

Three years after the battle of Baghuz, no due legal process has been applied to evaluate guilt and define the terms of punishment for the people living in Al-Hol, nor have any reasonable efforts been made to find a long-term strategy to deal with them and ascertain their future.

AANES has struggled to manage the extremely complicated legal and practical challenges that arise in Al-Hol in a manner in keeping with international standards and law. Meanwhile, humanitarian needs in northeast Syria continue to escalate, as a result of food insecurity, a water crisis, economic decline, political instability, politicisation of aid, and ongoing fighting and conflict. All of these factors contribute to broader instability in the region. Countries must assume responsibility for the repatriation of their nationals living in Al-Hol; they must support local authorities and ensure that they are taking immediate steps to guarantee the wellbeing and protection of people in the camp and respect for their fundamental human rights; and they must invest in long-term strategies to address the situation in Al-Hol camp in a manner that is in keeping with international standards and law.

Recommendations:

Countries from the Global Coalition against IS should:

- Increase efforts to identify a long-term **political solution to put an end to the arbitrary detention of people in Al-Hol camp.**
- Invest in solutions and measures to ensure that arbitrarily detained people in Al-Hol and other detention facilities and camps in north east Syria have access to due process, including the right for a fair trial and the right to contest the legality and necessity of their confinement before a judge.
- Provide the required support and guidance to local authorities and security forces to ensure they have the capacities to guarantee the safety and security for the people detained in Al-Hol camp, in a manner that is in keeping with international standards and law, including protecting freedom of movement for all the camp population and ensuring an adequate standard of humanitarian response.
- Strengthen capacity for the **provision of humanitarian assistance to meet people's basic needs**, including through increasing funding for humanitarian aid and supporting negotiations to allow unhindered and unconditional humanitarian access to the camp.

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and Security Forces should:

- **Take immediate steps to guarantee and ensure the safety and physical security** of all people detained in Al-Hol by investing in measures that conform to international standards and law to reduce violence and criminal activity; by improving living conditions for the camp population; and by ensuring their fundamental rights, including the rights to life, liberty and security.
- **Allow and facilitate unhindered, unconditional, timely and dignified access to secondary healthcare facilities outside the camp** for health emergencies, including at night, including ensuring that people requiring external referrals are allowed to be accompanied by caretakers.
- **Put an end to the practice of separating male adolescents from their caregivers in the Annex**, and work in collaboration with aid providers to ensure respect for people's fundamental human rights and ensure family links between children separated from their families as well as between other separated family members.

The Government of Syria should:

- Take all possible measures to facilitate the voluntary

return of the Syrian nationals to their areas of origin, and increase efforts around community reconciliation to prevent stigmatisation and marginalisation of returnees.

- Ensure that the returnees must be treated in line with international standards and law, including the prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment

International donors, humanitarian agencies and protection organisations should:

- Increase significantly the **provision of independent humanitarian assistance** in all Al-Hol and implement mid-to-long-term interventions, particularly in respect to healthcare and to water, sanitation and hygiene services.
- Enhance the scope of protection pathways out of Al-Hol camp.
- Increase and strengthen **response capacity for child protection**, including by establishing systematic family links mechanisms, increasing capacity for family reunification, and providing education facilities and safe spaces for children.
- Continue and increase **efforts and advocacy to ensure due process and long-term frameworks** for all people detained in Al-Hol, including – but not limited to – advocacy around due process, alternative solutions for Iraqis refugees, departure of Syrians who originate from areas outside the control of AANES, and funding and operationalisation of a coordinated multidisciplinary response – looking at healthcare needs, protection and education.

The Government of Iraq and all States of foreign nationals in Al Hol and other detention facilities and camps in north east Syria should:

- Take all possible measures to **protect its nationals by accelerating efforts to allow people detained in Al-Hol to access repatriation.** All repatriated individuals must be treated in line with international standards and law, including the prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment.
- Ensure that **transparent and extensive information about the repatriation process** is provided to enable people to make an informed decision.
- **Refrain from confining returnees to restrictive settings**, such as closed camps, and increase efforts around community reconciliation to prevent stigmatisation and marginalisation of returnees.

“We are living in the desert here, there is no education for our children, we are losing a generation here.”

Main camp resident



Endnotes

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of the person, as well as his or her age, social, cultural religious or political background and past experiences. Military manuals, codes of conduct and policy documents elaborated by states provide examples of humane treatment, which include treatment with all due regard to the person's sex, provision of adequate food, drinking water and clothing, safeguards for health and hygiene, provision of suitable medical care, and appropriate contacts with the outside world. (See International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Commentary of 2016 to the Convention (I) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field, Geneva, 12 August 1949, paras 553, 558 at https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Comment.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=59F6CDFA490736C1C1257F7D004BA0EC#_Toc465169892

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rights. This section will not analyse the question of whether non-State armed groups are bound by IHRL, nor will it address the question of whether IHRL continues to apply during an armed conflict. This section will only highlight the different rights and obligations that may be relevant for this report. For discussion on these questions, see, for example, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, International Legal Protection of Human Rights in Armed Conflict, United Nations, 2011, at https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/HR_in_armed_conflict.pdf; Katharine Fortin, The Accountability of Armed Groups under Human Rights Law, Oxford Scholarship Online, 2017; Tilman Rodenhäuser, The legal protection of persons living under the control of non-State armed groups, International Review of the Red Cross, Volume 102 Number 915, 991-1020, 2020.

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