

Reception of Returning Danish Children:

Reintegration and Rehabilitation after Repatriation from Detention Camps in Northeast Syria

Recommendations and lessons
from Denmark



Content

Introduction 3

Methodology 6

The Danish Repatriation Process 9

Preparing for Repatriation 12

Alternative to Ordinary Detention 15

The Repatriation 17

Life in Denmark 20

Preventing Risk of Radicalization 21

Challenges in the Future 23

Recommendations 25

Concluding Remarks 26

Notes 28

Introduction



In 2019, the self-proclaimed Islamic State ‘Caliphate’ fell, losing its last stronghold in Baghouz. Thousands of children, women, and men with alleged ISIS affiliations were captured by the American-backed Kurdish military forces and placed in detention facilities in North-east Syria.

Approximately 70,000 women and children from almost 60 states were detained in the al-Hol and al-Roj detention camps in the desert guarded by the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)¹.

The EU and UN, along with numerous international NGOs, experts and stakeholders, have criticised the camps’ arbitrary detentions, squalid conditions and lack of resources and have thus repeatedly called on governments to repatriate their citizens².

The humanitarian and political security situation continues to be catastrophic, as measures to ensure human security within the camps have failed. The camps are afflicted with internal conflicts, violence and murders. The detainees do not have adequate access to water, food, or medical care. The child mortality rates are extremely high. The security situation surrounding the camps is deteriorating. Turkey is attacking the region with drones and aerial bombings, causing instability and the ideal conditions for ISIS sleeper cells to awaken³.

Leading experts on terrorism, the UN Counterterrorism Unit, and security services worldwide have all warned against keeping the women and children in detention camps⁴.

al-Hol serves as a mini-caliphate where the stronger and more dominant extremist detainees exercise social control over the rest. ISIS radical ideology thrives in this environment. Extremist women have formed a morality police to oppose the Kurdish camp administration and violently enforce face, hands and feet covering rules. The children are indoctrinated with violent extremist ideology, and prolonged detention increases the children’s risk of being influenced and radicalised by this extremist environment.

Weapons, cell phones and propaganda are smuggled in through underground passageways. The same passages that ISIS terror cells use to kidnap children to teach them how to wield weapons. Combined, these factors create an extremely dangerous situation for children – both in terms of their immediate lives and long term. Furthermore, the circumstances pose a risk to the entire global society.

The AANES has repeatedly and publicly stated that the camps could collapse at any time and has urged the international community to repatriate their citizens. They lack the capacity and resources required to maintain international standards for security and humanitarian measures in the camps.





For a long time, most nations were reluctant to bring back their citizens⁵. Several countries, including Denmark, even enacted legislation that removed the rights of their citizens, i.e. making it possible to administratively revoke the citizenship of suspected ISIS supporters⁶. However, in 2022, a shift began. Countries previously unwilling to bring home their citizens, including France, Australia, Canada and the Netherlands, started repatriating children and their mothers⁷.

There is little to no precedent for the return of children from detention camps with their mothers. The knowledge and research available on best practices and services for reintegrating the returning families are thus very scarce.

Lessons from Denmark, and other countries that have recently repatriated children and families, are vital for improving and enhancing the process and circumstances for future repatriations of children and families. In this situation, it is crucial to prioritise children's rights and best interests. Growing up in dangerous war zones and inhumane detention facilities often leave physical and psychological scars.

Methodology

This report presents a series of recommendations on improving the repatriation process and reception of returnees from detention camps in Northeast Syria. Its contents are largely based on Repatriate the Children - Denmark's (RTC - Denmark) experiences with evacuations, reception and reintegration of Danish children from al-Hol and al-Roj camps in 2019 and 2021.



“Every single day wasted in the detention camps is traumatising for the Danish children, and merely one step closer to a slow but deliberate destruction of the chance that these children will have a good child- and subsequent adulthood, far from war and radicalization.”

Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen, Save the Children Denmark and Rasmus Grue Christensen, Dignity (Danish Institute against Torture)



RTC - Denmark closely followed the children and their families before, during and after they were brought back to Denmark, and RTC representatives have visited several of the children while they were confined in Northeast Syria. RTC - Denmark also served as part of the reference group for the “Evacuation Task Force” of the Danish government. As a result of their involvement, RTC - Denmark provides a unique perspective on the experiences of Danish children and their mothers following their repatriation.

The recommendations are based on first-hand observations and conversations with the families and made in collaboration with Danish and international decision-makers, interest groups and experts.

All of this has been placed within the context of existing knowledge regarding child exposure to extremism and warzones, legal perspectives on the child's best interests, as well as humanitarian, security and criminal justice perspectives.

Keeping the children and their interests at the forefront of the repatriation process is crucial while also acknowledging the security challenges. The Danish judicial system deals with individuals suspected of criminal activity upon their return to Denmark. Thus far, a judicial process for the caregivers, believed to have committed crimes in relation to their stay in the Islamic State, has begun immediately upon arrival on Danish territory.

Lessons from previous repatriations are critical in ensuring that future repatriations occur under less harmful conditions.

Almost 7000 third-country nationals remain indefinitely detained under poor conditions in the camps, mostly children. Countries worldwide should therefore expect to ensure swift and safe repatriations of their nationals in the years to come. Furthermore, as of spring 2023, five Danish children remain in arbitrary detention with their primary caregivers, who have been stripped of their Danish citizenship.

The Danish Repatriation Process

On October 7th 2021, 14 Danish children and their three mothers returned to Denmark. Before that, an orphaned baby and a severely injured 13-year-old boy had been repatriated.

Eleven of the 16 children were born in Denmark, and the remaining five were born in Syria, one of whom was born in the detention camps.

Before the repatriation in 2021, long-term negotiation and investigation of the circumstances had taken place.

To optimise the difficult task of establishing a government position on evacuating the 14 Danish children with their mothers in May 2021, a review of the children's health situation, as well as the legal and security policy challenges, was conducted by a cross ministerial taskforce⁸. Additionally, negotiations between the AANES and Danish authorities had also taken place.



” The real risk is not bringing these children home, it’s leaving them in the camps where they risk death, illness, and recruitment”

*Jo Becker,
Advocacy Director
of the Children’s
Rights Division,
Human Rights
Watch*

Before deciding to repatriate the Danish children to Denmark with their Danish mothers, the government assembled and dispatched a task force to the detention camps and the Kurdish Region of Syria. The children were assessed based on various psychological and physical conditions, as well as their attachment to their mothers.

“You cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that children’s lives and health are in grave danger”

Eva Ersbøll, Senior Researcher at The Danish Institute for Human Rights

It became clear that the following eighth points should be considered the grounds for which positive reintegration and future rehabilitation efforts in Denmark should be established:

1. The Danish children were severely affected by their stay in the Syrian detention camps, both physically and psychologically.
2. A significant short- and long-term need for psychological and health-related assistance, both in terms of diagnosis and treatment.
3. The mothers were categorised caring mothers by the Danish medical unit team, which was confirmed by local authorities in the camps.
4. The mothers fulfilled a crucial role being the children’s only and most important caregiver in the detention camps.
5. Separating the families by returning the children and leaving the mothers would be further traumatising for the children.
6. The health and educational conditions in the detention camps were of such poor quality that it was determined that their living standards did not comply with international law on children’s rights.
7. A need to ensure adequate attention paid to criminal justice and security aspects leading up to, during, and after the repatriation.
8. The grandparents of the children and the supportive network had a significant positive impact and collaboration with the network needed to be strengthened as much as possible.

With these factors as building blocks, the foundation for the children’s repatriation could be made possible.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Immigration and Integration, the Police and Defense Intelligence Service, the National Police of Denmark, and other relevant municipal and social institutions were all involved in the repatriation mission.



Experiences and lessons from the repatriation process can be divided into the following three crucial stages:

1. Preparing for Repatriation
2. The Repatriation
3. Life in Denmark

Each section below provides an overview of each phase and presents several recommendations to improve the repatriation process and reduce negative consequences for the children.

Preparing for Repatriation

Before the Danish government decided to bring 14 of the remaining 19 Danish children and their mothers home in May of 2021, lengthy negotiations concerning the repatriations had occurred.

Already in May 2017, a Danish mother and her two young children, under the age of one and two years old were captured by Kurdish forces. In 2018 and 2019, an orphaned baby with connections to Denmark along with six other Danish women and their 18 children were captured in Northeast Syria.

During that time, the government began preparing to evacuate the families. However, the process stalled due to practical difficulties.

Following the national elections in June 2019, Denmark's new government reversed course. It adopted a much stricter policy on the issue of repatriation. Only critically ill children would now be repatriated, and only if the mothers agreed to the separation. Only in exceptional cases would the mother be permitted to accompany her child, if an adequate relationship of dependence existed⁹.

When the government decided to bring 14 Danish children and their mothers home in May 2021, five more months would go by before the evacuation began. During these five months, no information was provided on how and when the process would begin.

“The Danish society’s capability to ensure criminal prosecution of the mothers and resocialization of the children, is in my opinion, the best in the world.”

*Kasper Fisker,
Criminologist and
adviser to RTC -
Denmark*





This was highly strenuous on the children. During a visit to the detention camps in Northeast Syria, one of the older boys shared with RTC - Denmark that he had started a countdown to the day of the repatriation by crossing out dates in his calendar. He had believed that the repatriations would happen promptly, however after a month with no news and a full calendar, he gave up.

Early on, the repatriation preparations were compartmentalised so that the criminal prosecution and security-political aspects were cut off and isolated from the social and healthcare practices. These

were transferred and then managed by a subordinate operating unit in the National Board of Social Services called VISO.

This division of tasks created an unnecessary lack of transparency and left the families uncertain and confused. For example, neither the family in Denmark nor the mothers in the detention camps were given sufficient information about what would happen when they arrived in Denmark. Would they face charges? Would their incarceration be with or without their children? Would they be incarcerated at all? What would happen to their children?

Relatives were eventually invited to a pre-evacuation orientation. All necessary authorities and actors attended except for the National Police and the criminal administration system, who cancelled on the day. This further exacerbated the families' sense of uncertainty and confusion. Especially since VISO was not authorised to address and answer questions from relatives on behalf of the police.

Clarification, information, and dissemination of the plan should be incorporated at a much earlier stage in the process and to a far greater extent. Both regarding the detained children and mothers, as well as considered in respect to the family members in Denmark. They are the ones providing a safety net for the children upon their arrival.

These lessons must be used to guarantee that the rights and needs of children will be sufficiently taken into account in similar cases. And must furthermore secure a future coordinated effort between the legal, criminal, security and social aspects, with particular attention paid to the children's specific needs.

Concerning this, legal representation for the children should be established, i.e. how placement and temporary custody of the children are handled. This will ensure that the children's best interests are sufficiently considered and they are incorporated.

It must be acknowledged that significant thought and effort went into providing a solid and positive foundation for repatriation. However, the cooperation between the relatives in Denmark, the families to be repatriated and the social institutions, with VISO acting as a coordinating unit, was considerably hindered by a lack of knowledge regarding the criminal law and security factors. As a result, information and clarification for proper preparation and subsequent repatriation were generally unavailable. Especially for the relatives and, by extension, the network, who were to be held accountable following the repatriation.



Alternative to Ordinary Detention

The actual imprisonment of the mothers gained a lot of attention in the repatriations, notably the topic of placing the mothers in custody with their children as an alternative to ordinary detention.

When detained for a pending investigation, the Danish Administration of Justice Act offers the opportunity to place a caregiver in a detention facility, where they will continue to provide the necessary care for the individuals, who may be dependent on them. This is to ensure that neither the investigation nor actual criminal acts unproportionally affect innocent bystanders. This may be coined surrogate detention, which is an alternative to ordinary incarceration, and was heavily discussed in the preparations for repatriations.

RTC - Denmark, Save the Children, The Danish Institute for Human Rights and numerous other children's organisations, specialists, and judges advocated a solution in which the children would remain with their mothers after arriving in Denmark - and while the mothers were being held in custody and investigated for criminal activity¹⁰. This would provide the children with a space where they could adjust to Denmark in a safe atmosphere while getting to know their Danish relatives.

Instead of the ordinary detention centres in Denmark, which are highly unsuitable for children, it was suggested that the mothers

“ In the absence of their engagement and acceptance of legal responsibility, children face death, starvation, and extreme physical and emotional harm”

Fionnuala Ni Aoláin, United Nations Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights

be held in households or institutions with adequate security.

By doing so, the children's rights would be respected in relation to the mothers' incarceration and punishment. At the same time, it would prevent the already traumatised children being removed from their only and primary caregiver after arriving in Denmark - a country that is new and unfamiliar.

The families hoped, until the very end, that if the mothers were taken into custody, then the option for surrogate imprisonment would be utilised.

Although the extensive encouragement for surrogate detention, it did not bear fruit¹¹. The mothers were placed in custody immediately upon arrival in Denmark and separated from their children simultaneously. This was a surprise as no doubt existed regarding the need to ensure a smooth and gentle separation for both children and mothers, taking all circumstances into account.



The Repatriation

Negotiations between the families' lawyers, RTC - Denmark, the National Police, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs persisted until the women and children were evacuated from the camps. These negotiations mainly concerned the extent of the forthcoming separations of children from their mothers and the involvement of the relational network in Denmark upon arrival.

Despite significant efforts to utilise and benefit from the relationship of innate trust between the grandparents and children, the authorities entirely dismissed its merits.

The families and networks in Denmark received most of their information about the evacuation from Danish journalists, Kurdish authorities, and other women in the camps. Compared with the slow delivery of news and information from Danish authorities to the next of kin. Despite being in a stressful and exasperated situation, the directly involved parties were only informed much later in the process. The unnecessary uncertainty made it difficult for the relatives to properly prepare for the children's arrival.

A few of the Danish children had been born in Syria and this caused ambivalence regarding the parental legal authority over the children. The mothers could thus not provide legal consent on behalf of the children on Syrian territory. Therefore, applications for temporary

"When they arrived in Denmark, they were skinny, scared children that didn't behave as children. They behaved as adults, who had to constantly protect themselves."

Aunt to eight of the Danish children, who have been repatriated from Syria

custody of the children had to be sent after the families had been evacuated from the camps, but before they arrived in Europe. This left only a short window to ensure that all the correct papers were in order before the families came to Danish national territory.

From the departure from Northeast Syria with layovers in Kuwait and Frankfurt to the final arrival in Denmark, security concerns had been a top priority. Very few safeguards were put in place to ensure the children’s well-being.

The mothers and children’s relatives were promised the opportunity to be present at the arrival in Denmark. However, these promises were broken. This resulted in significant frustration for the families, and highly traumatising separations of children and mothers. Police detained the mothers while the children were handed over to social services without any preparation.



In one case, grandparents, uncles and aunts waited only a few metres away and in sight of the cottage where the children were being held after arrival. The family members remember seeing the children searching for them through the windows and seeking contact with their families. However, they had to wait for a long time, staring at each other at a distance, before they were reunited.

In another case, the children were placed in an institution immediately after they were separated from their mothers. The family was not allowed to see them until the following day. A relative recounts how a young boy soiled his pants following the separation. He was terrified and had only sought out his siblings as he was afraid to seek out the adults.

Issues during the repatriation and arrival reflect several of the issues highlighted from the preparations process - Inadequate, delayed and insufficient information and transparency for the relatives. Furthermore, the early and harsh separation of mothers and children contradicts recommendations from interest organisations, experts etc.

Presence at the airport of arrival and assistance with the subsequent separation of mothers and children could have been purposefully arranged as to avoid further traumatising the children - but this was not the case.

The separation had a significant traumatising impact on the children. To this day, a five-year-old girl diagnosed with PTSD still recalls the "stupid people who took [my] mom and drove her away in a dark car".

The mothers had a unique position as primary caregivers. It became evident how, if allowed, their position could have provided the children with immense security and safety during the separation and transferral to their families and Danish authorities. The same can be said about the relatives, who should have been given a more prominent role in the repatriation process.

Altogether, this could have created a better foundation for the children before they left Syria, during their journey to Denmark, and, most importantly, during the separation.



Life in Denmark

After being separated from the mothers, the children were placed in secluded cabins and secured institutions with their relatives, where healthcare staff and social services were available around the clock. Some of the children stayed in institutions for a few weeks, while others remained longer. All are placed in the custody of their relatives today.

Initially, the children were not permitted to visit their mothers in prison, which added to their trauma. Children born in Denmark had not seen their families in nearly seven years, while those born in Syria had never met their grandparents, uncles, and aunts. Everything was new to them, and they had been separated from their primary caregiver, who was also their only security source.

After considerable time, the children were finally permitted to visit their mothers in prison. However, visitation was carried out under highly restrictive conditions and without regard for the children's reintegration into Danish society, particularly regarding their development in relation to daycare centres and schooling. The older children had already lost several years of education while imprisoned in Syria, and many of them have PTSD. All of which pose challenges in completing schoolwork and adjusting to everyday life in Denmark.

At the same time, prison visits needed to be prioritised. It was and

"It is probably the most touching moment in my life. Now, he was in our arms and got all the love and care that he needed. We needed to make sure that he will have the very best life in Denmark, where he belongs. He is the greatest gift I have ever received."

Aunt to the orphaned baby, who was repatriated in 2019

continues to be extremely difficult for the children to be separated from their mothers. Several of the children have teddy bears with voice recordings of their mother's voice. A grandmother explains that her grandchildren, even those in their teens, still play their teddy bear's voice recordings every night before they go to bed, so they can fall asleep to their mother's voice.

The children have also been significantly impacted throughout the criminal investigation and prosecutions of their mothers, both regarding the terms and conditions of their detention while awaiting trial, but most notably in the court proceedings.

It became necessary to address whether the children can be interrogated, according to the Administration of Justice Act's regulations on witness interrogation and protection. The questions concerned the severe psychological damage inflicted on the already vulnerable children, if they were to provide witness statements in their mother's cases.

A closely related next of kin is usually exempt from testifying. Yet, the District Attorney determined that the children's statements would be crucial for the outcome of the case. An assessment that was later reaffirmed in a court of law.

Ultimately, this meant that the criminal proceedings were prioritised above the children's best interests, despite psychological assessments concluding that submitting witness statements in their mother's criminal case could cause irreparable harm to the children.

Preventing Risk of Radicalization

The Danish children detained in Northeast Syria have survived shootings, bombings, and the deaths of loved ones.

Fear and worry are often primary concerns of children who have grown up in war zones, especially if they have been exposed to violence and extremism. The child is likely to experience stress, low self-esteem, loss of control and, in some cases, negative defence mechanisms¹².

A robust social network alongside targeted psychological treatment and counselling for the families, with particular attention devoted to the child's unique situation and individual needs, is one of the most vital tools to ensure the children's positive development.

Before the children arrived in Denmark, collaboration with some of Denmark's leading child psychologists had been initiated.



They have since followed the children and developed treatment plans for each of them. Furthermore, relevant municipalities were involved and prepared for the particular challenges and trauma that the children may have endured as a consequence of their prolonged stay in detention camps and warzones.

The mothers' involvement in the process has been vital. Both in terms of investigating and processing the consequences of being in a war zone and captivity, but also in the long term, so the families can re-unite and positively reintegrate into Danish society together.

This, however, has been challenged by the fact that the mothers cannot participate in psychological or deradicalization programmes as long as they remain merely in police custody, but have not been sentenced. Even though this may postpone the positive reintegration and rehabilitation of the mothers and by extension, the children.

The families have been subjected to extreme conditions in the Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliphate and subsequently in the detention camps. According to Danish and international intelligence services and experts, such exposure can accelerate the process of radicalization¹³. It is recommended that children and adults, who

have spent a substantial amount of time in such environments, receive assistance and support to aid the process of reintegrating into mainstream society.

It is also essential that the families avoid further stigmatisation both in the short and long term. Discrimination is a recognized push factor for the risk of radicalization¹⁴. Women from several countries, who have travelled to Syria or Iraq, have described experiences of discrimination and Islamophobia and how this alienated them from their home societies.

The heated public and political debate in Denmark over families, who have been with the Islamic State, has dramatically impacted the Danish children. Several of the older children have expressed reluctance, if not fear, of sharing their experiences in Syria with their peers.

A few of the children have experienced being called terrorist children and ISIS children in school.

Further challenges include registration of the children's addresses in the public schools' internal communication platforms and issuing passports for the children.

In one case, a group of siblings could not be issued passports by the authorities without legal aid from lawyers, as they had been ostracised due to their parents' situations.

In another case, children were stigmatised in school. They had been incorrectly enrolled on the school's intranet under the mother's address in prison rather than at their own place of residence with a close family member. This raised a lot of unnecessary questions by other parents at the school.

As Danish children have not previously been repatriated from detention camps, it requires special attention from the authorities to ensure that their best interests and rights are upheld equally to other Danish children.

Challenges in the Future

The 16 children brought back to Denmark from the Syrian detention camps are living a better life today.

Nevertheless, it is vital to bear in mind: the many traumas of a childhood in detention camps as well as the subsequent harsh separation from their primary caregivers, the continued uncertainty

” They have experienced things that children should not experience. They have seen children beaten and witnessed violent tent fires. A world with jungle law, where only the strongest survive.”

Aunt to five of the Danish children, who have been repatriated from the prison camps

about their mothers' criminal prosecution, their fathers' situation, and the suboptimal conditions for visitation in prison.

The children are adapting well to school and tell joyful anecdotes about their friends and classmates. Several of the children participate in extracurricular activities and sports. They can finally play outside without fear of explosives or jail guards. Yet, the children are still experiencing active and continued traumatisation due to the uncertainty about their parents' future.

The children require support today as well as in the future. Both in terms of any unpredictable but expected challenges that may arise and in ensuring the children's best interests after their mothers are sentenced. One example is making sure that the mothers serve their sentence in prison as close to the children as possible, so the children can visit without missing too much school.

Additionally, special needs will continue to arise where the network families need support and help concerning case processing in their respective municipalities.

When the mothers finish serving their prison sentences, a significant need to support the families with re-unification and re-establishing a healthy daily life will arise.

The relationship with the children's fathers, deceased or imprisoned in Syria, is equally crucial. The children deserve to understand what happened, not only for their own sake and self-understanding but also to secure their well-being.

"The dream is that the children get to live with their mother, when she is released from prison, and they have an ordinary life together. The parents were unfortunately brainwashed, but they still did everything they could to protect their children."

Aunt to five of the Danish children, who have been repatriated from the prison camps

Recomendations

Based on the lessons learnt throughout the repatriation process, we have compiled a list of the most important recommendations to improve the repatriation of families with children from detention camps in Syria.

1. Prioritise a coordinated effort between the legal, criminal and security circumstances in which international conventions are best observed.
2. Ensure better and earlier involvement of the children's family and network during the preparations for repatriation.
3. Establish party representation as in other placement cases to ensure the children's rights are respected.
4. Enable surrogate imprisonment upon repatriation if the mothers are arrested on arrival.
5. If a surrogate solution is not chosen, the mothers should hand over custody of the children to the relatives and the authorities in Denmark to avoid further traumatization and build trust between the children and their new guardians.
6. Due to the special attachment relationship, it is crucial for the children to establish contact with the mothers after custody.
7. Ensure fast and proper visiting conditions in prisons for the children.
8. Ensure particular attention to the child's best interest and specific needs, when prosecuting their mothers.
9. Maintain focus on continuous and constructive contact with the mothers.
10. The children's rights in connection with the imprisonment and punishment of the mothers should be analysed and improved to avoid the children experiencing it as abuse.
11. The psychologically vulnerable situation in which the children find themselves should be observed and respected in connection with the system's processing of measures and grants in critical areas of action, for example, during prison visits and about the network family.
12. The children's network and relatives in Denmark must involve all aspects of the children's reintegration.
13. The families must receive support in everyday life from the social authorities.
14. Avoid further stigmatisation of the children.

Concluding Remarks

Repatriating the Danish children and their mothers from detention camps in northeast Syria has secured the children's survival. They have regained some of the childhood they lost while trapped in a war zone, where bedtime stories were accompanied with the sound of bombings.

Nevertheless, several circumstances before, during and after the repatriation have been unacceptable and added further trauma to already vulnerable children. Especially the violent separation from the mothers on arrival in Denmark is cause for objection.

In addition, the lengthy negotiation process surrounding the repatriation decision has been burdensome for the families, including the subsequent secrecy in planning the children's return, where the criminal aspects of the situation in several cases took precedence over the children's rights.

In the past, the legal basis for the repatriations and the requirements that the authorities had to meet were based on the Vienna Convention and the preparations for the repatriations in 2019 and 2021.

On 14 September 2022, a judgement was delivered at the European Court of Human Rights in the case of H.F. etc. against France, which confirmed that also in the cases of children from the detention camps in Northeast Syria, European Human Rights apply. This means that in the future, the authorities must live up to the duties and requests concerning the children, which appear from the Human Rights Court's decision.

In the report, RTC - Denmark has compiled several recommendations to improve the repatriation and reintegration of Danish children from the Syrian detention camps. **All based on ensuring the child's best interests are the highest priority.**

The lessons from Denmark show that reintegration and rehabilitation are more likely to succeed when repatriated families and their relatives are involved. Such involvement keeps families together, prevents new separations, protects against further traumatization and promotes psychological recovery. Separating a child from their closest caregiver increases the risk of intensifying the child's trauma, thus inciting more anxiety and vulnerability.

Inadequate care for the children's interests can create fertile ground for radicalization. The children may feel guilty that they are safe at home. At the same time their friends, half-siblings, and fathers are still locked up in life-threatening conditions without the possibility of being prosecuted and thus getting a fair treatment of their case. At the same time, the older children have experienced being left in captivity for many years, where they have been afraid of what would happen to them. This, combined with the uncertainty about the fate of their relatives and friends, can add to the difficulty of ensuring rehabilitation and reintegration of the children.

The Danish state must expect to repatriate up to 30 children from the Syrian detention camps and the surrounding area who have Danish citizenship or have a right of entry to Denmark. The children have experienced war, earthquakes, and lengthy prison stays in Syria and Turkey, and in this very special situation it must be ensured that they get the necessary help to be reintegrated and process their experiences, and in the long term, have a good life.

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Repatriate the Children is a children's rights organisation that raises awareness of children detained in Northeast Syria and contributes to knowledge-based decision-making where humanitarian principles, rule of law, and global security are united and upheld.

RTC advocates for the children languishing in these camps in Northeast Syria, supports families awaiting their return and collaborates with the international community to bring these families home.

RTC operates with three autonomous national branches - Denmark, U.S., and Sweden - and has been an integral actor since the first cases of repatriations of foreign citizens by Western countries.