

For ISIS Children, Returning Home to Europe Meets Resistance

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BRUSSELS — Years after their parents left Belgium and France to join the Islamic State, 18 children were taken from squalid refugee camps in Syria and flown recently to new lives in Belgium and France, drawing widespread attention in those countries as examples of Europe grudgingly accepting the children of its jihadis.

But they were the exceptions, not the rule; estimates vary, but 1,300 or more children of European fighters and followers of the self-professed caliphate remain trapped in Syria and Iraq. While some European governments have softened their stands on repatriation, marginally, it is still unclear when — or even whether — the children might be able to leave.

The recent airlifts, which took place only after months of negotiation and vetting of the children, illustrate how resistant Western countries still are. On those flights in June, France and Belgium received only children whose extremist parents were dead; most are orphans, and some were taken to ISIS lands by their fathers, who were killed there, while their mothers remained in Europe.

Days earlier, a Belgian team had set up a makeshift clinic in the overcrowded Al Hol camp in northeastern Syria, which holds thousands of current and former ISIS adherents and their family members, providing medical care and psychiatric assessments for the children of Belgian nationals.

“They wanted to come to Belgium,” said Heidi De Pauw, a member of the team. “They kept saying to us, ‘We want to come home.’”

But Ms. De Pauw, the chief executive of Child Focus, a center for missing and sexually exploited children, had little hope to offer them, in part because most of them had at least one living parent with them in the camp.

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With few exceptions, European countries have refused to take back the adults. The Kurdish authorities who run the major camps have made it plain that they do not want to separate families, and do not want to be left holding stateless parents.



Al Hol was initially intended for 10,000 refugees but now houses more than 70,000.
Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

The issue is politically charged across Europe. ISIS survivors, even children, are seen as a threat, no matter how reformed they appear. Theo Francken, a former secretary of state for asylum and migration in Belgium who is a lawmaker for a conservative Flemish party, denounced the recent repatriation, warning that it might signal the return of all Islamic State children.

“I say no, no, no,” he tweeted. “Their parents are no longer fellow citizens.”

When ISIS controlled parts of Iraq and Syria, an estimated 41,000 people from other parts of the world left their homes to join the group — about one-third of them from Europe, including the Caucasus. Some took children with them and others had children there. Thousands were killed and thousands more managed to slip away, many of them making their way home and risking prosecution as terrorists.

But as ISIS lost the last of its territory early this year, tens of thousands of survivors crowded into refugee camps that were built for far fewer people. At least 29 children died just in traveling to Al Hol or soon after arriving at the camp, the World Health Organization reported in January.

Violence, disease and despair are common there, and food, medicine — and sometimes even clean water — are scarce. Gerrit Loots, a psychologist who led the Belgian team at Al Hol, said that women still faithful to the Islamic State threw stones at those who had renounced it.

About 3,000 women and 7,000 children from countries other than Iraq and Syria are held at Al Hol, according to the Kurds and the group Human Rights Watch. Many of them want to return to their home countries. The largest contingents are thought to be Russian and French, while Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium are also among the major nations of origin.

Some women who joined ISIS soured on it, but others believed fervently and even took part in atrocities. Children were indoctrinated and sometimes pressed into service. It can be difficult to determine who is guilty of crimes, who still adheres to radical ideology, and who might change with counseling.

A very few countries, including Kazakhstan and Kosovo, have repatriated many of their people from ISIS territory, including adults. Turkey, Russia and a few others have taken in significant numbers of children recently, mostly orphans, though more remain.

But most countries have taken a harder line. Britain has gone so far as to revoke the citizenship of people who want to return. Many European countries, after first refusing, have said they would take in children, but it has been slow going.

A malnourished child in the camp's foreign section. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

The Belgian authorities have promised to repatriate all Belgian children under the age of 10, and those over 10 on a case-by-case basis.

“Children can never be guilty of the actions of their parents,” Koen Geens, the Belgian justice minister, said in a news release last December.

But the government has worked to avoid repatriating adults. In February, it successfully appealed a court judgment that would have let two widows of Islamic State fighters return from Al Hawl, alongside their children.

Officially, the policy on children is one of the most welcoming on the continent. In reality, it has been slow going.

Belgium has allowed about 25 children to returned from Syria since 2012, but about 162 Belgian children are still in former ISIS lands, according to Thomas Renard, a senior research fellow for the Brussels-based Egmont Institute.

“It is something that has to be extremely frustrating for families, but also for youth workers, social workers,” Mr. Renard said.

The six who arrived in June were found in psychological examinations not to have been radicalized, and were sent to pediatric hospitals or to foster homes, said Bernard De Vos, a government representative for children's rights, who was part of the team that traveled to Al Hawl.

“We had some time to prepare,” said Mr. De Vos. “I am sure that the services are perfectly well prepared to help these children.”



A protest in Brussels in April urging the Belgian government to repatriate the children of Islamic State militants. Francois Lenoir/Reuters

Ms. De Pauw said, “considering the circumstances, they are doing well.”

France says it will accept children only on a case-by-case basis. It has stepped up the pace of repatriations this year, but fewer than 100 have been returned from Syria and Iraq, while aid groups say some 400 remain.

Germany, with almost 300 children stuck in Syria and Iraq, has taken in 15. Like France, it does not take back adults.

Mr. De Vos, the government children’s rights representative, said that Belgium must take back its citizens. Mothers who have committed crimes should return and face trial in Belgian courts, he said.

“That is the only thing to do, repatriate all the children and all the mothers,” he said. “There is no time to wait. The government has to decide to bring back all the children with their mothers. They are really in danger.”

But efforts to take any refugees are politically risky. Many Europeans disapprove of repatriation efforts, and see even the children as potential dangers, said Charles Lister, director of the Countering Terrorism and Extremism Program at the Middle East Institute in Washington.

“People have read anything to do with ISIS as a negative, as a threat, as a challenge, as a cost, as a risk, and children are in that calculation,” he said in an interview.

A poll released in February showed that two-thirds of French people oppose the repatriation of children, and Mr. Renard said he believed that results would be similar in Belgium.

But Dr. Loots, the psychologist, said he thought those concerns were unfounded.

“These are kids like all other kids,” he said. “I think we don’t have to be afraid.”

“These are children who want to take back their lives,” he added. “They went through some very difficult situations, and they need to get through that, and they just want help.”

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