



# Al-Hol Camp: Release, Return and Reintegration of Syrian residents

Situational analysis Paper

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## **Introduction:**

The release and reintegration of Syrian residents of the Al-Hol camp is becoming one major obstacle of stabilization in northeast of Syria (NES), especially in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor, the last region liberated from ISIS and the one most destroyed in the fights against the terrorist organization. A complex problem that is does not concern this particular region only, but is highly linked with the security situation in Syria and Iraq.

This paper provides a preliminary analysis on the issue of return from al-Hol camp to the rural areas of Deir Ezzor under the control of the autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) , and presents the options of return and challenges associated with it; It also addresses the difficulties returnees face in their daily life and obstacles to reintegration with the community.

This paper is based on a survey with 25 women returned with their families to towns and villages in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor; Two online interviews with community leaders in the area including a representative of a local civil society organization working primarily with returnees, and a Sheikh directly involved in tribal sponsorship process. in addition to the results of four sessions of dialogue with community leaders and notables held within the framework of the project in the towns of **Muwaylah, Azbah, Shahil and Jadid Uqaydat** in February 2021.

## **Al-Hol camp**

Al-Hol camp is located 40 kilometers east of the center of Hasakeh governorate, was first set up by the UNHCR in cooperation with the Syrian government during the Second Gulf War in 1991 to house thousands of Iraqi refugees fleeing the war, the number of refugees reach up to 15,000, including Palestinians expelled from Kuwait. the camp was reopened in 2003 along with two other camps to receive refugees fleeing the war in Iraq and was closed in 2007, until it was reopened again in April 2016 for families displaced from areas under ISIS attacks. By late 2017, the camp had a population of 20,000. with the defeat of ISIS it accommodate new

arrivals including families of ISIS fighters, and total number of inhabitants became nearly 74,000 in early 2019.<sup>1</sup>

Since mid-2019 residents were discharged, according to Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) 61,000 in 16,784 families still live in the camp in March 2021. These families are divided into 8277 Iraqi, 5906 Syrian and 2565 families of foreign fighters.<sup>2</sup> The UN reports at least 40,000 children of various<sup>3</sup> nationalities are in the camp. The camp also houses citizens from 57 countries, the vast majority of whom are ISIS families.<sup>4</sup>

The camp administration is done by the commission of Social Affairs and Labor of the AANES, while Bluemont NGO oversees the camp organization and provides needs of its residents. However, according to human rights reports and returnees' testimonies, residents suffer from deteriorating humanitarian conditions, poor services and lack of basic necessities for food, drinking water and healthcare,

In addition to the poor humanitarian and living conditions, the security situation is the biggest concern for camp management and the whole region. In the past year, there have been 47 murder incidents inside the camp, 30 of which were Iraqis. Moreover, a security campaign carried out by the SDF and the local police (Asayish) in March 2021 uncovered weapons and tunnels in the camp, leading to the arrest of 28 persons including senior ISIS leaders<sup>5</sup>. This reflects the risks associated with living in the camp and the need to secure and monitor the camp around the clock. The AANES announced that the situation in Al Hol camp has improved after the last security operation, but according to some of the people interviewed in this paper, the camp is in a "catastrophic situation" and could be described as a "ticking time bomb"

most of concerned countries are still reluctant to repatriate their citizens who joined ISIS or their families, whereas the tribal sponsorship system has helped releasing thousands of Syrians from the camp since June 2019, however, the depopulation of the camp is still very slow and not efficient, and there's a need to more efforts in term of : first, to accelerate the release of

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<sup>1</sup> Bridge Press: In numbers, the history of Al-Hol camp is 25.03.2021. Seen at 13.04.2021

<https://bit.ly/3wVIDGg>

<sup>2</sup> BBC Arabic: Al-Hol camp: Kurdish forces arrest nine IS members in northern Syria 29.03.2021. Seen at 13.04.2021 <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-56556376>

<sup>3</sup> UN News Site 24.03.2021. Seen at 13.04.2021 <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2021/03/1073192>

<sup>4</sup> Syria war toll tops 100: Internal Security Forces Asayish Announces the End of the First Phase of the Security Campaign within the Al-Hol Mini-State 02.04.2021. Seen at 13.04.2021 <https://bit.ly/3a8zVK4>

<sup>5</sup> Previous Source

families and children who wish to return to their families and areas of residence or to an area to which they wish to move, and second to ensure a conducive environment to reintegrate these families into the community again.

- **Other camps in the region**

There are more than ten small and large camps in the NES, not including the temporary housing facilities in schools and halls. Some camps were closed, while others are still sheltering IDPs, such as the **Mashte Nour** camp in Kobani, established in 2015, **Roj** camp in Gire Resh village and Newroz camp in Malikiyah/Derik region, these two camps were established in 2014 and were designed to Iraqi refugees fleeing ISIS attacks, mainly Yezidi's escaped from Sinjar and the districts of Zumar and Sheikhan. The **Mabrouk** camp south of Ras al-Ain with a capacity of around 14'000 residents, was opened in January 2015. **Al-Sadd/Al-Shadadi** camp opened in June 2017 and a home to 4'000 IDPs. **Ain Eissa** camp which had about 10'000 residents from Raqqa (however was closed and burned after the Turkish operation peace-spring). **Tuwayhiniya** , **Abu Khashab camp**, **Rashid and Tashrin** camps in Raqqa, Most of these camps were built to accommodate those fleeing ISIS and during the war on ISIS , in addition to those Iraqis from the border-areas who sought refuge in the AANES controlled areas.<sup>6</sup>

Operation Peace Spring by turkey and allied Syrian National Army in Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad led to a wave of displacement in late 2019, and the **Washokani** camp was hastily prepared for displaced people and shelters approximately 7500 people, and the **Tal Abyad** camp in Raqqa, which was later expanded due to the influx of IDPs. In addition, many schools (especially in Hasakah Governorate) were repurposed into temporary shelters/

all camps are supervised by the commission of Social Affairs and Labor and managed by local organizations such as the Kurdish Red Crescent, and international organizations such as the UNHCR, UNICEF, Mercy Crops, People in Need, IRD, and IRC.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Arta FM: Refugee camps in northeast Syria (video). Seen at 13.04.2021 <http://www.artafm.com/video/6947>

<sup>7</sup> Same source as before.

## Ways to leaving Al-Hol camp for Syrian citizens

- **Tribal and Family sponsorship**

One of the main methods to release families from al-Hol camp is sponsorship by a tribal leader, a tribal leader (Sheiks and notables) are allowed to request the release of individuals, these are mostly members of the tribe or large families known by the tribal leaders, names are agreed upon by the tribal leaders and the camp administration and sponsors should be Syrians. This framework was introduced by the AANES in to deal with the crisis of IDPs, following the territorial defeat of ISIS in Baghouz in March 2019. According to a tribal leader in Deir Ezzor nearly 5000 families have been released this way, including 1200 families went to Raqqa. women who returned from Al-Hol find that family Sponsorship represents the least dangerous and least expensive way for families to leave the camp. Of the 25 women interviewed for this paper, eleven said they went out on bail (tribal or family sponsorship). The process is usually very slow according to returnees, however, the period after leaving the camp is the hardest, mainly to get accepted by the family and community, for instance, the parents of one woman refused to let her out with her children and asked to release her alone because she was married to an unknown person (a foreigner).

In addition to family and tribal sponsorship, the framework is also open for entities to facilitate the exit of some families. For example, a consortium of five local civil society organizations (CSOs) in Deir Ezzor in coordination with the Deir Ezzor Civil Council (DCC) prepared a lists of families to sponsor based on information given by relatives. According to one CSO representative, nearly 75 families were released by this initiative. however, this approach is not systematic yet and requires much coordination and approvals of many. Also the dependence of local organizations on funding and donor agendas further complicates this work and limits its effectiveness.

One important issue affecting sponsorship system is corruption and nepotism. Some brokers/sponsors have reportedly cashed out large sums from camp residents to be added to the lists of those sponsored and will be released. This practice is hampering the efforts of Sheikhs and dignitaries who take upon themselves the released ones. one Sheikh of a significant tribe in Deir Ezzor has expressed his dismay at some sponsors who receive "bribes", these practices by others forced him to refrain from providing sponsorships to protect his reputation. He also confirmed that other Sheikhs had stopped helping camp residents for the same reasons.

- **Requests to leave the camp without a sponsor:**

According to the survey, eight out of 25 women said they had left by applying for exit to camp management. This mechanism is available to families living in the camp who have voluntarily entered the camp and have no direct relationship with ISIS members. According to these women, the process included repeated requests and a long waiting period for up to one year until the application was approved. According to media sources, approximately 65 families were released this way in March 2021 after their identity was verified and passed a security vetting<sup>8</sup>.

- **Smuggling:**

Some residents resort to illegal ways to leave by paying smugglers to get the family out of the camp; One of the routes revealed lately was through the use of water trucks (tankers) that nearly killed the deserters. However, despite talks about smuggling and while some of the interviewees spoke about it, no monitoring or documentation of these operations are available. One reason for the lack of information might be to avoid accountability when the issue is investigated and documented according to one interview.

Six women interviewed for the survey stated that they were smuggled out. For these women, the biggest hurdle was the large sums they had to pay to smugglers. There are no precise figures or information on the amounts paid usually for smuggling, but some sources point to around \$800 per person.

In addition to the financial burden, getting out of the camp this way is risky, as smuggling is carried out by gangs inside and outside the camp. According to a source close to one smuggled family, the smuggled groups often get attacked just after leaving the camp and before reaching the final destination, with many failed attempts and the family returning to the camp.

## **Return destinations**

In the absence of accurate statistics and figures on the number of returnees from al-Hol camp to Deir Ezzor, especially with the prevalence of smuggling operations, documenting the returnees' whereabouts is another challenge to address the problems. However, distribution of population can be grouped into three main categories:

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<sup>8</sup> Syria TV: 65 Syrian families emerge from Holocaust camp seen in 13.04.2021 <https://bit.ly/3wNPwIN>

**1. Returning to areas of origin in Deir Ezzor countryside:** This category is primarily for those who return on sponsorship, as the return is to a place of residence determined by the conditions of the bail. For example, a family returning from al-Hol through tribal sponsorship often reside in the area where the tribe is spread or in the areas in which relatives of the sponsoring family reside. In addition, the security and economic situation is a factor in the distribution of returnees, as most returnees, mainly from areas under the control of the AANES, return to their towns and villages due to the relatively stable security situation compared to other areas, or because proximity to the family provides returnees with necessary housing and livelihood in most cases.

**2. Returnees from other areas but return to AANES-controlled Deir Ezzor countryside:**

Returnees who come originally from areas are now under the control of Syrian regime forces and affiliated militias. In a dialogue session held in Al-Azbah town, participants reported that seven villages east of the Euphrates are currently under the control of regime forces and allied Iranian militias, so IDPs from those villages are now temporarily living in makeshift houses on the outskirts of Azbah town.

**3. Returnees to other areas in Syria or abroad:** This category includes people who come from other areas such as Raqqa governorate or the northern Aleppo countryside. However, some information also suggests Turkey as a destination for some returnees, especially for younger ones seeking jobs or fleeing security restrictions (arrests and forced conscription).

## **Challenges for returnees and reintegration opportunities:**

- **Housing:** The lack of adequate housing is one of the main challenges facing families returning from Al Hol, especially women and children. Of the 25 women interviewed in the questionnaire, 17 said they were staying with another family in the same house, either the larger family or the husband's parents, or even other families in the same situation. In addition, two of the women stated that they were staying in unprepared temporary shelters (an old poultry farm). According to knowledgeable source interviewed for the paper, many of the returning families found their previous homes destroyed or uninhabitable, forcing them to build tents with available materials to live in (such as jute), or to reside in another camp for displaced persons in the area (Al-Sadd and Abu Khashab camps) with less restrictions. Another source mentioned the spread of mud houses built hastily on the

outskirts of villages and towns in some areas of rural Deir Ezzor.

- **Economic situation and livelihood:** the availability and quality of basic services in areas of return are of the most significant challenges for returnees and limits the effectiveness of reintegration efforts. The lack of specialized centers to provide assistance to returnees, which makes women out of the camp vulnerable to relying on relatives' assistance or returning to the camps. Of the 25 women surveyed, 17 reported living with their children without a steady provider, while six relied on a family member as a primary breadwinner (father, son or brother). In contrast, only two women said that they work and provide for the family. In this context, the limited employment opportunities available to women and the general weakness in qualifications play a key role in the difficulty of securing sustainable and sufficient employment opportunities to support the family. According to a local elder participating in the local dialogue sessions on the situation of the returnees, "a large portion of the detainees in al-Hol camp prefer to stay there rather than returning to their villages, because of the economic situation", as staying in the camp may ensure the family's access to humanitarian assistance from the camp administration.
- **Community view of returnees:** Reintegration within the community is usually challenged by the perception and acceptance of returnees, especially those known or suspected to be association with ISIS members. Several women interviewed said they suffered from a negative perception of them and were treated as if they were radicalized, this practice pushed them to live in isolation at the edges of the villages and towns they returned to, two of whom were married to foreign fighters. However, a tribal sheikh interviewed for this paper offered a very different account: "The returnees are from our own tribe, and we have to welcome them and give them everything we can, and there is no discriminatory views against them," he said.
- **Legal Issues and civil-register documents:** Many returnees are unable to issue identification papers for themselves and their children, especially as the marriages have not been documented in any civil registers. the problem is stark when the nationality of the father is unknown, as many children were born to foreign fighters whose real names are not known even to their spouses, according to the Syrian law the mothers don't grant Syrian nationality to their children, it is also difficult (if not impossible) to register the children of

Syrian nationals since official records are located in areas under Syrian government control in the city of Deir Ezzor, which makes the issue of formal birth registration of newborns a priority to attend to.

- **The threats of extremist ideology:** In the absence of large programs to counter extremism violent, both inside and outside the camp, the spread of extremist ideology could become a major challenge for the reintegration processes. One interviewee cited the danger associated with extremist ideology among children and youth who lived most of their lives under this ideology and "know nothing but a tent, extremist rhetoric, and the ideology of ISIS." he also pointed to the moral dilemma in balancing the humanitarian principles and the sympathy for families of former fighters from one side, and the danger inherent in the influence and conviction in extremist ideology on these families receiving support, from the other side.

This factor also poses a challenge to the design of psychological and livelihood support programs for returnees, especially women and children. A member of a CSO mentioned the reluctance of a woman to join a professional qualification program in hairdressing as she considers it unreligious or "Haram". There is also an urgent need to train CSO and aid workers on the design of psychosocial support programs that take into account the issue of extremist ideology and the premise of intolerance in this group.

- **Contextual challenges:** Security concerns is a major challenge both for returnees and the local communities, especially considering the increasing activity of ISIS sleeper cells and the prevalence of kidnapping and assassinations. A community leader stated in a dialogue session that the raids and security operations carried out by SDF in the area are also contributing to the stalling of the reintegration process. Calls were made by some communities for the displaced to leave the area due to their direct involvement and their role in the "security incidents and chaos." He described the security operations taking place in the area as "harassment of returnees and their families." Furthermore, a number of participants in the dialogue sessions pointed to the difficulty of separating the issue of returnees and reintegration from the security and political situation in Syria as a whole, pointing to the stalled political solution as an impediment that hinders stability and the improvement of living conditions of both the returnees and the communities.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

This paper provides a general overview of the complex nature of the issue of Syrian returnees from Al Hol camp and the challenges of their reintegration into the community, as a preamble for the expansion and in-depth investigation of this issues. Given that the data in this paper point to the overlap of various social, economic, security, psychological and administrative factors which have a great influence on the topic, as well as to the multiple levels and number of actors involved which requires a high coordination of efforts to deal with this problem.

The lack of clear information on exit mechanisms, the number and distribution of returnees, and poor planning and coordination at different levels and among different actors are the first factors that should be taken into account to foster opportunities for resolution and transition to a more stable phase. This also points to the need to systematically intensify documentation, verification and assessment, and build on these to develop plans, programs and mechanisms that ensure synergy of efforts and cumulative impact, that respond to immediate challenges in terms of living and humanitarian as well as to more serious and complex challenges that are linked to the social, security and psychological context of returnees and communities alike.