

The Future of ISIS Fighters and Families After Damascus Takeover

By Wladimir van Wilgenburg

On February 12, reports emerged that 6,000 foreign families had escaped or were smuggled out of the al-Hol camp ([Middle East Eye](#), February 12) in northeastern Syria. Damascus took control of the camp on January 20 ([SANA](#), January 20). Before the events in al-Hol, there were heavy clashes between the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Syrian government that began on January 6 ([ANHA](#), January 6). The clashes erupted after the deadline for the implementation of the March 10, 2025 integration agreement between Damascus and the SDF expired and last moment talks did not result in a solution. These clashes continued through the month of January despite efforts to reach a ceasefire and the SDF lost 80% of its territory ([IRIS France](#), February 2). A new Damascus-SDF agreement was reached on January 29 that includes a phased integration of military and administrative bodies, the deployment of security forces into Al Hasakah and Qamishli, and the state's administration of civil institutions and border crossings ([SANA](#), February 21). This also has implications for the detention of ISIS fighters and families with links to ISIS fighters.

Changing allies

There were already indications that the Trump administration wanted Damascus to take over the ISIS file from the SDF. During his May 14 meeting with Syrian Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa, U.S. President Donald Trump urged the Syrian government to assume responsibility for the detention facilities in northeastern Syria (U.S. State Department [report](#), September 24, 2025). On January 20, U.S. Special Envoy for Syria Tom Barrack underlined that "Damascus is now both willing and positioned to take over security responsibilities, including control of ISIS detention facilities and camps." ([X](#), January 20). He also argued that the Syrian Kurds should work with the new administration in Damascus.

According to the latest U.S. Department of Defense Office of Inspector General Quarterly report, Syrian government forces overran SDF-run detention facilities and displaced persons camps holding ISIS fighters ([Lead Inspector General Report](#), February 17). This included the Shaddadi detention facility and the al-Hol displaced persons camp, where U.S. officials had warned that ongoing ISIS ideology and radicalization risked the group's resurgence with a new generation. Reports suggest that about 200 low-level ISIS fighters escaped Syria's Shaddadi prison on January 20, but Syrian government forces reportedly recaptured many of them ([Reuters](#), January 20). There are no indications that Dutch-national ISIS fighters escaped. Other prisons with ISIS detainees are still under Kurdish control, including in Qamishli and Hasakah.

Male foreign fighters

Shortly after the escape of the ISIS fighters on January 21, the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) announced a plan to transport 7,000 ISIS detainees from Syria to Iraqi-controlled facilities ([CENTCOM](#), January 21). This number also includes Dutch nationals. According to the

government of the Netherlands, there were around 15 Dutch male fighters in jails in Syria as of December 2025 ([NRC](#), February 17).

In the end, a total of 5,700 adult male ISIS fighters from detention facilities in Syria were transferred to Iraqi custody ([Al Jazeera](#), February 15). U.S. officials were afraid that, if left in Syria, these fighters would escape and return to the battlefield to reconstitute ISIS ([Fox News](#), February 18). Of the approximately 10,000 male prisoners, a number remain in Syria — either because their health conditions made transport too difficult, or because they were deemed low priority ([PBS](#), May 3, 2024/local sources). Iraq hopes to repatriate the foreigners among them ([Reuters](#), February 13). In 2019, Iraq handed death sentences to seven French citizens who had joined ISIS ([The Wall Street Journal](#), May 30, 2019), but so far none have been executed.

This transfer was an indication of a lack of trust in the new Syrian government led by President al-Sharaa, who had been previously designated a terrorist by the United States in 2013 ([PBS](#), December 8, 2024). Al-Sharaa himself spent some time in the Camp Bucca prison in Iraq in 2005, and was previously the emir of the Islamic State of Iraq, the predecessor of ISIS ([Washington Institute](#)/Foreign Policy, December 11, 2024, [BBC](#), December 9, 2024). There are also between 1,500 and 6,000 foreign fighters still affiliated with the Syrian government from the Sunni armed group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which was disbanded in 2025 and delisted as a terrorist organization by the United States in July 2025 ([U.S. State Department](#), July 7, 2025, [Deutsche Welle](#), May 20, 2025). In October 2025, Syrian government forces clashed with French fighters in a camp close to the Turkish border, but failed to dislodge the fighters from the camp ([AP News](#), October 23, 2025). The risk of “Green-on-Blue” attacks by extremist members of the Syrian security services was made clear when, on December 13, 2025, a member of the Syrian security forces killed two U.S. Army soldiers and an American civilian interpreter. The member of the Syrian security forces was reportedly slated for dismissal over his extremist views ([The New York Times](#), December 14, 2025). The United States is planning to completely withdraw from Syria in the near future, although there are still a number of U.S. troops in Syria ([Al Jazeera](#), February 23).

ISIS foreign women

More worrying was the escape of 6,000 ISIS foreign women from Syria’s al-Hol camp in early February. According to U.S. officials, it appears the Syrian government decided to let them go free ([Fox News](#), February 19). This is not a surprise, due to the ideological affinity between Syrian fighters and the women, who perceive the women to be victims of the SDF. Some women also married foreign elements who are now part of the Syrian army ([The New Region](#), February 16). Before the women escaped, there were already indications that Damascus wanted to close down the al-Hol and Roj camps ([Reuters](#), January 30, 2026). According to estimates of the Norwegian Refugee Council, prior to the escape al-Hol hosted 14,000 Syrians, 6,200 third-country nationals, and 4,000 Iraqis ([NRC](#), January 24). The remaining residents of al-Hol were relocated to Aq Burhan camp in Akhtarín, northern Aleppo, while some families returned directly to their areas of origin ([MSF](#), February 27). It is unclear how many al-Hol families currently reside in Akhtarín, but some suggest it includes 1,500 families, mostly of Iraqi

and Syrian origin ([Enabbaladi](#), February 22). It is likely these numbers are lower — around less than 2,000 — but no public official estimates exist.

Foreign fighters also played a role in the escape of women from Syria's al-Hol camp. Local sources in Idlib told the news website *The New Region* that some of the women and children headed to various displaced persons camps on the Turkish border. Others went to the French Firqat al-Ghuraba, or Strangers Division camp, which has remained outside of the control of the Syrian government. ([The New Region](#), February 16). According to the former director of the al-Hol camp, Jihan Hannan, there is a high chance these women will go abroad ([The New Region](#), February 16). Some women also reportedly married foreign fighters ([The New Region](#), February 16). Hannan also confirmed there were two Dutch women in al-Hol camp whose current whereabouts are unclear ([Nu.nl](#), February 19). There are still around 2,300 women and children of roughly 50 different nationalities left under Kurdish control in the Roj camp ([Eurasia](#), March 9, 2026). Most likely there are also Dutch women among them.

Concluding Remarks

The escape of the 6,000 ISIS-linked women and children from al-Hol could pose a threat to the security of Europe, even while the male fighters are safe in detention in Iraq. It is unlikely that these male foreign detainees in Iraq will be executed, especially if Baghdad is pressured by Western governments to not carry out such sentences. So far, no death sentences have been carried out. The Dutch government could pressure Baghdad to prevent mistreatment of Dutch nationals in Iraqi jails, halt the implementation of death penalties, and insist on visits to the prisons to assess conditions. Another option is to repatriate these men to the Netherlands and put them on trial.

The bigger issue is the foreign women, who now live in uncontrolled locations in Idlib, can easily move through Syria, and could possibly gain access to travel documents. If, in the future, Damascus takes over the Roj camp currently under Kurdish control, it is also likely that these women and children will escape again. These women could escape to Europe via smuggler routes through Turkey or Libya, or reorganize ISIS activities in Syria. Also, their children could grow up and join ISIS cells in the future in the Middle East or other areas where ISIS networks are active. They could also return to Europe after being indoctrinated by ISIS ideology and carry out attacks.

Foreign women still in Syria could also connect with other male foreign jihadist fighters that are present in northwestern Syria, such as the foreign fighter camps on the Turkish border. According to the latest December report of the Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, there are already 25 Dutch males that are freely operating in Syria ([NCTV](#), December 2025), most likely in northwest Syria.

According to survey data from a UN report, most foreign women in al-Hol have a strong desire to return to their countries of origin ([UN Women](#), October 29, 2025). The UN report said that only one quarter of the women and men they surveyed in al-Hol indicated that they or their

family members have no links to ISIS ([UN Women](#), October 29, 2025). In February, an ISIS woman was arrested upon her return to Belgium ([VRT](#), February 10).

The Dutch government could engage with Damascus and local Kurdish authorities in Hasakah, including authorities from the Roj camp, to prevent a similar mass-escape from the Roj camp. Currently, Kurdish internal security forces are being integrated into the Syrian Ministry of Interior. Furthermore, the Dutch government could push Damascus to put foreign women on trial or at least keep them in controlled environments, such as the Aq Burhan camp in Aleppo. Another option for the Dutch government is to repatriate these women in coordination with Damascus, although it might already be difficult to locate them, apart from those still in the Roj camp. A number of Australian ISIS families in the Roj camp already tried to go back to Australia, but were stopped by Damascus also because this move was opposed by the Australian government ([BBC](#), February 17).

Furthermore, the Dutch government could pressure Damascus to jail Dutch foreign fighters in Syria, disarm them and remove them from Syrian armed forces, or arrest them and repatriate them to the Netherlands.

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