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Between Detention and Repatriation:

Policy Options for Dealing with Detained IS Supporters from Germany

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Network for Disengagement
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» Abstract

In northeastern Syria, a little over 40 men from Germany - so-called foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) - are being held in detention without access to due process, legal counsel, or adequate humanitarian assistance. In two confirmed cases, this has resulted in death (see Beres 2025). These individuals represent only a fraction of the roughly 9,000 male members of the so-called Islamic State (IS) who remain within the Kurdish-led detention system. Given Syria's unstable security situation, it is uncertain whether this detention infrastructure can be sustained in the medium term.¹ Thirty detainees are German nationals, and a further dozen have enduring ties to Germany (see Koller/Mrvová 2025).

Their situation is emblematic of a far-reaching set of security, legal, and humanitarian responsibilities: continued confinement in extrajudicial detention may be exploited by extremist milieus as a 'martyrdom' narrative and disseminated among young people in ways that can facilitate radicalisation. Such narratives already played a central role in the individuals' earlier radicalisation trajectories. Moreover, some detainees are fathers of German children. This means that, in addition to security and human rights considerations, the welfare of children must be an integral part of any debate on repatriation policies.

Based on the present analysis, the following priority areas for action emerge:

Security and prosecution: The return of detained individuals to Germany enables state

and civil society actors to obtain information on networks, accomplices, and potential future offences. It also facilitates the criminal prosecution of the gravest human rights violations.

Deradicalisation and prevention: Detention facilities in northeastern Syria lack professional programmes aimed at disengagement from extremist ideologies. In Germany, by contrast, returnees can access established measures of psychological stabilisation, ideological processing, and social reintegration.

Symbolic effect: Controlled repatriation counters jihadist narratives of state indifference and strengthens public confidence in rule-of-law principles.

Legal certainty and human rights protection: Only repatriation can ensure due process in accordance with German and European law. Those concerned gain access to legal representation and judicial review of their detention and detention conditions.

Regional stabilisation: Reducing the burden on the Kurdish-led detention system through the repatriation of German citizens contributes to stabilising northeastern Syria. At the same time, Germany signals to other European states that responsibility cannot be outsourced.

Health protection: In overcrowded and under-resourced detention facilities, detainees are at times exposed to life-threatening conditions. Repatriation enables access to healthcare and helps prevent further human rights violations.

¹ The editorial deadline for this text is 11 October.



» Deradicalisation and reintegration through proven, operational networks

Germany's approach to dealing with returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) is widely regarded among experts as exemplary (see Renard/Coolsaet 2018). In Germany, a robust infrastructure of non-profit counselling services has emerged, with a focus on deradicalisation work, returnee case management, and family crisis intervention in the context of religiously motivated extremism (see Koller 2019). In recent years, the repatriation of women and children who had been with the so-called Islamic State has been implemented successfully, followed by psychological stabilisation, legal accountability processes, and ideologically oriented disengagement work, particularly where relatives are able to provide a resilient social support network.

The repatriation and reintegration of women who travelled to join IS has, in recent years, been embedded in Germany within a stable network of actors and structures:

- The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) Advice Centre on Radicalisation serves as a nationwide, low-threshold first point of contact.
 - Recognised deradicalisation counselling services now exist in almost all federal states (Länder), in some cases drawing on decades of experience.
 - At the level of the Länder, returnee coordinators have been established to act as interfaces between governmental and non-governmental organisations.
 - Law enforcement and security authorities have developed experience in returnee cases, particularly regarding risk assessment, prosecution, and security monitoring.
- This interdisciplinary approach is complemented by probation services, family counselling, religious education, trauma therapy as well as academic monitoring and evaluation.

Taken together, these structures can provide a rule-of-law-based and professionally robust framework for the repatriation of male IS detainees.

» Policy recommendations

Drawing on long-standing experience in civil society work with returnees in the field of deradicalisation, the following measures are recommended:

1) Clarify the whereabouts and health status of detainees

The Federal Government should use existing diplomatic channels vis-à-vis Syria's transitional authorities and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) to obtain up-to-date information on the whereabouts and health status of German detainees.

2) Secure access for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

Germany should advocate for the ICRC to be granted access to the detention facilities holding German detainees. Detainees should be able to receive letters from their families and to initiate contact with the outside world.

3) Ensure minimum rule-of-law standards

The Federal Government should work towards ensuring that German detainees in northeastern Syria have access to legal counsel, either through the commissioning of independent attorneys or by facilitating appropriate legal contacts.



4) Prepare a phased repatriation process with clear criteria

It is recommended to prepare the repatriation of male detainees in several phases, drawing on procedures used in previous repatriations of women and children. Criteria should include willingness to return, health status, and alleged criminal offences. In addition, it is suggested to compile - together with international partners - a list of individuals willing to return and to verify identities through DNA testing and documentation provided by relatives, thereby enabling the issuance of temporary travel documents.

5) Strengthen coordination across repatriation, prosecution, and reintegration

An interdisciplinary, nationwide coordination mechanism should be established that links repatriation to rule-of-law-based criminal justice responses and structured deradicalisation and reintegration work. Alongside judicial and security authorities, this requires the involvement of specialised counselling services, psychosocial professionals, and returnee coordinators at the level of the federal states.

6) Monitor detention-facility security and prepare contingencies

Together with international partners, the Government should closely monitor the security situation of detention facilities in northeastern Syria. Given the instability, prison breaks or releases without legal proceedings remain plausible. To prevent uncontrolled returns and de facto impunity, coordinated repatriation options should be developed at an early stage.

» Repatriations

How countries of origin deal with detained male IS affiliates

Countries of origin of male IS members who

have been held for years in Kurdish-run detention fear that those repatriated could perpetrate terrorist attacks. Continued "containment" in Kurdish custody may therefore appear to entail a lower security risk. Some states, including France, the United Kingdom, and Australia, have stripped certain IS-linked individuals of their citizenship.

In 2019, the German Bundestag decided that participation in combat operations on behalf of a terrorist militia abroad may result in the loss of German citizenship; however, this applies only to dual nationals and is not retroactive (see Deutscher Bundestag 2019).

In September 2025, it became public that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) had transferred 47 French citizens to Iraq, where they face terrorism charges and may be at risk of the death penalty (see Le Monde 2025).

Repatriation of women and children

Since 2019, Germany has repatriated 28 women, 84 children, and one young man from northeastern Syria. This process involved cooperation between federal and state governments' authorities, youth welfare offices, as well as psychotherapeutic and deradicalisation providers (see Rüssmann 2025). Around half of the repatriated women were taken into custody immediately upon return and subsequently brought before a court. Among those who were initially allowed to return home, investigations led to charges in roughly two thirds of cases at a later stage. To date, none of the repatriated individuals has become known to have reoffended.

» Security and prevention perspective

The continued detention of German IS supporters in northeastern Syria poses substantial security and prevention-policy risks, driven by the precarious security environment



in northeastern Syria and the country as a whole, structural deficiencies within the detention system, and the absence of rule of law safeguards.

» Security situation

Although the Islamic State has not controlled any fixed territory in Syria since 2019, it remains highly active. In an IS attack in January 2022 on a prison in northeastern Syria, 500 people were killed and dozens of IS fighters were freed. Reduced military and financial support by the current U.S. administration has made it more difficult for Kurdish security forces to maintain order in the camps. In the event of an attack by Türkiye, Türkiye-backed militias, or the Syrian army, SDF units would likely be redeployed away from guard duties. The mass killings of Alawite and Druze minorities - reportedly involving security forces of the transitional government - have reinforced the distrust of ethnic and religious minorities towards the transitional government led by the former jihadist Ahmed al-Sharaa (see Van Wilgenburg 2025). At present, it appears unlikely that the SDF would transfer responsibility for the camps and prisons to the government.

Consequences of precarious detention conditions

Following her visit to northeastern Syria in 2023, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism concluded that detention facilities are characterised by arbitrariness and the indefinite duration of detention, as well as precarious and harsh living conditions. These include inadequate shelter, open sewage, multiple forms of violence and coercion, limited access to water and sanitation, foreseeably poor health care, and restricted

education for children (see Special Rapporteur 2023). In combination with the near-absence of effective international oversight, this creates an environment that does not mitigate radical worldviews but may instead entrench or reactivate them. Individuals who remain ideologically committed can assume informal leadership roles, establish internal loyalty structures, and actively obstruct disengagement processes. Younger detainees, in particular, may remain trapped in identities defined as 'fighters' or as 'victims of the West,' reinforcing grievance-based self-understandings that are relevant to both security risk management and prevention efforts.

Even if there is currently no immediate threat to Germany or Europe in the form of imminent attacks perpetrated directly by these detainees, there remains a medium- to long-term risk of security challenges arising from:

- possible prison breaks or prisoner exchanges resulting from military or political instability;
- a later return of unresolved cases without sufficient preparation time for the authorities;
- the emergence of new digital support networks;
- the portrayal of these detainees as 'martyrs'; and
- the continued salience of ideological narratives that are reinforced by sustained inaction.

» Obligation to repatriate

As early as 2014, the UN Security Council called on all UN Member States to contribute to the criminal prosecution of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) originating from their countries (see UN Security Council 2014).



German politicians have argued - when questioned about detained male IS affiliates - that the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) had itself announced it would bring IS members to trial. To date, however, no such proceedings have taken place in northeastern Syria (see Römel 2025). In fact, the AANES has called on Germany to repatriate its nationals (see ZDF Frontal 2025).

A central problem for detainees is the lack of access to legal counsel. In a judgment of September 2022, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) held that there is no general, enforceable right to repatriation for IS supporters; however, ECtHR member states do bear legal responsibilities towards their nationals detained in Syria. There must be a rule-of-law mechanism enabling detainees' cases to be brought before the administrative authorities and courts of their countries of origin (see Sehl 2022).

» Civil society actors

Civil society providers such as Grüner Vogel e.V., Violence Prevention Network gGmbH, and Vereinigung Pestalozzi gGmbH (Legato) play a pivotal role in disengagement and deradicalisation efforts, particularly in work with returnees from jihadist conflict zones. As independent points of contact, they offer low-threshold access for individuals seeking support - especially those who approach state institutions with mistrust. In this context, Grüner Vogel e.V. was involved early in the psychosocial support of repatriated women and has extensive experience in combining stabilisation, case-based counselling, and the referral and integration of therapeutic services.

Case-based evidence indicates that such

support processes are effective when they are designed for the long term, backed by sustained political commitment, and embedded in a cooperative support system.

» Conclusion

The experience gained in prosecuting and reintegrating repatriated female IS members suggests that Germany's rule-of-law system is capable of meeting its responsibilities. Syria's security situation is so unstable that continued inaction regarding the fate of male IS affiliates who are German nationals or have ties to Germany could have serious consequences. If the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have not been integrated into the Syrian army by December, Türkiye may intervene again to dismantle the SDF - and, by extension, the existing detention system (see New Arab 2025). An orderly repatriation process combined with criminal proceedings under the rule of law is safer than the risk entailed by further delay, namely that IS detainees could escape and subsequently carry out attacks in Syria or after returning to Germany.

Repatriation to Germany does not amount to an acquittal; rather, it creates the legal framework for due process. The crimes committed by the Islamic State are extensively documented. Following a prison sentence - which is highly likely - IS affiliates originating from Germany must be afforded a realistic prospect of becoming part of society again. A pragmatic and differentiated assessment, in place of blanket rejection, also enables German authorities to obtain information on networks, logistics, and other accomplices - information that could strengthen the prevention of future attacks and support the prosecution of previously unidentified IS facilitators.



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