



Forgotten Innocents: France's Abandoned Children in Syria

Introduction

Since the fall of the Islamic State, detention **camps such as Roj and Al-Hol** in northeastern Syria have held thousands of women and children, including around 200 children and 80 women of French nationality. Trapped in inhumane and often life-threatening conditions, their futures rest entirely in the hands of political decision-makers.

The issue of **foreign fighters** individuals who travel abroad to commit, plan, or support acts of terrorism has been high on the international agenda. After the territorial collapse of the so-called Islamic State in 2019, increased attention has been placed not only on these fighters but also on their families, many of whom remain detained in these camps, unable to return home or rebuild their lives elsewhere. Among them are thousands of children over 60% of the 38,000 foreign nationals detained in Syria most of whom have been living in these camps since 2019. Eighty percent are under the age of 12. Many have died from preventable diseases, violence, or accidents. Others survive in limbo, with no access to proper education, medical care, or even basic human dignity.

While many European nations have moved to repatriate children, recognizing their innocence and vulnerability, France has remained largely resistant. What concerns are driving President Emmanuel Macron's reluctance?

“Childhood is the last sacred thing there is... yet neither policymakers nor the public give a damn.”

— Marie Dosé, war journalist



This humanitarian crisis has all but vanished from media coverage and public discourse. And yet, today, hundreds of innocent children many of them French still languish in camps with no hope for a future.

In this blog, I will explore the complex situation of these children, the rights they are owed under international law, and the particular case of France a nation whose current stance stands in stark contradiction to the human rights values it claims to uphold.

Kurdish Camp, Al Hol Camp / BBC Picture

What does international law actually say about repatriation ? Who has the right to return and why is France so reluctant to bring its own citizens home, especially its children ?

Legal Framework

According to the European Union the right to repatriation is a personal right of a refugee or a prisoner of war to return to their country of nationality under specific condition laid down in various international instruments and human rights instruments as well as in customary international law.

Basically it's the act of sending back a person to the country of nationality , it's often championed as a solution that honours the right to return. But the reality is frequently at odds with this narrative.

France's Reluctance to Repatriate

Repatriation is a fundamental principle rooted in international law, especially when it comes to the duty of states to protect their citizens in life-threatening conditions. Children, under the protection of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), have an especially strong claim to this right. This is not simply a humanitarian matter, it is a legal obligation.

This right is clearly established in multiple international legal instruments. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* affirms that everyone has the right to return to their own country. *The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* reinforces this right, regardless of political affiliations. Most importantly, the CRC highlights that the best interests of the child must be the primary consideration in all decisions that affect them. It ensures every child's right to life, development, and protection from harm, and it obliges states to act in a humane and timely manner when children seek to return to their home country.

Children currently held in camps like Al-Hol and Roj, many under the age of 12 have committed no crime. They are innocent victims of conflict and ideology. As French nationals, they have a clear legal right to be repatriated. Yet, despite being a signatory to these treaties, France has been among the most reluctant European countries to act. Unlike other nations that have moved to bring their child nationals home, France has adopted a cautious, case-by-case approach, repatriating only small groups sporadically and under pressure from courts or public outcry.

This political hesitation is not just morally questionable it is legally indefensible. *Human rights organizations, the United Nations*, and even the *European Court of Human Rights* have openly criticized France for failing to meet its international obligations. *The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)* has stated that France's failure to repatriate these children violates their right to life, and subjects them to inhuman and degrading treatment.

In a powerful ruling, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child examined three separate cases submitted by French relatives of 49 children detained in Syrian camps such as Roj, Ayn Isa, and Al-Hol. These children, some as young as five, were either born in Syria or taken there at a very young age by their parents, who are alleged to have joined ISIS. Since the cases were filed in 2019, only 11 of the 49 children have been repatriated. The remaining 38 remain trapped in what the Committee describes as war-like zones with inhuman living conditions.

The Committee concluded that France not only has the capacity but also the legal responsibility to protect these children from the imminent threat to their lives. Furthermore, it found that French authorities failed to consider the best interests of the children in their decisions about repatriation. It urged France to act

immediately to repatriate the remaining children and, in the meantime, to take urgent measures to protect their health, safety, and dignity.



“The children are living in inhuman sanitary conditions, lacking basic necessities including water, food, and healthcare, and facing an imminent risk of death. At least 62 children have reportedly died in the camps since the beginning of 2021,” said Committee member **Ann Skelton**. *“We call on France to take immediate action, as every day that passes there is a renewed possibility for further casualties.”*

France’s continued inaction exposes its citizens particularly innocent children to preventable suffering and death. By ignoring its international obligations.

Children in the camps of Al Hol/ AFP Archives

France risks undermining the very human rights values it claims to uphold. The question remains: how long will France allow politics to override the basic rights and dignity of its most vulnerable citizens ?

France and the ECHR

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) condemned France for its refusal to repatriate two women and their children, arguing that the decision lacked sufficient justification. Yet, despite this ruling, France remains largely inactive.

On 14 September 2022, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) issued a landmark ruling in the case **H.F. and Others v. France** (applications nos. 24384/19 and 44234/20). The case concerned the refusal of French authorities to repatriate women who had joined Daesh and were detained with their children in Syrian camps under Kurdish control. While the Court stopped short of demanding a blanket repatriation, it nevertheless condemned France for failing to provide an appropriate individual assessment of repatriation requests made by the detainees’ relatives thus violating Article 3, §2 of Protocol No. 4 to the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees the right of nationals to enter their own country.

Notably, the Court did not find France guilty of violating Article 3 of the Convention (prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatment), largely due to the legal complexity surrounding jurisdiction. The Court held that France does not exercise effective control over the Syrian camps, nor over the individuals detained there, which makes it difficult to directly attribute responsibility for their conditions to the French state. Moreover, the Court emphasized that there is no general legal obligation for France to systematically repatriate its nationals from a foreign conflict zone particularly in the context of counterterrorism and national security.

However, the Criminal Law Professor Olivier Cahn in his studies the ECHR recognized that the case presented exceptional circumstances: the detainees were completely dependent on French intervention to leave the camps, the Kurdish authorities had expressed a clear willingness to transfer them to France, and the individuals were unable to reach the French border without official assistance.

These factors were sufficient for the Court to establish that France exercised jurisdiction in this specific case. As a result, the Court found that France had a positive obligation to ensure that any refusal to repatriate its nationals was subject to a genuine, individual review process.

In practice, this means that while France is not legally required to repatriate all its nationals immediately, it must ensure that each request for repatriation is reviewed fairly, transparently, and independently of political

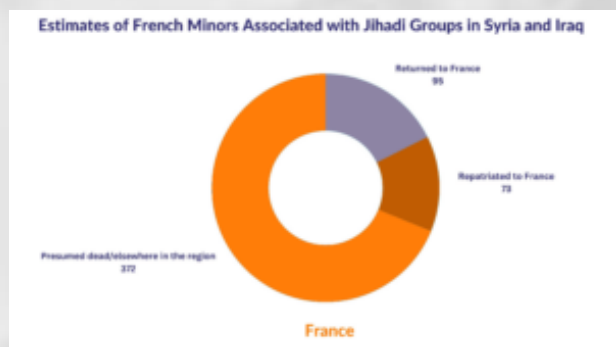
considerations. The Court criticized France's opaque procedures and noted that the relatives of those detained had not been provided with any reasons for the rejection of their requests a violation of their right to an effective remedy.

This judgment reflects a careful balancing act. On one hand, the Court acknowledges the legitimate security concerns of states facing the return of individuals linked to terrorism. On the other, it reaffirms the fundamental rights of citizens, including children, who remain at the mercy of state decisions. The ruling avoids placing an "excessive burden" on the French government, yet clearly signals that a minimalist, case-by-case approach without due process is no longer acceptable.

Ultimately, while the decision reaffirms the right of every national to return to their country, it does not create a general right to repatriation from foreign detention camps. Still, under exceptional conditions such as those in northeast Syria states must take positive steps to make this right practical and effective. The ECHR thus leaves the door open for France to repatriate its citizens progressively, but insists that it must do so in a manner consistent with human rights law.

France may not have been found directly responsible for the inhuman conditions in the camps, but the Court made clear that its inaction particularly with respect to children carries legal consequences. The ruling places France at a crossroads: continue hiding behind national security rhetoric, or begin to uphold its international obligations with the seriousness they demand.

French Children: A Hope That Cannot Be Abandoned



This brings us to the heart of the issue, in total, France repatriated 109 children in 2022 and early 2023. According to available figures, more than 100 French children and about 50 French women are still unlawfully detained in northeast Syria.

The below [table](#) from Rights & Security International gives an overview of those that have been repatriated from the camps since January 2019, and the subsequent graphs provide a more in-depth look into the scale of the challenge for five European countries as a means of highlighting the spectrum of eventualities that might be in store for remaining FTFs. For

France there remains an estimated 150-170 children in the camps.

The Children France Doesn't Want: A Policy of Forgetting

Many of the French children once trapped in Daesh-controlled territories are now orphans or have been forcibly separated from their parents. Left behind in the rubble of war and abandonment, they grow up without education, psychological support, or a stable home. Some are repatriated only to find themselves again in chaos, caught in a fragmented reintegration system. Many are placed in marginalized neighbourhoods like Paris's 19th arrondissement, where poverty, neglect, and disillusionment leave space for radical ideologies to fester. What should be a new beginning becomes, instead, a continuation of trauma.

Fatma's story is a haunting example. A survivor of Daesh, she lost her entire family to the war in Syria except for her young nephew, who miraculously survived. Her own life had already been marked by violence and control. Her brother, **Boubaker el Hakim**, beat her and forced her to leave school at the age of 11. Later, she was forced into marriage in France to **Peter Shérif** a violent terrorist, enduring further abuse and rape.

After escaping this nightmare, she fought for years to bring her nephew back from Syria. Her battle with the French government, specifically with the Foreign Ministry (Le Quai d'Orsay), was long, frustrating, and dehumanising. Even when she succeeded, she was barely allowed to see him. Her nephew, scarred by trauma and exhibiting violent behaviour, was placed into care with little involvement from the only family he had left.



Fatma tells her story in the podcast **"75019 Daesh"** and in her memoir **"Mon frère, le djihad : Daesh et moi"**. Her voice is clear: France's inaction is planting seeds of hatred in the hearts of forgotten children, and unless it acts now, those seeds may grow into future violence.

She is not alone. Families across France are desperate to bring back grandchildren, nieces, and nephews from Syria. But what they encounter is often silence. Many, like Fatma, turn to journalists for help such as Marie Dosé, a lawyer and advocate for repatriation. When the first family approached her to help bring their daughter and two grandchildren home, she assumed the French government would act swiftly. She was wrong.

Despite evolving policy, France has repatriated far fewer women and children than other European countries like Germany or Finland perhaps out of fear of public backlash, political optics, or the trauma of past terrorist attacks.

Those who do return face a reintegration process riddled with dysfunction:

- **Children are routinely separated from their mothers upon arrival.** These women, repatriated from Syria, are often indicted and placed in pre-trial detention immediately, accused of ISIS-related crimes. The separations are abrupt and brutal. A psychiatrist working with these children said, ***"It was the worst experience more than the bombings, the corpses, the war. They weren't prepared. No one explained anything. Their mothers couldn't even say goodbye."***
- **Contact with detained mothers is often minimal or impossible.** One mother was imprisoned in Rénau, nine hours away from her 3-year-old son in Saint-Brieuc. Some children still haven't seen their mothers months after arriving in France.
- **Extended families grandparents, aunts, uncles are rarely allowed to take in the children immediately.** Lengthy investigations and bureaucratic assessments delay reunification. In one case, a girl spent three years in foster care before being allowed to live with her grandparents. By then, she had bonded with her foster family, making the transition even more painful.
- **Delays in obtaining documentation leave children in limbo.** Some have waited years to receive ID papers or passports. Without them, they cannot enrol in school, receive proper healthcare, or fully integrate into French society.

This is not just a policy failure. It is a moral failure. These are not children of Daesh. They are children of France. And if left unsupported stripped of identity, care, and belonging, France may find itself facing the consequences in the form of another lost generation. A generation not born into war, but forgotten into it.

Success Stories and Warnings: Children Who Rebuilt Their Lives

Despite the difficulties, some repatriated children have successfully rebuilt their lives with proper support: schooling, psychological care, and reintegration programs. But for those left behind, the risks are severe: radicalization, death, malnutrition, and inhumane treatment. By leaving them behind, France risks creating future threats and perpetuating cycles of resentment and violence.

While France has struggled with the political and logistical challenges of repatriating children from camps in Syria, stories like that of **Yunus** show what is possible when action is taken.

Yunus, was one of thousands of children illegally detained in the al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria, now lives safely with his grandparents in France. His mother was killed in an airstrike in 2018, and his father remains imprisoned in Syria. But today, Yunus is thriving. His grandmother proudly shares:

"My grandson has integrated very well at school. He has friends, he's good at math, and he's curious interested in everything."

Yunus's success is not an isolated case. According to a comprehensive Human Rights Watch study, many repatriated children adapt remarkably well. They return to school, make friends, and discover passions:

football, dance, cycling, crafts, and music. Some go on zoo visits, others to the circus or museum. Many are sociable and joyful. They are not a threat they are children reclaiming their stolen childhoods.

Yet, as much as these stories inspire hope, they also carry urgent warnings.

Despite the proven potential for recovery, **many children remain trapped** in bas conditions in the al-Hol and Roj camps like we mentioned in our previous part.

International law is clear: every child has the right to life, nationality, protection from torture, and the right to return to their country. Prolonged detention under these conditions is not only inhuman it may amount to torture. And it is illegal.

France, like other countries, has often failed to uphold these rights. The **separation of children from their mothers upon arrival in France** either due to judicial investigations or pre-trial detention can cause deep trauma. As one mental health professional put it:

“The most traumatic thing for many of these children wasn’t the war, or the camps it was being torn away from their mothers at the airport in France.”

Security experts echo what human rights advocates have long warned: leaving women and children in these camps is not a solution, it’s a breeding ground for future violence. In the words of **Timothy Alan Betts**, U.S. acting coordinator for counterterrorism:

“Leaving fighters and their families in northeast Syria is not a viable option... It risks new conflicts and global instability.”

There are two choices: remember, or forget.

Children like Yunus are proof that with compassion, care, and commitment, these lives can be rebuilt. But for every Yunus, there are thousands still waiting, still suffering. To forget them is not only a betrayal of human rights. It is a threat to the future. France, and the world, must choose to remember.

Conclusion : A Generation We Cannot Afford to Abandon

These children are not responsible for the choices their parents made. Yet, they carry the weight of those decisions, often marked by trauma, displacement, and loss. Many of them have already endured more than most adults face in a lifetime. But they are also resilient and they represent a chance to break the cycle. With proper care, education, and emotional support, these children can grow into citizens who contribute positively to society, who love the country that gave them a second chance, and who help build a future where peace is stronger than hate.

Turning our backs on them now would be not only a moral failure but a strategic mistake. Abandonment breeds resentment; support cultivates hope. If we truly want to fight radicalization and protect the values at the heart of Europe’s legacy human dignity, justice, and solidarity we must act. Not tomorrow. Today.

These children want to live. They want to learn, to dream, to heal. It is our responsibility to help them do so and to ensure that their future is not defined by the shadows of their past.



My name is Yasmine Razouane, and I’m a third-year student in Anglo-American Law at CY Cergy Paris University. I have a strong interest in migration issues, international law, and the protection of vulnerable populations. My goal is to become a lawyer specialized in migration and asylum law, working to defend those whose voices are too often silenced. Writing this blog entry is part of my commitment to raise awareness and advocate for a more just and humane response to one of the most urgent challenges of our time.