



Save the Children

“REMEMBER

THE ARMED MEN WHO

WANTED TO KILL MUM?”

The Hidden Toll of Violence in Al Hol on Syrian And Iraqi Children

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Report title: «Remember the armed men who wanted to kill mum?» is a question that a -5year-old girl asked her younger brother in early December 2021. She and her brother had woken up in late November to two armed men in their tent looking for their mother. She escaped unharmed.

Cover photo: Children gathered next to a road in Al Hol camp

Photos Credit: Muhannad Khaled/ Save the Children

Report design: Roni Ahmad

The background image shows a vast refugee camp with numerous tents stretching into the distance. The ground is dusty and uneven. A person is visible standing near one of the tents in the middle ground. The overall tone is somber and highlights the living conditions of the camp.

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Introduction



Violence has become a ghost that is haunting us. If one doesn't feel safe then his whole life is ruined. We are afraid and nervous all the time

Khalil, Syrian father of 5 children



Around 57,000 people live in Al Hol camp in North East Syria - 64% of them are children. Almost 50% of the camp's population are under the age of 12. Originally established in 1991, Al Hol was reopened in 2016 when anti-ISIS operations began in Iraq, sending thousands of Iraqi civilians across the border into Syria in search of safety. From 2016 to 2018 there was an influx of Syrian internally displaced people (IDPs). During the final offensive against ISIS in Hajin and Baghouz in early 2019, the camp's population skyrocketed from approximately 9,800 people to over 73,000 people.

While security incidents are not new in the camp, including attacks against security personnel, arson, escape attempts, and fights between residents, from April 2019 the security situation has significantly deteriorated, after the first recorded murder.

Since then, there have been at least 130 murders, including eight children, and 46 attacks/ attempted murders. The pace of the murders increased substantially from September 2020 onwards. From April 2019 to September 2020, there were 25 murders. Since then, there have been 106 murders, including at least four in 2022 alone. In 2021, this amounted to an average of more than two people killed per week and made Al Hol- per capita- one of the most dangerous places in the world¹. The overwhelming majority (98%) of these attacks have taken place in Al Hol's Main Camp, home to Syrian and Iraqi men, women and children.

The pervasive insecurity has had a profound effect on children's fundamental rights, their sense of safety, their psychological well-being, their education and their hopes for the future. Children have seen murders directly and hear and share graphic descriptions of other attacks.

They worry that their siblings and especially their parents will be killed. Most are now forbidden from playing outside. Many of them have nightmares. Others have lost interest in going to school. These are pressures and fears that no child should have to carry. Their parents, deeply fearful themselves, struggle to manage their children's reactions to this daily threat of violence and its aggregate impact on their behavior and their healthy development.

Al Hol is no place for any child to grow up. Many families, fearing the violence, want to leave the camp but parents worry about finding jobs and being able to provide for their families. Khalil, a Syrian father of five, has been living in Al Hol for five years. He told Save the Children: "We are trying our best to leave the camp. My children are pressuring me to leave. But we don't know whether our situation outside will be better than here. My first thought this morning was leaving the camp. I always dream about leaving." Three months after Khalil said those words to Save the Children, his seven-year-old daughter was shot and injured when armed clashes erupted in the camp on 28 March 2022. Khalil's daughter was one of five other children who were also injured while another child was reportedly killed on that day.

Ongoing insecurity in Al Hol denies children their fundamental right to be protected from the devastating effects this widespread violence is having on their survival, learning and protection. These rights are enshrined in international human rights law and standards, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and must be fulfilled to allow these children the chance to fulfill their potential.

This report examines the impact that the violence has had on children’s lives, their experience and understanding of the violence; the impact on their mental health and well-being; and

the measures that parents and children take to try to keep themselves safe. It concludes with a series of recommendations to provide support for children and their families.

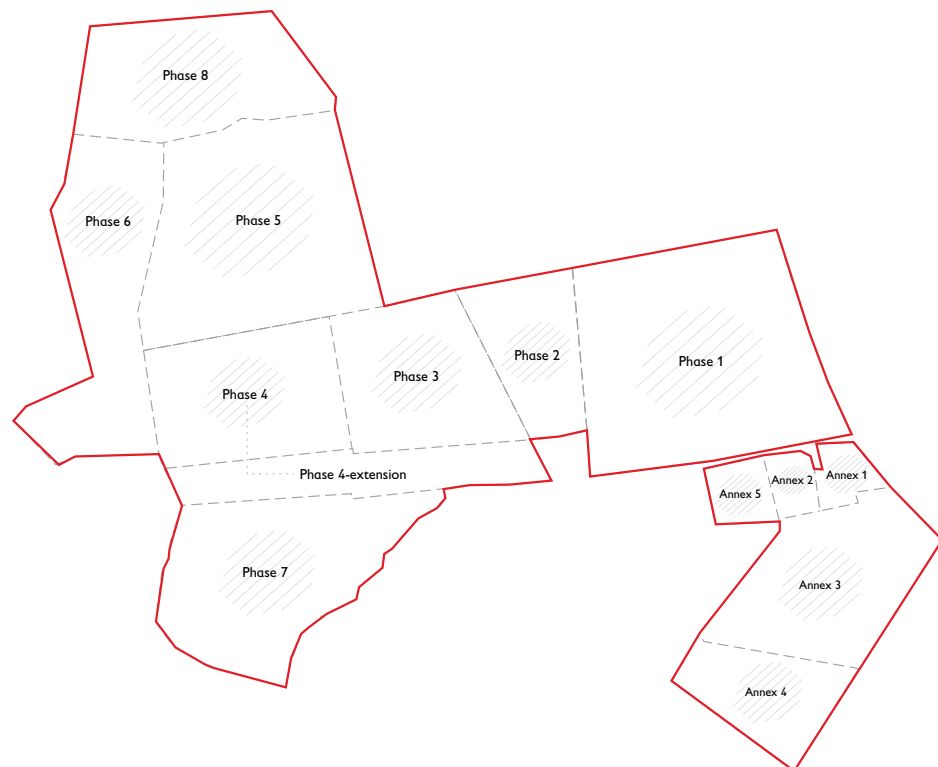
Methodology

This report is based on 17 interviews with Iraqi and Syrian families in the Main Camp in November and December 2021. Nine interviews were conducted with Iraqi families in phases 1, 2, 3, 7; and eight interviews with Syrian families in phases 4 and 5. These phases were selected as they are the most impacted by murders and attempted murders. A further three interviews were conducted with families that were relocated from Al Hol, following an attack on the camp’s Reception Area (where families with particular protection risks are relocated for their safety) which resulted in the deaths of two men, and a number of men and women beaten.

Because of the sensitivity of the issues, interviews were conducted only with adult members of the

families about their children, to avoid any risk of trauma to these children. Interviews were semi-structured, focusing on capturing the real and daily effect of violence children and their families experience. Given the relatively low number of murders in the Annex, likely due to heightened security measures in place there, no third country national families were interviewed for this report.

In December 2021 and January 2022, five focus group discussions were conducted; three with male and female members of Save the Children’s Community Protection Committees and two with teachers. Three additional key informant interviews were conducted with child protection specialists working in the camp.



Map of Al Hol Camp, North East Syria

AL HOL CAMP

Al Hol camp is separated into a Main Camp, made up of eight phases and an Annex, which houses the Third Country Nationals. In the Main Camp, Syrian and Iraqi nationals live in different phases, though there is no formal demarcation between these areas. The entire camp is guarded by security forces. The camp's residents are only allowed to leave the camp with permission from the Camp Administration in limited circumstances, including for medical treatment that is only available in hospitals outside the camp, or in order to leave the camp permanently (though this is far from a simple process, see below).



Children's Direct and Indirect Experience of Violence



On his way to the marketplace, my son saw people gathered next to a tent. He entered it to see a man and his wife killed. He saw the whole thing and still remembers and mentions the scene in detail. At night, he wakes up crying.

Yamen, Iraqi father of seven children



Instead of stories of adventures and superheroes, children in Al Hol talk to each other about death and about how their neighbors have been tortured or killed. They give graphic descriptions of injuries, including about the bloodstains that spread on the ground and about sudden raids in their homes or their neighbors homes. Of the 20 families Save the Children spoke to, 15 of them had at least one child who had directly witnessed at least one murder in the camp. Some children had witnessed more than one murder.

Children have seen their neighbors being killed in their tents. Others have seen murders including shootings, stabbings and strangulations on their way to buy food from the marketplace or while on their way to school. One teacher told us that children will tell them about the murders they see, saying *“One day my students came and told me that a woman and her brother were killed. They had seen it on their way to school. They started giving details about how the brother was shot and his sister was strangled with a shoelace and how their children were screaming and crying for their dead parents. I was afraid hearing what they witnessed. This is common.”*

Others have seen tents being deliberately set on fire to kill their inhabitants. Adam, an Iraqi father of three, who has been in Al Hol since 2018, said, *“Every other day we see a tent burning. My children saw a whole family being burned. They started to cry and scream and imagined that one day our tent might burn too.”* Newal is 26 years old. Originally from Iraq, she is now living in Al Hol caring for her child and four nephews who were orphaned by the conflict. All five of the children saw *“a horrific murder. A man was killed as his tent was burned down. They saw his burned head. They kept talking about it, describing the head and the way the man was killed. Now my seven-year-old nephew wakes up at night shouting ‘Go away! Don’t hit me! Don’t kill me!’”*

Other children have also seen the aftermath of violence and murders on their way to school. In late June 2021, there was a murder in front of one of Save the Children’s schools just before children arrived to start their day. One teacher working there said; *“Her [The victim’s] blood was still on the floor when the students started arriving. On that day, the school was not as it usually is. There was no joy, no life.”*

While other children may not have directly witnessed violence, news travels fast in the closed confines of the camp, and children regularly hear and recount accounts of violence. Every single parent that Save the Children spoke to reported that one or all their children had heard and repeated a story of a murder or attack. Ameen, who has 10 children and has been living in the camp for four years, told Save the Children that 2021 had been a particularly bad year because of the murders. He said that his children *“talk about the murders a lot and they describe the way the crime happened and the person killed as if they were there which is not the case. The other day, my son spoke about a murder that happened in another phase; he was describing how the individual’s brain came out of his head and how his blood formed a ‘lake’ next to his head. He wasn’t there and hadn’t seen what he was describing.”* Menal, a Syrian mother of seven children, describing their daily routine said; *“There has never been a day over the last year when we didn’t talk about murder, violence and blood.”*

Two boys sitting in the shadow of a tent in Al Hol



ZIAD

Ziad, 12, witnessed his best friend and his friend's father being shot dead. He refused to eat or drink when he first came back home after the incident. Afterwards, Ziad started seeing nightmares involving his friend. He always calls the name of his friend in his dreams and sometimes he shouts "*My friend was killed, my friend was killed*". It has been over a year since the incident but Ziad is still having the same dream.

Now Ziad is always absent-minded. He hasn't been to school regularly since the incident. He doesn't want to go to school without his friend with whom he used to attend. Ziad doesn't know how to read or write and when his mother asks him to study, he refuses. When Ziad's friend was alive, they used to dream of becoming engineers and teachers.

”

Wondering why his friend was killed, Ziad would say 'I may be killed one day just like him'.

Hadia, Ziad's mother

“

The Impact of Violence on Children



My husband works as a guard for a local NGO. Whenever there is the slightest sound, my daughter who is five years old, cries and begs him not to go to work saying 'You will be killed too.' When he is at work and there is shooting, we don't sleep at all. We all die a hundred times out of fear until he returns.

Ameena, a Community Protection Committee member



Every parent that we spoke to described the profound fears that their children have for their own and for their parents' safety. *"My child started to worry that I would be killed. He often gets me a knife and puts it under my pillow so I can protect myself,"* said Yamen describing his son's reaction after witnessing the murder of man and his wife on his way to the marketplace. Even before their arrival in Al Hol, many children had experienced severe levels of violence, living through armed conflict and displacement. Adam who fled his home in Iraq due to the conflict and sought refuge in Al Hol following an arduous journey said: *"My children saw many atrocities in Iraq. They were terrified because of the bombardment. They saw people being killed or beheaded while driving to Syria. Then they saw the same bloody scene here in the camp."*

Residents of Al Hol live in tents, which provide very little protection from the elements and from potential intruders and exacerbate real feelings of insecurity and fear; *"Our house is only a piece of fabric, which cannot protect us. It does not have doors to be locked,"* said Adam. Rania *"hate[s] it when it's windy outside. My tent keeps moving and I keep thinking that someone is outside."* Fears are particularly acute at night, when most murders and attacks are believed to take place, with many people restricting their movement after dark; *"life stops at sunset"* said Khalil.

Children's understanding of the insecurity in the camp has had profound effects on their social interactions and their basic functioning. Talking to parents about their and their children's experiences of violence, it is clear that large parts of their days and thoughts are consumed by images of death and violence. Children manifest their fears and discomfort in different ways, often

because they lack the understanding or ability to articulate their emotions. Factors such as their age and gender, the extent of their direct exposure to the violence, and the wider culture of fear across Al Hol limit emotional expression. The effects observed in children include sleeping disorders, venting through aggressive behavior, the inability to concentrate as well as physical symptoms such as bed-wetting, vomiting, loss of appetite and the lack of care or attention towards their personal hygiene and dress. These can act as temporary escape routes for children, but risk completely overriding their natural resilience and impeding their emotional and psychological development, including their ability to express themselves and to relate to others in a healthy and constructive way.

Recognising the profound challenges that children and their families face, Save the Children is providing a range of protection and support services, including Child Friendly Spaces. This includes recreational activities, such as sport, music, art and storytelling, combined with psychosocial support activities. These can enhance children's resilience and reinforce positive coping mechanisms that are available to children and their families. Specialized case management support is provided for children with particular needs - including to Ziad and his family, after Ziad's experience. While these services cannot fully overcome or address the impacts of insecurity on children's lives, they can support them to build outlets for their stress and fear. Reinforcing community-based systems, so that families can recognize when children are in need of additional support is also a critical factor in ensuring that referrals to specialized Mental Health and Psychological Support services (MHPSS) support or other case management services can be provided.

Disordered Sleep

Many children suffer from disordered sleep, including nightmares and insomnia, or refuse to go to sleep because they are concerned about violence overnight. Huyam who works as a teacher in the camp told us about a time when a student in her class came “very sleepy” to the class “I asked him ‘What’s wrong? Why don’t you sleep?’ He said he couldn’t sleep as he was worried that the man with the suppressor [gun] would come after him”.²

Rania’s son “wakes up the most in his sleep, he always has nightmares, he starts sleep-talking and waking up. Once he dreamed of people coming after us, then he woke up and started crying. The same happened yesterday, he woke up crying. He wakes up crying because of his nightmares almost three times a month.”

Nightmares and insomnia can indicate how deep the violence has seeped into the minds of children. As described by parents, children’s recurrent nightmares involving killings and violence, agitated sleeping and their fears to go to sleep indicate the high level of stress that children suffer. They also indicate the challenges for them to develop appropriate and effective coping mechanisms to understand and respond to the daily conditions in Al Hol.

Nightmares in childhood can be a normal maintenance function of the developing brain to integrate recent and past learning and establish psychological equilibrium. But when changes or new experiences lead to regular disruption of normal sleeping patterns, it is an indication that children are running out of resources to understand the reality around them, and that this reality is preventing them from building coping mechanisms.

Aggressive Behaviour

Many parents, caregivers and teachers reported that children’s behaviour has changed since the violence started. Many parents pointed to the games that children play together becoming increasingly violent, often building on the stories of murders they hear about. “These war games are very common. The other day, my neighbour’s son was chasing my son and his friends, with a knife in his hand and shouting: ‘I am going to slaughter you.’” They are eight years old, says a male Child Protection Committee member. Talking about a game his daughter and her friends were playing, another Committee member told us: “One of them was laying on the ground while the other was about to behead her with the lid of canned meat. They were supposed to be playing. Thank God, they weren’t hurt. These are the games all of our children play. They are witnessing murders up close, so what do you expect?”

Others described increasingly antisocial or violent actions by children, including thefts by gangs of children in marketplaces and children throwing stones at adults and other children.

At home, linked both to children’s fears and their increasing frustration at being kept inside, arguments between siblings have become more common and violent. Khalil said that his children, aged from 17 to six-years-old, “used to spend a lot of time together. Now they are much more violent with each other, and they are always fighting.” When children have access to a TV, tablet or phone, many parents say that they only want to watch violent movies or videos of people who have been killed in the camp; “They also follow social media accounts that talk about murders and people who have received death threats, as well as news about imminent security operations, they are always stressed” said a father at a Focus Group Discussion.



A boy carrying a gun made of foam during a war game which has been popular among children in Al Hol.

Loss of Concentration and a Sense of Hopelessness

Losing concentration and interest in their favorite things or activities can be initial signs of children (and adults) feeling emotionally overwhelmed and unable to control their discomfort and emotional responses to their circumstances. One teacher told us that children in her school “stop concentrating in class when murders happen. Previously, my students were excelling in everything. Now, it is much harder to explain things to them, as they are not concentrating as much.”

Some teachers described children’s inability to cope with their surroundings or interact with them, even when in school or in the playground. “A sister and a brother who attend our centre, insist on staying together all the time. The sister keeps holding her brother’s hand in the classroom and during breaks in the playground. She just stands still, refusing to play.” Abbas’s eldest daughter “refuses to talk to any of her relatives who are outside while we are still in the camp. She starts crying whenever our relatives ask how she is doing.”

Fadila is 25 years old and Syrian. She has a one-year-old daughter and is pregnant, but also raises her husband’s four children from his previous marriage including Nasr who is five years old. Shortly before she spoke to Save the Children, Fadila’s husband survived an attempted murder.

“Sometimes I notice my stepson Nasr is preoccupied. I ask him what’s wrong, he answers me that he wants to die. I ask him why, he answers saying that he wants to die because he doesn’t want to get old and die, he wants to die now since he will die anyway. I tell him you shouldn’t say something like this, in the future you will get older and become a teacher or a doctor. He answers back saying he doesn’t want that; he wants to die now.”

Physical Impacts

The stress and fear that many children face has physical manifestations. Some children wet themselves and other children have lost their appetite and refuse to eat. Adel, aged 26, is caring for his nieces and nephews in the camp, after their father was attacked and had to leave Al Hol because of security concerns; “after their father was injured, they lost their appetite and did not eat. They have been like this for almost a year. They lost weight and you are shocked by their tiny body. They like Iraqi food so much. Their mother cooks them the things they love but they refuse to eat and never touch it.” Adam said that his three children “saw a whole family burning next to our tent. They started to cry and scream. They could not eat for a long period.”

Families' Ability to Cope

Parents themselves are not immune to the psychological toll that years of violence, insecurity and fear have caused. Aseel, an Iraqi mother of three children, said *“I am terrified and worried all the time because of the ongoing violence. I cannot sleep well at night. My children and I have nightmares. I am afraid that one day someone will enter the tent and kill us.”* The day we spoke to Adam, he admitted *“To be honest, I feel overwhelmed today. I wish I was a bird and had two wings to fly away from this camp.”*

Many parents worry that the psychological toll is impacting on their ability as parents. Ameen worries that his relationship with his children has been negatively affected; *“Previously I was more tolerant. I was playing football with them. Now, I just don’t. I also argue with my wife more, which is also bad for the children. I try my best not to do so, thinking that the children are suffering enough. But sometimes it is too much, even for us [adults].”*

Huyam, a Syrian mother who has three boys-aged six and three-year-old twins said *“the violence in the camp has led me to not taking care of my children as I used to. I neglect them, because I am psychologically very tired. I am normally very kind to my children, but not as much now. I am very tired of what is happening around in the camp.”*

Parents we spoke to reported resorting to different mechanisms to deal with the security situations’ toll on their children. Some of these include positive measures, such as trying to calm their children’s fears by explaining noises or making up stories about the violence. Aseel’s husband *“tries hard to convince them, telling them lies that there was no violence, and it was not a shooting. [He says] all you have heard is fake news. He describes the camp in a way as if it were a wonderful and safe place. When they see their father, they feel a little safe.”* Khalil, a Syrian father of five, tells his children that noises at night are from animals, Rania’s husband tells their children that gunfire sounds are from a wedding.

Other families try to make staying indoors as appealing to their children as possible. In a bid to *“make them [his three daughters] forget what is happening outside”*, Abbas reads stories for them and tells them about their life before the camp while Aseel bought birds for her son for him to *“spend more time home”*. Newal also tries to keep the children busy at the tent as much as possible; *“I carry out recreational activities for them and*

handcraft activities for the girls”, while Shahad’s neighbours have planted flowers in the yards of their tents for their children to tend.

However, the unpredictability of violence means that even adults face challenges regulating their own emotions, further compounded with the need to help regulate their children’s emotions. When combined with the length of time that the violence has been ongoing as well as the scale of violence that many of them endured before they arrived in the camp, it is clear that the coping mechanisms of caregivers have been severely eroded, and completely overwhelmed in some instances.

In response, Save the Children has been providing parents and caregivers with Positive Parenting sessions, reaching 250 parents in the Main Camp in 2021. One of Save the Children’s Common Approaches, it focuses on the internal tools and resources that caregivers can use to positively meet the needs of their children, build positive relationships between family members, and acts to prevent children experiencing physical and/or humiliating treatment at home.

Restrictions on Play and Education

While some families resort to positive coping mechanisms, others recognize that they are increasingly using negative ones to try to physically and psychologically protect their children and that these cause deep negative impacts on their family dynamics. For all of the positive activities that caregivers provide for their children in their tents, many are imposing severe restrictions on the time their children spend outside.

In some instances, these measures also involve preventing their children from attending school, particularly in the short-term aftermath of a murder, when many parents or caregivers are afraid to let their children out of their sight. Adel is currently preventing his nieces and nephews from going to school; *“I have prevented them from attending school for more than one month recently. I am worried about them. I try to compensate by teaching them at home. But after being kept at home due to the security situation, they became upset and angry.”*

These restrictions can involve physical restraints in some extreme cases. A male community protection committee member told us about a mother nearby his tent who *“ties her son in the tent to prevent him from going outside. She ties him up as you would tie a calf or a sheep.”*

Play and education are essential in fostering children’s growth and development. Play helps children develop their personalities, their understanding of the world and themselves. Education offers children and adolescents a place for self-development, to build their first relationships outside of their family and pursue the experiences and learning necessary to fulfil their dreams of their future roles within their community. Yet in an environment of pervasive fear, restrictions force children to understand and develop their personalities in response to violence, including attempting to defend themselves or create a sense of control in their lives without the necessary interactions and structures of play and education.

Save the Children sees access to education as a key tool to help children cope with their surroundings and build a sense of normalcy for part of the day. This means that education and protection staff work hard to enroll children in school and to support them and their families to maintain their attendance. Following a murder in the vicinity of a Save the Children center in June 2021, school attendance records showed that students’ attendance dropped by almost 80%. It took Save the Children staff two weeks of community outreach efforts to convince parents to send their children back to school.

MHPSS Support in Al Hol

Compounding the dire situation of children and their families is the limited availability of professional Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MHPSS) available in Al Hol in comparison to the need. There are insufficient resources, including financial support and qualified service providers, available for MHPSS in North East Syria more broadly. Compounding this is the stigma that can often surround mental health and the need for services and support.

The situation in Al Hol can and will have a long-term impact on children’s healthy development, because emotional discomfort will impact their daily cognitive function and their emotional development.

Some parents are aware of available support and are planning to access it. Rania, for example, whose seven-year-old son witnessed a murder, said *“I am going to make an appointment with the MHPSS service, though his father says there is no need, because the whole camp needs MHPSS support, and he [her son] would recover if we left the camp.”* While services are available, they are stretched. Fear further complicates this work, with some families refusing to send children to NGO services for fear of being subsequently targeted by armed actors.

Other families remain unaware of any service provision in the camp. Ameen, Yamen, and Shahad all told us that they had not heard about specialist support services available to either children or their parents, meaning that greater outreach and steps taken are needed to assure the safety of both children and their caregivers accessing services, as well as the safety of staff providing them.

Planning to Leave the Camp

For many children and parents, the only way they see their security situation improving is to leave the camp. Yamen, an Iraqi father of seven said *“What I think about all the time is to get out of this place. I hope we can get out.”* Khalil said *“We are considering leaving the camp. It is terrifying both adults and children alike.”*

Aseels children *“want to leave the camp. Their mood gets bad when they see people leaving. They cry for more than two days, and they don’t eat or sleep properly. Sometimes they blame us and accuse us of destroying their future. They say, ‘Why have you brought us to this life and this camp?’”*

But leaving is not a simple task. For Iraqis willing to voluntarily return to Iraq, they must register and wait for the authorities in North East Syria (NES) and in Iraq to approve their return. To date, just 448 families (1,778 people) have returned to the country and progress on further returns has been slow. Others are unwilling to return to the country, fearing for their safety because of perceptions that they are affiliated with ISIS, and there are no alternative arrangements for them to leave Al Hol in place.

Following some ease on restrictions on Syrians who wish to leave the camp in October 2020, Syrians now can leave either to their areas of origin or to live elsewhere after they register their intention to leave and wait until permission is granted, if they are originally from areas in NES. Restrictions imposed by the authorities on families originally from areas under the control of Government of Syria (GoS) and the opposition mean that these families are currently not permitted to depart from the camp, including to settle elsewhere in NES. Since 2019, 1337 families (a total of 10,829 individuals) have left the camp including Faten’s family who told Save the Children a few days prior to her departure with her husband and three children that *“I am sure that we will not be able to forget our miserable life here after we leave the camp but at least, it will be easier to live our life.”* The level of violence is the reason behind Faten’s decision to leave. Her 10-year-old son Ahmad witnessed a murder, while three of Faten’s own friends were killed. Yet the desire to leave the camp can come with a lot of uncertainty and delay. Huyam and her three children had registered to leave the camp eight months before being interviewed by Save the Children in November 2021 and are

still unsure when their day will come to leave.

The broader economic situation in both NES and across Syria is a major factor in a family’s decision to leave the camp. One woman at a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) said, *“I wish it was that easy [to leave]. It is obvious that we all want and need to leave for the children. Not only children but adults. But look outside. It’s difficult. I have relatives who are discouraging me from leaving, saying that I will not be able to make a living outside. Here at least, we have food to eat, unlike outside. Living conditions outside are by far worse than here.”* At a separate FGD, one man told us about an acquaintance of his who decided to leave Al Hol and ended up living with his family in a tent on the outskirts of Raqqa city because of the harsh economic situation in the city. He quoted his acquaintance saying: *“Although I don’t fear being killed now, I have to worry about food for my children every single day.”*

Stigma will also prove a challenge that impedes families from leaving. In August 2021, UNICEF reported that preliminary findings of FGDs with 80 families who returned from Al Hol showed that those families have limited access to services due to high levels of discrimination and social stigma. One third of women and adolescent girls are estimated to be at high risk of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), including forced or undocumented marriage, while half of children are engaged in child labor, working long hours and are poorly paid. Children who leave Al Hol often do not go to school to avoid stigma and discrimination and for financial reasons.³

The same is true for populations that are in Al Hol because they fled from ISIS rather than having lived under their rule or supported their ideologies. Zainab, 25, was relocated to Al Hol’s reception area with her three children after receiving death threats. In November 2021, while Zainab was still there, the reception area was stormed by armed actors who murdered two men. Following the incident, Zainab, with all the other Syrian families, were relocated to a different IDP camp in NES for their safety. Three weeks later, she told us: *“People here don’t like us. They are not welcoming. It is ironic that in Al Hol camp, we were threatened to be killed by ISIS because we are not hardline enough. Here, we are not welcomed and stones are pelted at us because we are deemed to be ISIS.”*



A woman holding a child's hand in the marketplace in Al Hol

Addressing Al Hol's Insecurity

The causes of Al Hol's insecurity remain unclear. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and Camp Administration claim that most attacks are committed by individuals who remain loyal to ISIS and this is a suspicion shared by many in the camp, particularly those who arrived before the fall of Baghouz – the last stronghold of ISIS – and who themselves arrived in Al Hol fleeing ISIS. *“Everything changed since the people came from Baghouz. After they arrived, the fire incidents [arson] started happening. If a woman is not wearing ‘proper’ clothes, they would set her tent on fire. I feel obliged to dress differently because I don’t want to risk the lives of my family,”* said Rania, a Syrian mother of four. Rania and her family fled from ISIS to Al Hol one year before the group was defeated.

However, criminality due to economic hardship in the camp and, more broadly in North East Syria, is likely to play a role, particularly as the murders and murders have also been accompanied by death threats to individuals perceived as wealthier, including NGO staff, shopkeepers and merchants. Guns and other weapons continue to circulate. Almost all of the perpetrators of violence remain unknown.

The diverse population- mixing those who fled from ISIS with its adherents, combined with the scale of unmet need in the camp and frustration at the lack of options to be able to leave have created a toxic security situation for the authorities to address. The authorities have attempted to take steps to tackle the violence through various security operations but these have not been successful in addressing the root causes, nor in stemming the tide of violence.

These security operations and more regular patrolling from security forces predominantly include armored patrols in vehicles known in the camp as “hammers.” There have also been intermittent reports of children detained during arrest operations.

Some residents do believe that the increased patrols have had a positive impact on security. Hasna, for example, said *“Nowadays there are security patrols roaming around the camp. They even roam at night. We feel safe.”*

But others have mixed feelings. The widespread concern that ISIS affiliates are responsible for attacks, means that some are concerned that interacting with security patrols could put them at risk of harm; Marwa told Save the Children that while she felt safe when the Hammers patrolled, she was also scared that the Hammer might make a stop at their tent or security members might talk to any of them, because *“we will then be perceived to be associated with them and subsequently targeted.”* Talking about a murder in the section where she lives, Newal told us *“The security forces got everyone out to conduct a search operation, including the children who were very scared. People were arrested. People are scared of indiscriminate arrests, which is something that has been happening due to the murders.”*

The camp authorities have also developed a proposal to reorganize the camp in response to the security situation. This currently involves splitting the camp into six sections- three for the Iraqi population, two for the Syrian population and one for the Annex. Each would have its own market area and would be separated by fences and trenches, with lighting and cameras installed in each of the new sections. However, Save the Children and other humanitarian organisations remain concerned that the current proposal risks exacerbating limitations on access to services and may not go far enough in both understanding and addressing the root causes of violence, as well as actively working to protect children and their families.

Conclusion and Recommendations



My children used to always discuss their future plans, but now they don't. How would you think positively about your future when you are surrounded by death? When you hear bad and depressing news every day? We just want safety. That is a basic human right.

Abbas, father of three girls



Childhood should be a process of discovery and growth, where children learn to give a name to their emotions and build their understanding of the world around them, so they can frame their future. Al Hol's children are instead trapped, with fear as the overriding emotion and very little room for other feelings.

Children in Al Hol have witnessed or experienced the deaths of loved ones, neighbours and strangers. They have also experienced or heard about physical harm and violent situations. The psychological impact of conflict-related violence, coupled with the ongoing stressors related to displacement and the insecurity in Al Hol can have a further significant impact on the mental health and well-being of adults and children. They can result in a sense of hopelessness, contributing in turn to psychological distress, increased family violence, a diminished sense of dignity and control and a reliance on negative coping skills.

A strong social support network is one of the most important coping strategies. However, when all community members suffer the same violence, and there is a sense of mistrust among residents, these networks are disrupted. There is an urgent need to provide immediate MHPSS support to children and their families living in Al Hol, to break the vicious cycle of the effects of violence. This includes rebuilding family and community supports as well as strengthening individual coping capacity through more specialized MHPSS services.

At the same time, there must be credible steps to address the violence and to support families- where possible- to leave the camp, access the support they need and to rebuild their lives. It is important that these efforts support children

to recover their hopes for the future. Children like Aseel's 14-year-old daughter. She suffered severe burns on her face two years ago when their heater exploded. She recently saw a tent burning. Her mother told us, "*She cried a lot saying 'This miserable life is our destiny. This nightmare will not end and we will not get out of this.'*"

All of Al Hol's children deserve the possibility of a peaceful future- one without violence- and one where they can grow up healthily and safely.



A child heading to school in Al Hol

Recommendations

To AANES

- Ensure unfettered access to Al Hol's population to ensure that services, including MHPSS and child protection case management support can be provided in a timely manner.
- Recognize the low levels of acceptance of the security forces from many of the camp's population the impact of security operations, and the fears that others have in engaging, consider alternative security approaches, and ensure that there are safe and anonymous methods for camp residents to provide information on causes of insecurity in Al Hol;
- Work with donors and the humanitarian community to identify ways to close Al Hol, including:
 - Scale up support and facilitation of the safe, voluntary and dignified departure of Syrians from Al Hol, including for those originally from NES and those from areas of the country under the control of the Government of Syria or de-facto authorities; and facilitate the work of humanitarian organizations to ensure that they have access to services and assistance in areas of return or relocation;
 - Support the safe, voluntary and dignified return of Iraqi children and their families, and work with humanitarian actors to identify alternative solutions for Iraqis who are unwilling or unable to return to Iraq. This should include exit from the camp and registration for residence outside of the camp;

To Donors

- Increase financial support for MHPSS responses for children and their families inside Al Hol;
- Engage in dialogue with the AANES and humanitarian organisations to find ways to close Al Hol and safely return or relocate its population, respecting the rights and wishes of its population for solutions to their displacement;
- Provide long-term and flexible funding for areas of return or relocation from Al Hol inside NES to ensure that families able to leave the camp are able to access services and support, including to meet their basic needs, livelihoods support and MHPSS services, when they arrive;
- Ensure that support for the potential reorganization of Al Hol is provided with guarantees that the reorganization will not further limit freedom of movement or access to humanitarian services;
- Support AANES and the Government of Iraq to develop sustainable plans for the voluntary and informed return or relocation of children and their families in-line with their rights.

To the Government of Iraq and other countries with nationals in the camp

- Facilitate and support the safe, voluntary and dignified return of Iraqis, in coordination with AANES and humanitarian actors in NES and Iraq with the particular engagement of protection actors;
- While violence has not severely affected the Annex to date, recognise that the camp's overall conditions are not conducive places for children to grow-up; and urgently repatriate children with their families home where they can access the services they need to recover from their experiences.

ENDNOTES

[1. Inside the 'deadliest place on earth': Murders surge in Syrian refugee camp stalked by Isis, the Independent, 11 November 2021](#)

2. Many of the murders in Al Hol involve the use of a gun with a silencer- many children and parents refer to “the man with the suppressor” in reference to the perpetrators of the murders

[3. UNICEF, Whole of Syria Humanitarian Situation Report, August 2021](#)

“REMEMBER
THE **ARMED** MEN WHO
WANTED TO **KILL** MUM?”