

# The Future of Repatriation from Northeast Syria

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 Brief Analysis

## From potential SDF trials to Assad's steady normalization, the widening number of "known unknowns" has increased the urgency of taking action on Islamic State detainees.

The Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) recently [announced](https://apnews.com/article/islamic-state-syria-sdf-kurds-alhol-628730e580697497696f13855b3931f6) that due to the international community's slow response to the repatriation of thousands of individuals affiliated with the Islamic State (IS), it will begin to hold "fair and transparent trials in accordance with international and local laws related to terrorism." The announcement comes after representatives from more than eighty countries gathered in Saudi Arabia on June 8 for a ministerial meeting convened by the Global Coalition Against Daesh, where U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [reminded attendees](https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-ministerial-opening-session/), "We know that repatriation is the only durable solution." His statement stood out in this context because citizens from many coalition states are still being detained indefinitely in northeast Syria.

While the United States has proactively advocated for repatriation across two administrations, most other countries around the world have been reluctant or slow to take such action. To date, approximately [5,500 Iraqis](https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-fighters-168-family-members-repatriated-to-iraq-7122119.html) and 2,700 third-country nationals (i.e., not Syrian or Iraqi) have been repatriated from detention camps, and the international community is on track to repatriate more such individuals in 2023 than in years past. Although this is a step in the right direction, it means that more than 10,000 third-country nationals from almost [60 countries](https://apnews.com/article/syria-is-islamic-state-children-iraq-75b7999e4a4920b308ddde0181258d7e) remain in detention in northeast Syria, including approximately 2,000 men and boys and [8,000 women and minors](https://media.defense.gov/2023/May/02/2003213005/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OIR.PDF). These numbers do not include the more than 18,000 Syrians and 25,000 Iraqis who are also being held indefinitely.

With numerous international conflicts dominating daily headlines, much of the international community is no doubt fatigued by the challenges emanating from the fight against IS and the repatriation of IS-affiliated individuals. Yet the AANES announcement and other developments show that these challenges will only proliferate without concerted attention from Washington and its coalition partners.

## The "Known Unknowns"

The "known unknowns" in northeast Syria—that is, factors capable of destabilizing the precarious situation and thus affecting IS-affiliated individuals detained in the area—have multiplied to an alarming degree in recent months. These factors center on five main issues, some more imminent than others:

**The AANES trial announcement.** Very little is known about when these trials may begin or who would face prosecution. What is known is that U.S. support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—a key military actor in the AANES—has been a vital component of the fight against IS. As [noted by Gen. Matthew McFarlane](https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/3266646/us-central-command-virtual-roundtable-with-dasd-dana-stroul-and-general-matthew/), commander of the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), the SDF is America's "lead partner" in Syria and has been throughout the anti-IS campaign. Yet the decision to place foreign nationals on trial in the AANES could hurt this relationship. The wider international community is unlikely to find consensus on this issue either. For instance, NATO ally Turkey views the SDF as a hostile entity, arguing that it [is linked](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/accidental-allies-us-syrian-democratic-forces-partnership-against-islamic-state) to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)—a U.S.-designated terrorist organization and Ankara's longtime domestic nemesis.

**Increased normalization of the Assad regime.** This potentially destabilizing factor has come to the forefront amid a pair of recent developments: the Arab League's decision to [welcome Syria back](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/middle-east-matters-back-normal-region-reaches-out-assad) with seemingly open arms, and the quadrilateral talks between [Turkey, Syria, Russia, and Iran](https://www.reuters.com/world/turkey-syria-russia-iran-hold-highest-level-talks-since-syrian-war-2023-05-10/). Although such moves will not change the situation on the ground overnight,

one cannot discount what they might mean for the disputed territory in northeast Syria and its thousands of third-country detainees. For example, if normalization empowers Bashar al-Assad to take over the area, he could take any number of steps with regard to these detainees, from releasing them to roam free, to imprisoning or killing them, to holding them for ransom as negotiation tools with their countries of origin.

**Ongoing threats from IS.** According to a [recent CJTF-OIR report \(https://media.defense.gov/2023/May/02/2003213005/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OIR.PDF\)](https://media.defense.gov/2023/May/02/2003213005/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OIR.PDF), “ISIS capabilities remained ‘degraded’ due to Coalition-assisted counterterrorism pressure, but the group continued to pose a threat.” These threats include the [group’s longstanding insurgency \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-state-2023-threat-levels-and-repatriation-questions\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-state-2023-threat-levels-and-repatriation-questions) (which has tapered down but persists), its use of gang violence in northeast Syria and Iraq, and its [external and internal threats \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/detention-facilities-syria-iraq-remain-vulnerable-islamic-state-attacks\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/detention-facilities-syria-iraq-remain-vulnerable-islamic-state-attacks) to the security of detention camps and prisons. IS has explicitly noted that it sees these individuals as key to its future success.

**Possible Turkish intervention.** Turkish forces have previously launched incursions into northeast Syria, and [the SDF has warned \(https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/syria-rebels-warn-isis-escape-rcna59853\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/syria-rebels-warn-isis-escape-rcna59853) that a future intervention could oblige it to pivot vital resources away from fighting IS and maintaining its prisons and detention centers. A conflict between Turkey and the SDF would also put the United States in an uncomfortable position between its NATO ally and its top local partner.

**Climate change and natural disasters.** The humanitarian crisis in the northeast is not limited to the status of detention camps; it also includes broader national factors such as Syria’s political crisis creating more food insecurity in a country already plagued by a [“severe and long-term drought \(https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/critical-response-and-funding-requirements-response-water-crisis-syria-august-2022\).”](https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/critical-response-and-funding-requirements-response-water-crisis-syria-august-2022) Moreover, the February earthquakes in Turkey and Syria highlighted their deep vulnerability to major natural disasters. If another such incident hits northeast Syria—an area not officially governed by a state—it could result in [even greater difficulties \(https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-government-blocked-un-earthquake-response-opposition-areas\)](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-government-blocked-un-earthquake-response-opposition-areas) getting proper aid to those affected.

## Policy Implications

Although some of the above “known unknowns” have been at play for quite some time, the recent announcements regarding AANES trials and Assad’s normalization should give the coalition greater cause for concern about the future of northeast Syria and IS-affiliated individuals detained there. Recent efforts [spearheaded by the United States \(https://www.state.gov/deputy-coordinator-for-counterterrorism-ian-moss-fireside-chat-with-matthew-levitt/\)](https://www.state.gov/deputy-coordinator-for-counterterrorism-ian-moss-fireside-chat-with-matthew-levitt/) have underlined this precarious situation to more reluctant governments, many of which claim that their slow response stems from the difficulties they will face in prosecuting these individuals—especially adult women—upon their return. Yet successful prosecutions against IS-affiliated women in the [United States \(https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/american-woman-who-led-isis-battalion-sentenced-20-years\)](https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/american-woman-who-led-isis-battalion-sentenced-20-years), [Germany \(https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2022-08/CEP%20Policy%20Paper\\_Prosecution%20of%20German%20Women%20Returning%20from%20Syria%20and%20Iraq\\_August%202022\\_final.pdf\)](https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2022-08/CEP%20Policy%20Paper_Prosecution%20of%20German%20Women%20Returning%20from%20Syria%20and%20Iraq_August%202022_final.pdf), and [the Netherlands \(https://nltimes.nl/2023/04/13/four-dutch-women-isis-ties-sentenced-prison-rotterdam-court\)](https://nltimes.nl/2023/04/13/four-dutch-women-isis-ties-sentenced-prison-rotterdam-court) show that best practices for meeting this challenge exist and need to be emulated.

The AANES announcement in particular indicates that local frustration with the slow international response to this issue has come to a head. The decision to leave third-country nationals in northeast Syria is destabilizing the area, not only by taking resources away from the rebuilding effort, but also by distracting from the fight against IS cells still in operation there. If IS manages to seize new territory, having large numbers of its affiliates nearby would only widen its recruiting base. And as described previously, Syrian normalization could likewise create a host of destabilizing scenarios and threats involving these detainees across the Middle East and beyond. Normalization might also lead Washington to gradually change its policy in Syria and perhaps even withdraw its forces.

To be sure, repatriation is not risk-free. Yet coalition members have already demonstrated effective ways to mitigate these risks, such as sharing best practices on gathering evidence; holding responsible parties accountable; adapting risk assessments to the needs of each individual and state; operating a clear dual communication strategy for civil society and those being repatriated; and creating a trauma-informed care approach to these individuals. Each country will need to apply these best practices differently based on their unique capacities and legal systems. In the end, even effective repatriation will not solve all of the region’s problems. Yet simply leaving these individuals behind in Syria will create a much greater risk to the international community.

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