

France Repatriates Several Orphan Children Who Were Stranded in Syria



Islamic state fighters and their families gather after surrendering in the village of Bathouz, in Deir Al Zor province, Syria, on Tuesday. CREDIT RODI SAID / REUTERS

by ELIAN PELTIER

PARIS — For months, Lydie and Patrice Maninchedda were met with silence when they pleaded with the French government to repatriate their three grandsons, who were stranded in a Kurdish-controlled camp in northeastern Syria, after their mother had been reported killed.

But that silence came to an end on Friday when an official told them that their grandchildren, ages 1, 3 and 5, were part of a small group of Islamic State militants' orphans who had been brought back to France.

« *We are their only remaining family, and now they are our only reason to live,* » said Ms. Maninchedda, whose daughter Julie joined the Islamic State in Syria in 2014, and was reported killed in late 2018. « *One of my grandchildren has shrapnel wounds on his face, the other has an atrophied leg, they all needed critical care* », she added.

Ms. Maninchedda's grandsons were among the estimated 2,500 children still stranded in northern Syria by the war against the Islamic State, or ISIS — the sons and daughters of fighters and young enthusiasts who saw in ISIS the realization of prophecy.

ISIS has now been reduced to a sliver of territory. Thousands of jihadists and their children have filled Kurdish-controlled camps in recent weeks, posing a major quandary to foreign governments: Should they repatriate their citizens, and how?

Most governments have so far refused to bring back ISIS militants, arguing that they should be tried in the countries where they committed crimes. But that has left the fate of children uncertain.



One of the two detained French women who fled the Islamic State's last pocket in Syria sitting with her children at the al-Hawl camp in northeastern Syria. CREDIT BULENT KILIC / AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE – Getty Images

More than 3,700 foreign-born children were taken to ISIS territory by their parents, including 460 from France, according to a 2018 report from [the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization](#) at King's College. It is unclear how many are still alive.

Nine countries, including Russia, Egypt and Indonesia, have brought back about 200 children. Western governments, including France, have so far demurred, both for legal reasons and for fear of infuriating public opinion, according to experts.

The return of the French children on Friday, therefore, surprised many, including their families. Laurent Nuñez, the junior interior minister, had said on Wednesday that children would not be repatriated in the near future.

Although France's foreign ministry did not provide an exact number, announcing only the return of « *orphan and isolated minors, all aged 5 and less* », three French lawyers who represent French families of ISIS militants said that five children had returned.

That includes Ms. Maninchedda's three grandchildren, a 5-year-old girl who was held in the same camp, known as al-Hawl, and a 5-year-old boy who was in another camp, also controlled by the Kurds in northern Syria.

Marie Dosé, a lawyer for one family, welcomed their return but argued that French authorities should repatriate all children, not only those who had lost their parents. At least 100 French children are stranded in Iraq and Syria, according to human rights groups. « *France plans to leave some French children, who still have their mother, die of exposure and hunger, while rescuing some others on the pretext that they are orphans* », Ms. Dosé said. « *If that's what France has become, we have fallen very low.* »

[At least 29 children have died](#) in the al-Hawl camp or while traveling to there, mainly from hypothermia, according to the World Health Organization.



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« *A child remains a child, they all live the same ordeal there* », said Amine Elbahi, 20, a law student whose sister is in al-Hawl with her children, aged 2 and 4. While Mr. Elbahi welcomed the return of the five children, he said his niece and nephew were not among those repatriated on Friday.

Western governments have been grappling with their legal responsibility for the fate of the children, whether orphaned or not.

The Belgian state won an appeal in late February against a ruling ordering it to repatriate six children who are with their mothers in al-Hawl. The British government had also refused to repatriate children, until the [death of Shamima Begum's](#) 3-week-old son forced it to look at ways of bringing ISIS militants' children back to Britain.

France has shifted positions several times over the past year, initially saying that children would be repatriated, only to adopt a more cautious tone in recent weeks.

It has ignored a petition signed by thousands, including politicians, actors and journalists, to repatriate the children, and has not reacted to a complaint filed by three lawyers of families before the United Nation's committee dedicated to children's rights.

While President Emmanuel Macron has refused to meet the families of ISIS militants or their lawyers, he said this week that France would take a « *case by case approach* » to the children. « *Some countries like France have backtracked on the issue of the children's return, others have been showing reluctance or utter indifference* », said Nadim Houry, director of Human Rights Watch's terrorism and counterterrorism program. « *The lack of action and political leadership from European countries has been shocking.* »

Experts argue that the French government, like those in Britain, Belgium or the Netherlands, has so far rejected the option of repatriating its citizens by fear of infuriating public opinion. According to one poll conducted in late February, two-thirds of French citizens do not want children of ISIS militants returned.



A wounded child is helped off a truck after being evacuated from the Islamic State's embattled holdout of Baghouz earlier this month.
Credit Delil Souleiman / Agence France-Presse – Getty Images

« Authorities know that the children aren't a serious threat, but the public opinion might not be aware of that », said Jean-Charles Brisard, head of the Center for the Analysis of Terrorism.

Among European countries, France had the largest contingent of militants go to ISIS territories. It has also been hit by a string of attacks that claimed more than 240 lives in recent years.

France's foreign ministry said on Friday that the official policy had not changed for adults who had joined ISIS. *« They must be tried where they have committed their crimes »*, it said, suggesting that mothers were unlikely to be repatriated.

Separating children from their mothers can pose legal and psychological challenges, experts say. Some children lack proof of identity or may have a second nationality through a foreign parent.

Under the United Nations' convention for children's rights, which has been ratified by all member countries but the United States, authorities cannot separate a child from her parents against the parents' will. Yet a separation is possible if the child is mistreated, neglected or endangered, law experts say.

But in France's case, families and human rights organizations say the government's current stance is hypocritical because from late 2016 to late 2018, French authorities repatriated and screened dozens of ISIS militants' children before handing them over to their relatives or to foster families.

Over 84 children had already returned before Friday, said Thierry Baranger, a juvenile judge at the Bobigny court who has handled 50 of those children's cases.

« Provided that we take the time to assess their level of trauma and the type of care they need, their return usually goes fine », Mr. Baranger said about the underage returnees. *« But the older and the more damaged they come back, the harder it will be to reintegrate them. »*

For Ms. and Mr. Maninchedda, it will take months before they know whether they can raise their three grandsons in northern France, in the home where their daughter grew up. ■