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## **AI-HAWL: REPATRIATING FINNISH CITIZENS OF THE ISLAMIC STATE**

### **Introduction**

In connection of neutralizing of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, there have been thousands of foreign fighters captured by government and non-government security forces in Syria. Although the war on Islamic State (IS) and Islamist terrorism continues, prisoners of IS are overcrowding Al-Hawl's make-shift prisons near the conflict zones. The Al-Hawl (Syrian name of Al-Hol) Prison Camp, which doubles as a refugee camp, close to the borders of Iraq and Syria where wives and children of foreign fighters of Islamic State are held captive and awaiting their fates of being repatriated to their country of origin. A number of Finnish nationals who are currently held in detention at the Al-Hawl Camp are estimated to be twelve or so women and around thirty five children according to Finnish authorities, now awaiting their fate.

These IS women have been radicalized in Finland by contact radicalization as well as in the religious communities of the meeting place (Shuara) and the social media as well as by befriending extremist Muslims within Finland and abroad. The majority of them who have been radicalized are of Caucasian and a few are of African origin having Finnish nationalities. These women left for Syria in the early days of the Syrian conflict to be with their husbands or even to become brides of IS and to support the fighters for comfort as well as for adhering to its false interpretations of the so called "Caliph" by their husbands and leaders. The promise of life after death and martyrdom of giving oneself for the cause of jihad and to achieve "Zalim" – "to do good".

Finland has now decided to repatriate these Finnish citizens, however there was a wide debate and discussion prior about whether to repatriate the children only and not the mothers. These debates are very controversial due to differences in the political discourse. Some planned missions as well as negotiations between Finland and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were ongoing for the release and repatriation. According to sources provided to the NCTN-IACSP intelligence monitoring team, there were

some uncertainties on these discussions and indication for an immediate solution and negotiations were not as favourable in the early stages of repatriation as it may appear to be now.

## **Rehabilitation and Finnish Laws**

Whatever the outcome is now, some are heading back and the question is are the Finnish authorities prepared for the reception of these women and children? And if so, are there ready deradicalization and rehabilitation centres appropriate for the repatriation of former women extremists and their children? These are the questions the Finnish government needs to address and be prepared for. With regards to these and regardless of the current situation, the Finnish government needs to consider the fact that those women and children are of Finnish nationality and are subject to the protection provided under the constitution and international laws, unless otherwise stated in the constitutional framework.

On the pretext of repatriating these women and children, Finland has existing laws to detain and prosecute them for supporting terrorism or being a terrorist. No doubt, these women and children, depending on their ages may pose a threat to Finland's national security.

The repatriation of these women and children will provide Finnish authorities a better understanding and to be better equipped in curtailing the threat in the near future. Repatriating these women and children will also assist security agencies to gather intelligence on communities within Finland on current methods of transmission and activities that relate to radicalization and violent extremism. Providing the right remedies and tools, these threats can be curtailed in a given time frame. Solutions are readily available to de-radicalize and rehabilitate these women and children.

The repatriation of Finnish national and rehabilitating them will assist Finnish authorities to understand the mindsets of these extremists or militants on why they have decided to join the IS struggle. It will disclose motivating factors which vary from person to person as the psychological aspects of radicalization vary. Deconstructing the psyche of such militants could provide invaluable insight for deradicalization efforts. The Finnish intelligence services will need to ascertain the threat these individuals and their children present. This is in order to assess the threat they pose to the community and how far they have been indoctrinated.

## **Repatriation Process and its Value to Security Agencies**

The Finnish authorities having offered to let these former recruits to return, however they must make sure that they agree to enter the country's deradicalization and rehabilitation program. They can also be prosecuted based on Finnish laws and determine the sentencing based on the given rehabilitation time frame for their perpetrated crimes committed under Finnish laws for being involved or representing a terrorist organization. Legal aspects to addressing these terrorists can be structured accordingly within the justification and approval of parliament on a special sitting under the provisions of the law and constitution if decided upon.

In Southeast Asia, the Caucasus and the US, returnees have become assets to security agencies and research centres equipping them with knowledge as well as to deter others from falling into the trap of radicalization and violent extremism. The NCTN and IACSP SEA Region work with former, rehabilitated Islamist terrorist operatives of Al Qaeda (AQ) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and other jihadist operatives who have provided vital information as well as vital discourse of countering Islamist narratives.

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## Conclusion

The opportunity to be able to address future threats is far greater if they are brought back rather than preventing their returns. The IACSP SEA Centre for Security Studies has supported the former Malaysian Counter Terrorism Chief and the government of Malaysia in its assessment of repatriating former IS fighters of Malaysian nationals. The goal is to win the narratives of Islamists globally and not to encounter terrorist attacks within the home front. The only way forward to protecting Finland's national security from Islamist terror and phobia in the near and coming future is to be better prepared. Understanding the different threat scenarios will contribute to become a more resilient state in overcoming such threats.

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