



**Remarks for the
The Global Coalition Against Daesh/ISIS**

The Global Coalition Against Daesh/ISIS
Foreign Terrorist Fighters
Working Group Meeting

**By Ms. Stephanie Foggett
The Soufan Center
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About The Soufan Center

The Soufan Center (TSC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving as a resource and forum for research, analysis, and strategic dialogue related to global security issues and emergent threats. TSC fills a niche-role by producing independent, quality research and hosting proactive conversations in order to effectively equip thought leaders, policy makers, governments, bi- and multilateral institutions, media, and those in the non-profit and academic communities to engage in strategic security-related practices. Our work focuses on a broad range of complex security issues—from international and domestic terrorism, to humanitarian crisis analysis, to refugee and immigrant issues, and more.

The Soufan Center is a 501c3 non-profit organization



The Current State of Play on the Return or Repatriation of FTFs and their Families

I would like to thank The Global Coalition Against Daesh/ISIS, Foreign Terrorist Fighters Working Group, co-led by Turkey, Kuwait, and the Netherlands for inviting me to join you here today. I kindly thank the Government of Turkey for hosting this important meeting.

It is an honor to represent my organization, The Soufan Center, a U.S.-based think-tank that focuses on the nexus between security, human rights and humanitarian crises.

Our team has been monitoring the foreign fighter phenomenon since 2014, providing figures on the numbers of foreign recruits who traveled to join jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria, as well as analysis and policy considerations surrounding this issue.

By our last count, our research found that over 40,000 foreign individuals had travelled from more than 110 countries to join the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Now, following the military defeat of this terrorist organization, the international community is faced with the imminent challenge of what to do with the men, women and children who were affiliated with this group.



Thanks to the efforts of the actors in this room, ISIS can no longer lay claim to a territorial ‘caliphate’ – a devastating loss to the group. However, moving forward, we must recognize that this group still lives on in several forms:

In the region, the group is restructuring itself to lead an underground insurgency in Iraq and Syria, and the continuing challenges of rebuilding those countries mean ISIS has fertile ground to regroup.

Internationally, the group claims several affiliates that are increasingly embedding themselves in local conflicts, taking advantage of vacuums in governance and endangering the lives of countless civilians.

Finally, and, of most concern, the group lays claim to a ‘spiritual caliphate’ – an ideology and narrative which lives on the minds of many people across the world today.

Return or Repatriation of FTFs and their Families

Given the group’s ongoing regional and international activities, an important task moving forward will be to manage the situation regarding the return or repatriation of foreign populations that were affiliated with ISIS.

Our terrorism experts recommend that each state take responsibility for their respective citizens – a recommendation we consider provides the greatest long-



term security gains. While politically difficult to defend, this decision would be in the best interest of the comprehensive security of all states. Repatriation and prosecution remain the recommended course of action for both male and female members of ISIS. Foreign children and infants born in ISIS-controlled territory should not face uncertain futures in camps, but raised in ways that secures their safety and avoids their likely devolution into agents of future conflict.

While this topic is extensive, in my short remarks today I would like to highlight four particular factors to consider in today's discussion:

1. Prisons and refugee camps provide ideal environments for the ideology of ISIS to incubate and spread. Following the loss of ISIS's last remaining stronghold in Baghouz, eastern Syria, large numbers of individuals formerly affiliated with the group now find themselves in detention facilities, the largest of which is the Al Hol camp in Syria.

According to the United Nations' latest situation report on Al Hol camp¹, the total current population is now **73,393 people**. There are approximately 30,000 Iraqis; between 30-35,000 Syrians; and 10,000 or so other nationals. Of most concern, **around 70 percent of the camp's population is under the age of 18; 65 percent is under the age of**

¹ Syria: Humanitarian Response in Al Hol camp - Situation Report No. 2, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Al_Hol_Sitrep_2_FINAL_19Apr2019.pdf



12. There are an estimated 26,000 school-aged children in the camp – the majority of whom have been out of formal education for at least five years. There is also a notable absence of adolescent boys and men between the age of 15 and 65 years old (reportedly detained elsewhere).

2. In ISIS’ worldview, children are considered one of the group’s most important assets. Given that children make up around 70 per cent of the Al Hol population – and that these children could be exploited as the next generation of the so-called ‘caliphate’– the international community should urgently work together to move these children from an environment fertile for continued indoctrination and radicalization. It is also our view that states should not strip their nationals of citizenship or deny citizenship to any children born in ISIS-controlled territory as a means of trying to provide an expedient solution to a complex problem. By revoking and/or denying citizenship, states risk creating future “citizens” of the Islamic State, reinforcing the groups’ message that Sunni Muslims will never truly be accepted as equal members of any state except for the “Islamic State.” Taking back these children provides a strong counter-narrative that says we recognize these children as our fellow citizens, and as such, we fully reject any notion of citizenship imposed on them by ISIS.



3. The present situations in Iraq and Syria make local prosecution of foreign nationals problematic.

Local realities mean that the judicial systems in both countries are overextended and may struggle to manage the large number of cases for crimes carried out within their territories, including by foreign nationals. The largely Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are not an internationally recognized government and they will be both unwilling and unable to prosecute and/or hold foreign nationals in detention indefinitely. Local prisons are often underfunded, overcrowded and may provide fertile environments for ISIS's ideology to spread. Furthermore, ISIS has established provinces around the globe and after their possible release or escape from local facilities, foreign fighters may simply join new theatres of the fight, continuing to pose a threat to both their home countries, if they help facilitate attacks from abroad, and to international security, as they may join local conflicts or in other ways work to destabilize communities.

4. We should not lose sight of local ISIS fighters and families.

Ongoing political, social, and security conditions contribute to the cyclical nature of terrorism today. In parts of Iraq and Syria, years of violence have completely destroyed the social fabric; and, moving forward, communities will have to slowly rebuild trust and learn to live alongside each other again. This process must include individuals and family members formerly associated with ISIS, particularly women and children. There are thousands of people from Iraq and Syria who fought for or otherwise supported ISIS



who will remain in Iraq and Syria. Alienation, stigma, and dehumanization of these populations will only serve to perpetuate violence and conflict in the future.

In Conclusion. The military defeat of ISIS demonstrates what is possible when local and international actors come together against a common threat. Building on the military success of this coalition, an equally coordinated, consistent, and collective approach should be taken to address FTFs and their families. While ISIS has been significantly diminished, new dynamics mean that every effort should be made to keep FTFs and their families from relocating to new theatres and further exacerbating regional and international insecurity.