

Canada refuses to repatriate illegally jailed citizens accused of ISIS ties

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Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal government is refusing to abide by its legal obligation to assist and repatriate dozens of Canadians, most of them young children and women, illegally detained in miserable conditions in military prisons in northeast Syria. The prisoners are being held by Kurdish nationalist forces, who allege the Canadians had ties to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS.

The New York-based organization Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a chilling 92-page report on June 29th on the conditions faced by some 47 Canadian citizens—8 men, 13 women, and 26 children. The child detainees, most of whom are under the age of six, include a five-year-old orphan. The report was based on interviews with detainees, family relatives, and Canadian and foreign officials.

The Canadians are among some 14,000 non-Iraqi foreigners from more than 60 countries who are still being held in the north of Syria for suspected ISIS links, even though US President Donald Trump declared the Syrian war ended last year, and said ISIS forces were “one hundred percent defeated.” In fact, the US-led onslaught on Syria, which began with the instigation of a bloody civil war in 2011, has devastated the country, with more than half of the pre-war population forced to flee their homes. When the US-led air bombardment and military intervention was launched in 2014, on the pretext of combatting ISIS, Canada's Conservative government deployed fighter jets and troops to the Syria-Iraq conflict. After waging a “progressive” election campaign in 2015, including a demagogic pledge to withdraw the fighter jets, Trudeau's Liberals promptly extended and expanded Canadian military involvement in the war in early 2016. Four years on, Canada continues to maintain almost a thousand troops in Iraq, Jordan and Kuwait.

In the introduction to its report, HRW provides a scathing critique of Trudeau's refusal to bring the Canadian prisoners home. The Liberal government has left them languishing “for more than a year in overcrowded, filthy, and life-threatening conditions,” says the report. Canada, it asserts, has breached its obligations, including “taking necessary and reasonable steps to assist nationals abroad facing serious abuses including risks to life, torture, and inhuman and degrading treatment.” The HRW analysis continues, “The indefinite detention without charge of

the Canadians amounts to guilt by association and collective punishment, prohibited under international law.”

The report underlines that none of the Canadians have been charged with any crime, or even brought before a judge to review the legality and necessity of their detention. In other words, no evidence has ever been presented to prove their ties to ISIS. Three of the adults interviewed even said that ISIS had imprisoned them before they were captured by the Kurdish nationalist forces, the YPG. Some women, including at least one Canadian, said they are on an ISIS “kill list” for refusing to support the terrorist group.

The Trudeau government's refusal to honor its obligation to ensure that the basic rights of Canadian citizens, including children, are being respected, leaving them to rot in illegal prisons in Syria, represents a dangerous precedent and an attack on citizenship rights. It is a de facto abrogation of the Liberals' own Bill C-6, which at its passage in 2017 overturned a law adopted by the previous Stephen Harper-led Conservative government that stripped dual citizens of their Canadian citizenship if convicted of terrorism, treason or espionage.

The 26 children have been imprisoned because their fathers are “suspected” of having ties to ISIS. In many cases, their fathers have disappeared and are likely dead. Some children are imprisoned along with their mothers, but as the HRW report notes, others are orphans. Such is the case of five-year-old Amira, “who was found on the side of a road last year after her parents and siblings were killed in an airstrike.”

These people are arbitrarily detained in prisons and camps run by the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the militia force backed by the US-led Global Coalition Against ISIS, of which Canada is a member. It is worth noting in this regard that the SDF was embraced as Washington and Ottawa's proxy force in the campaign to overthrow the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad only after the Sunni Islamist forces they had previously supported were either vanquished or had defected to ISIS. If anyone is to be held accountable for the crimes of Islamic State—many of whose foreign fighters were funneled into Syria with the support of the Western powers or their Gulf State allies—it should be the imperialist powers who fostered its growth, rather than the women and children caught up in the maelstrom created by US imperialism's drive to consolidate its

hegemony in the Middle East.

The conditions in the prison camps are horrendous. HRW notes, “In makeshift prisons for men and adolescent boys food is scarce and overcrowding is so severe that many of the detainees must sleep shoulder to shoulder. ... In locked camps for women, girls, and younger boys, tents collapse in strong winds or flood with rain or sewage.”

The report goes on to point out that no protective equipment is provided to face the coronavirus pandemic. It notes, “Drinking water is often contaminated or in short supply. Latrines are overflowing, wild dogs scavenge mounds of garbage littering the grounds, and illnesses including viral infections are rampant. Medical care is grossly inadequate.”

HRW estimates that more than 100 prisoners and possibly several hundred have died, many from lack of care, since mid-2019. The Kurdish Red Crescent reported that in al-Hol—the larger of two camps for women and children with about 65,000 detainees—at least 517 people, 371 of them children, died in 2019, many from preventable diseases.

Trudeau has resorted to evasions and flat-out lies to justify his government’s decision to leave dozens of Canadian citizens in perilous conditions. “Syria is an area where we do not have any diplomats or any Canadians on the ground and therefore we work through intermediaries to try and provide consular assistance as best we can,” he said when questioned about the HRW report. In fact, Canada has managed to repatriate 40,000 citizens from 100 countries since March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including 29 from Syria.

Even though other imperialist countries such as the US, France, Germany, the UK and Australia have repatriated some of their citizens detained in Kurdish camps so as to prosecute and jail them, the Trudeau government has no intention of doing so. One reason for this is that the government knows that attempts to prosecute the adult detainees, male or female, are likely to fail, for lack of evidence that they were ISIS fighters, let alone broke any Canadian law.

Above all, the Liberals fear that if they repatriate the detainees, the Conservatives and other of their right-wing opponents will lambaste them for imperiling “national security” and an indulgent attitude towards “terrorists” so as to politically destabilize the government. As HRW points out in its report, “Although Canadian authorities do not cite potential political fallout as a reason, in 2017 Trudeau faced a backlash simply for supporting rehabilitation programs for Canadian (ISIL) suspects who return home.”

The abandonment of vulnerable, traumatized and, in many cases, ill children points to the vindictiveness and moral decay of Canada’s ruling establishment. It is also in line with the criminal policy of successive Liberal and Conservative governments of imprisoning innocent refugees and their children in migrant prisons in Canada itself. According to the latest data reviewed by the refugee rights group No One is Illegal, the Canadian government jailed more than 87,000

refugee claimants and other migrants without charge between 2006 and 2014, including up to 807 children per year. These migrants are detained under atrocious conditions in provincial prisons and in various immigration-holding centers run by the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA).

The capturing, jailing and torturing of civilians have also become commonplace in the uninterrupted series of US-led military conflicts involving Canadian imperialism over the past quarter century. From NATO’s bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999 to the neocolonial occupation of Afghanistan, the air war on Libya and the ongoing conflict in Iraq and Syria, US and Canadian forces have devastated entire societies, killed tens of thousands, and forced millions to flee their homes.

Canadian citizens caught in the crosshairs of US and Canadian imperialist aggression have suffered systematic abuse and mistreatment. Omar Khadr, who was detained as a child soldier in Afghanistan in 2002, became the youngest inmate of the infamous Guantanamo Bay prison camp. During 10 years of detention in this hell-hole, he was abused and tortured by US authorities with the complicity of successive Liberal and Conservative governments. (See: Canada's role in the persecution of child soldier Omar Khadr)

In the early years of the so-called “war on terror,” Ottawa also instituted what the *World Socialist Web Site* described as a “made in Canada form of rendition,” under which Canada’s national-security agencies encouraged authoritarian regimes to detain and torture Canadians suspected of possible terrorist ties when they travelled abroad. Maher Arar and Abousfian Abdelrazikk, both of whom were Canadian citizens, were detained, tortured, and interrogated by the Syrian and Sudanese regimes respectively. In both cases, the torturers used information supplied by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service to question them. No evidence of their involvement in terrorist activity was ever uncovered (See: Cover-up in Canada’s complicity in torture continues).



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