

# Labor government moves to bar entry to Australian women and children interned in Syria

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Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has personally denounced 11 young women and 23 children—all Australian citizens—who were prevented from returning home this week from hellhole conditions in Syria. “I have nothing but contempt for them,” he declared on national radio yesterday, before being prompted to say he did not have contempt for the children, who are mostly babies or infants.

The Australians have been detained in a virtual concentration camp since 2019, together with thousands of other families whose governments have blocked their returns, asserting links to accused former Islamic State (ISIS) fighters. Many of the children were born in detention and have known no other life, deprived of essential care and education, resulting in illnesses and deaths.

The 11 families had left the Al Roj internment camp in northeastern Syria on Monday with plans to travel to Beirut and then Australia, only to be turned around 50 kilometres into their journey and sent back to their incarceration. Albanese immediately declared that his government would do nothing to assist them, even if it was “unfortunate” for the children.

On Wednesday, Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke said he had imposed a Temporary Exclusion Order (TEO) on one unidentified member of the group, overturning their legal and democratic right, as a citizen, to return to Australia for at least two years, “on advice from security agencies.”

This indicates that the Labor government may have intervened to halt the group’s journey, despite its members having Australian passports, to which they are legally entitled, permitting them to return.

Labor’s rhetoric echoes the poison of the far-right anti-immigrant One Nation party, which is trying to divert rising discontent with deteriorating living standards into scapegoating and demonising immigrants. Albanese told Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio yesterday: “These are people who chose to go overseas to align

themselves with an ideology which is the caliphate, which is a brutal, reactionary ideology and that seeks to undermine and destroy our way of life.”

Albanese matched the increasingly strident anti-immigrant line of the opposition Liberal-National Coalition. Its recently-elected leader Angus Taylor told Ben Fordham on 2GB radio that Australia “should shut the door to people wanting to come to our country who want to bring hate and violence of another part of the world to our country.”

Such language, referring to threats to “our way of life” or “Australian values,” can be used to justify barring entry to anyone—including Australian citizens—who are deemed by ministerial decree to be enemies of the existing economic and political order.

Labor’s actions flout warnings from Amnesty International and other non-government agencies of widespread and systematic human rights abuses in the Syrian internment camps, where they say detainees, many of whom were forcibly trafficked to ISIS or born into its rule, are subjected to torture, gender-based violence, forced disappearance and other atrocities.

Last month, a panel of UN rapporteurs and experts voiced concern about a further deterioration in the plight of the families under the US-backed Syrian Islamist government headed by Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa, and called on “over 50 countries to urgently repatriate, rehabilitate and reintegrate the thousands of foreign nationals in detention.”

They said: “ISIL-related mass indefinite detention in North-East Syria has been a legal blackhole for over six years, with no legal basis or due process. A majority of detainees are children and women who have suffered serious rights violations.”

In overturning basic legal and democratic rights, Albanese and his ministers have gone beyond even the previous Liberal-National government, which permitted the return of eight orphans and a newborn baby in 2019. At that time, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, however hypocritically,

professed sympathy for the plight of the children.

Moreover, in 2022, the Labor government itself allowed the repatriation of 13 children and four women, but only on the basis of placing the women on restrictive control orders and to face possible imprisonment on charges of having entered a prohibited zone that had been under effective ISIS control.

The women were forced to wear ankle monitoring devices and allow the police and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) to monitor their social media activity, internet use, communications, movements and associates. These control orders were the widest ever application of such police-state measures, which were introduced in 2005 by the Howard Coalition government, backed by Labor, as part of the supposed “war on terrorism.”

Last October, two Australian women and their four children escaped a camp in Syria and made their own way to Lebanon. Once at the Australian embassy, they were given passports, as required by law, to return to Australia.

Even such legally-mandated steps are now being condemned. Coalition leaders have demanded that Burke impose TEOs on the rest of the turned-back women and children. As home affairs minister, he has the arbitrary discretionary power to do so, effectively stripping a person of citizenship rights without any court order.

Burke only has to assert a “reasonable suspicion” that an exclusion order would “substantially assist” the prevention of a possible terrorist-related act, or that ASIO had classified a citizen as likely to support “politically motivated violence.”

Terrorism is defined in sweeping terms that can cover anti-government activity or statements, and “politically motivated violence” includes acts directed to “assisting in the overthrow” of a government, which could mean voicing anti-establishment or socialist views.

The TEO legislation, introduced in 2019 by the Morrison government, with Labor’s support, explicitly denies any right to procedural fairness, that is, the right to notice, a hearing and lack of bias. It also seeks to block judicial review, instead providing for oversight by a “reviewing authority,” usually a government-appointed judge or former judge.

Far from being “temporary,” TEOs can be renewed repeatedly by ministerial fiat, allowing the indefinite barring of entry to citizens. The home affairs minister can also revoke any return permit “on the Minister’s own initiative.”

Return permits can include pre- and post-entry conditions such as police and ASIO reporting requirements. Entering Australia without a permit or breaching permit conditions is an offence punishable by up to two years in prison.

The imposition of TEOs flies in the face of 2022 and 2023

rulings by the High Court, Australia’s supreme court, that it is unconstitutional for governments to revoke a person’s citizenship without a court order, because that amounts to extra-judicial punishment.

Two underlying issues must be emphasised. First, for all the corporate media demonisation of the women and children interned in Syria, nothing has been said about the origins of ISIS. It was largely a creation of the drive by US imperialism and its allies to overturn the regime of Syrian President Assad and impose control over the Middle East, which is pivotal to US war preparations against Iran and China.

In Syria, the US and its partners turned to reactionary Islamic fundamentalist forces to carry out their objectives, as they did earlier with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Foreign fighters were allowed to flood into Syria and western Iraq, including from Libya, where they had been supported by the US and NATO in 2011 to overthrow the Gaddafi regime.

That was after successive Australian governments, Coalition and Labor alike, sent troops to the illegal US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, aimed at securing US dominance over the resource-rich region. More than a million people died in these wars and entire societies have been destroyed, with tens of millions made homeless.

Second, nor is there any mention in the media of the social conditions that have provided fertile ground for the recruitment of vulnerable young men and their partners by Islamists who pose as enemies of global imperialism and inequality.

In Australia’s working-class suburbs, young people from Middle Eastern and other immigrant backgrounds face a future of low-wage employment, poor educational and social facilities, and constant police harassment, under Labor and Coalition governments alike. That is the reality of the “Australian way of life.”



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