

# Labor blocks return of Australian citizens interned in Syria

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The Albanese Labor government has doubled down on preventing the journey home of women and children trying to leave the hellhole conditions in the Al Roj internment camp in northeastern Syria, thus violating their fundamental democratic right as citizens to return to Australia.

Thirteen women and children from four families, previously linked to dead or imprisoned Islamic State fighters, left the concentration camp, a remote facility on the Iraq border, on April 24 to travel to the Syrian capital Damascus, and reportedly have plane tickets to get to Australia.

However, the Syrian regime's information ministry told the Associated Press the group was turned back before reaching Damascus International Airport as "the Australian government had refused to receive" them.

While cynically claiming to not be "engaged" in blocking the group's return, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke have reiterated their opposition to their re-entry, citing explicitly political grounds.

Albanese declared last week: "They made decisions to leave Australia to fight against Australia's national interest for an ideological group that want to—don't respect Australian law or Australian values."

This sets a wider precedent for barring the return of citizens deemed to be lacking in respect for the "values" prescribed by the ruling capitalist establishment.

Many of the children, some as young as six, were born in detention and have known no other life, deprived of essential care and education, resulting in illnesses and deaths. Their Australian mothers mostly reportedly moved to the Middle East during the so-called Islamic State caliphate, which was declared in 2014, then were displaced after its defeat in 2019.

Despite feigning sympathy for the children, Albanese stated: "Our position is very clear. They made their decision. There are consequences for them of the decisions that they have made. Unfortunately, there are also consequences for these children who are victims of their parents and those adults who made that decision."

While the group of 13 reached Damascus early on April 25, seven remaining Australian mothers and their 14 children are still stuck in the primitive Al Roj camp, where they have been incarcerated since 2019. Conditions are further deteriorating

around them under the US-backed Islamic fundamentalist Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) regime that seized power in Syria in late 2024.

This is the second such blocking act by the Albanese government. On February 16, it prevented the return of the larger group of 11 women and 23 children—all Australian citizens with valid passports. They had left the Al Roj camp in a convoy with plans to travel to Beirut and then Australia, only to be turned around 50 kilometres into their journey.

Albanese and Burke have also stated their readiness to exclude these citizens, either by imposing Temporary Exclusion Orders or revoking passports if advised to do so by the domestic surveillance agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO).

As the WSWS has explained, Labor's stand is not just barbaric. It has wider implications as a standard for use against other citizens deemed politically undesirable. It constitutes a historic assault on the core democratic right of citizenship, without which no other political or civil rights can effectively be exercised, including the rights to reside, vote, politically communicate and challenge government decisions, including arbitrary detention without trial.

Albanese's government is so intent on stopping the return of the families that it is cutting across efforts by the Syrian regime, supported by the US State Department, the UN and Red Cross, to shut down the Al Roj camp. The Syrian regime's Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani had approved the extraction of the families from the facility.

Labor government ministers have repeatedly declared that if any of the stranded families managed to return to Australia, they would face "the full force of the law," without specifying what charges would be laid. That alone prejudices the possibility of any fair trial.

Addressing a press conference alongside Albanese last Thursday, Burke declared that some in the group would be "weighing up" their decision to return, fearing they would be arrested upon landing in Australia.

Some women who return from Syria may face charges under Australian laws of entering or remaining in proscribed terrorist areas, similar to those laid against Mariam Raad, another Australian who returned in 2022 and pleaded guilty to such a

charge.

While a magistrate ruled that the case against Raad was proved, no conviction was recorded and she was placed on a 25-month good behaviour bond after successfully arguing she had entered and remained in the Islamic State caliphate under duress.

This crime consists of being in a “declared area” proclaimed by the foreign affairs minister. This is one of the many offences created since the declaration of the “war on terrorism” in 2001 that hand arbitrary police-state powers to government ministers. The minister only has to be “satisfied” that a terrorist organisation proscribed by ministerial decree is engaging in hostile activity there.

Alternatively, members of the group could be placed in detention or under house arrest without trial through the imposition of control orders or preventative detention orders—which also can be imposed on vague grounds.

At a media conference last Tuesday, Albanese denied that he had changed his stance since 2019. Then, as parliamentary opposition leader, he said the children were worthy of protection. Now, he said, the children were victims of their parents’ “evil choices to undermine Australia’s national interest.”

Labor’s actions have far-reaching implications. They set a bar that can block entry to any citizen deemed to have undermined the “national interest”—that is, the interests of the ruling capitalist class and its political representatives.

Two days after the larger group was turned back on February 16, Burke imposed a Temporary Exclusion Order (TEO) on one unidentified member of the group. TEOs are not “temporary.” They can be renewed indefinitely.

Under the TEO Act, the home affairs minister only has to declare 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.” That includes acts directed to “assisting in the overthrow” of a government. These vague words could extend to voicing anti-establishment or socialist views.

Also, the Australian Passports Act hands the foreign affairs minister the power to refuse or cancel a passport if they merely “suspect on reasonable grounds” that a person “would be likely” to engage in conduct that “might prejudice the security of Australia or a foreign country.”

These formulations could extend to a citizen denouncing the Labor government’s support for the ongoing Gaza genocide and the criminal US-Israeli war on Iran, or to a citizen opposing Labor’s AUKUS pact and other preparations to join a US-led war against China.

In 2019, 2022 and 2025—first under the previous Liberal-National Coalition government, then the Albanese Labor government, three groups of Australian citizens—32 women and children in total—returned from the camps.

Today Albanese, Burke and others are vying to outdo the Coalition by accusing it of permitting Islamic State-related citizens to return to Australia under Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government.

This is a warning of how far the Labor leaders will go in tearing up fundamental legal and democratic rights as they compete with their Coalition counterparts to outflank Senator Pauline Hanson’s far-right anti-immigrant One Nation party.

They are all trying to make immigrants, particularly Muslims, scapegoats for the cost-of-living crisis, housing unaffordability and declining living and social conditions confronting working-class households, now being intensified by the criminal US-Israeli war on Iran, which the Labor government has supported from day one on February 28.

This is in line with the rightward lurch of political establishments internationally, from the fascistic Trump administration in the US to Nigel Farage’s Reform UK, Marine Le Pen’s National Rally in France and the AfD in Germany.

There is a notorious precedent for barring the return of a citizen by denying them a passport. During the Cold War, the Menzies Liberal-Country Party government refused to issue a passport to the Australian-born journalist Wilfred Burchett—who had exposed the death toll from the US nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as US war crimes in Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia—and others suspected of communist sympathies. From 1955, Burchett was forcibly exiled for 17 years.

Historically, there has never been a constitutionally protected right to citizenship in Australia. In fact, there is no bill or rights guaranteeing any basic right, including the right to vote. Instead, the 1901 Constitution, a British colonial era document adopted by the emerging Australian capitalist class, treated residents as “British subjects.”

After World War II, the Chifley Labor government introduced the 1948 Nationality and Citizenship Act, which recognised birthright (jus soli) citizenship that made anyone born in Australia a citizen. That principle was overturned by the Hawke Labor government’s legislation in 1986, which mandated that at least one parent be a citizen or permanent resident.

Basic legal and democratic rights, including citizenship itself, are threatened in the hands of the ruling class and its political servants. The defence of all such rights depends on the development of a mass movement of the working class, guided by a socialist perspective for the total reorganisation of society, with full civil and political rights for all people, regardless of their country of birth.



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