

Australian Labor government persecutes women and children returning from Syria

Oscar Grenfell
8 May 2026

A small group of four vulnerable women and nine children, who arrived in Australia yesterday after years of arbitrary detention in Syria, have been subjected to a venomous reception by the country's Labor government and the entire political and media establishment.

There were hysterical media packs at Sydney and Melbourne airports, intent on creating a scene. And scarcely after they had landed, three of the four women were arrested before being charged with offences that could see them imprisoned for decades, or even for life.

One of the women has been hit with terror offences related to allegedly entering a "declared area," a portion of Syria that was then under the control of Islamic State (IS). Unbelievably, two of the other women have been charged with crimes against humanity, in what will be the first such prosecution in Australia since trials of alleged Japanese war criminals in the aftermath of World War II.

The treatment of the women and children is grotesque and amounts to political persecution. The Labor government is effectively seeking to destroy the vulnerable people, who have already suffered enormous hardships. The vilification of the group, amounting to incitement to violence against them, is transparently Islamophobic.

The government is competing, not only with the conservative Liberal-National Coalition, but with the fascistic and anti-immigrant One Nation party, whose leader Pauline Hanson only recently declared that there were "no good" Muslims. The aim is to whip up an atmosphere of racist hysteria. That is one component of a broader anti-immigrant drive, whose purpose is to divert social discontent into reactionary channels. At the same time, the attacks on the cohort are being used to undermine the core democratic rights of the entire population.

That has already occurred. Over recent months, Labor has repeatedly blocked the group and 21 other women and children from returning to Australia, despite the fact that all of them are Australian citizens.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, that set a far-reaching precedent "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."

Blocking the group from returning consigned them to remain in the Al Roj camp in Syria, where they were imprisoned without charge since the fall of IS in 2019. The camp lacks basic sanitation, has been the scene of mass outbreaks of disease and untold dozens have died there.

While subjecting the women and children to the risk of death in the camp, Labor government leaders publicly vilified them. "If you make your bed, you lie in it," Prime Minister Anthony Albanese contemptuously declared in February, ignoring the fact that some of the women say they were tricked or coerced into entering Syria and the obvious reality that the children are guilty of nothing.

The ability of the first 13 to return yesterday did not mark any shift from Labor's assault on citizenship rights. Instead, they were permitted to enter the country after representatives of the Syrian government told the press that the only obstacle to the repatriation of the families was the fact that they were being blocked by the Labor government. Documents had also been leaked to the media, showing that US authorities, who back the new Syrian regime, also supported the repatriation.

Labor's decision to allow the families to enter Australia, as is their fundamental right as citizens, had nothing to do with legal niceties but was bound up with the alliance with the fascistic administration of US President Donald Trump.

The levelling of the charges against three of the women, however, can only serve as a massive disincentive for the women who remain in Syria to return. The extraordinary prosecution for crimes against humanity is thus aimed at perpetuating the ban on the other families returning, only in a different form.

Those charges relate to the alleged practice by IS of enslaving women of the Yazidi ethno-religious minority. That IS was an utterly reactionary entity that committed heinous crimes is not in doubt.

The suggestion, though, that two random Australian women were in anyway central to those crimes is simply absurd. One of the women charged is a 54-year-old grandmother. The other is currently only 31, meaning that she would have been still in

her teens or very early 20s during the period that the charges relate to.

The substance of the accusation appears to be the claim that the two women were in the same household as an alleged Yazidi slave. As is well known, IS, however, not only enslaved and persecuted minorities, but was an ultra-patriarchal organisation, with women, including wives and mothers in a subordinate position that in some instances may also have resembled slavery. Under those conditions, the charges have a punitive character, punishing potential victims themselves.

In any event, only the wilfully naive would believe that the Australian government and its imperialist allies has the slightest interest in the welfare of the Yazidis or in the prevention of “crimes against humanity.”

The persecution of the families attempting to flee Syria has coincided with a massive crime against humanity, the unprovoked and illegal US war against Iran. US President Trump has carpet bombed an oppressed country of 93 million, in a war for regime-change and dominance. In doing so, he has uttered Hitleresque statements of genocidal intent, including threats to return Iran to the “stone ages” and to “annihilate” its civilisation entirely.

The Labor government is fully complicit. Albanese was among the first world leaders to explicitly welcome the sneak attack on Iran on February 28, despite ongoing negotiations between the two countries. His government has since dispatched troops, including Special Forces, a warplane and missiles to the Middle East to directly participate in the illegal war.

That follows more than three years, during which Labor has politically, diplomatically and materially supported Israel’s mass murder of the Palestinians, in an atrocity that has been deemed by all reputable human rights and international law organisations to constitute a genocide.

It should be the perpetrators and enablers of those crimes, the leaders of the Labor government among them, in the docks for crimes against humanity, not a couple of working-class women who became caught up in the Syrian civil war.

In all of the media hysteria over the “ISIS brides,” there is no analysis of the character or the roots of that war. In fact IS emerged directly out of a US war for regime-change in Syria, that was one of the preparations for the current assault on Iran and the broader global war, targeting Russia and China, of which that criminal assault is a part.

Beginning in 2011, Washington instigated a civil war in Syria, in a bid to oust the regime of President Bashar Al-Assad, because of its close ties to Iran and Russia. In what has since been acknowledged as one of its largest operations in history, the CIA funnelled hundreds of millions of dollars in arms and cash to Islamist opposition groups that were also supported by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.

It was from such Islamist groups that IS emerged. The US only targeted it after IS declared a caliphate and crossed into

Iraq, threatening American dominance over oil fields. The broader regime-change operation continued, however, culminating in the fall of Assad in December 2024 and the establishment of a US-aligned government run by the former Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda.

Australia also backed the regime-change operation out of which IS emerged. In 2012, Foreign Minister Bob Carr announced that the then Labor government recognised the Syrian opposition, whose ground forces were Islamist militias, as the “legitimate” administration of the country. In the same year, Carr publicly suggested that Assad should be assassinated, an extraordinary call for international law to be violated.

While the Labor government and the subsequent Coalition administration warned that Australians who went to fight in Syria could be subject to prosecution on return, dozens of Australians were able to make the journey, without any attempt to hinder them. There is a distinct sense that, for a period at least, elements of the security establishment had an “open door” policy allowing Islamists to travel to Syria, in line with the US war aims.

The same Australian state that was party to the US-led proxy war that created the conditions for ISIS’s rise—that cheered on the arming of jihadists, bombed Syria, and participated in the destruction of the entire regional order—turned around and used these women and children as scapegoats, political targets and instruments of domestic fear-mongering.

As part of the frenzy of demands to deny these citizens the right to be repatriated, and together with the Coalition, One Nation and the far right, the Murdoch press demanded these citizens be sent to Christmas Island for “deradicalisation”—a chilling demand for indefinite detention and ideological coercion of Australian citizens without charge or trial.

The persecution of the Syrian families all these years later, including of children who were not even alive during the IS caliphate, should be opposed by the working class. It is inseparable from an assault on democratic rights that is completely connected to the new stage of imperialist militarism, expressed in the criminal assault on Iran.



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