

ISIS-linked families return to Australia, but mother and child blocked

Mike Head
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Despite the efforts of the Albanese Labor government to vilify and block them, a group of Islamic State-linked Australian citizens—19 women and children—trapped since 2019 in squalid conditions in the Al Roj internment camp in northeastern Syria returned to Australia on Tuesday, only to face another media-government-police witch hunt.

On arrival—some at Sydney airport and others in Melbourne—they were subjected to interrogations and searches, including of their electronic devices, amid an intensive police presence, featuring heavily-armed riot squad officers. But no charges were laid or arrests made, even though the government and the police-intelligence agencies said they had been under surveillance and investigation for years.

Unnamed “government sources” rushed to tell reporters that some of the women may be charged in coming days, as were three women who returned with their children on May 7 and remain in prison, separated from their children and denied bail.

Suddenly on Thursday, in what appeared to be a deliberately timed move to reinforce that threatening message, Rayann El Houli, a woman who returned from Syria last September with her sister and their four children, was arrested in a morning police raid. She was charged with entering or remaining in a “declared area” and being a member of a terrorist organisation. Both offences carry a maximum penalty of 10 years’ imprisonment.

Moreover, one member of this week’s arrival group, Hodan Abby, and her nine-year-old daughter, remain stranded in the Middle East. Abby is barred from re-entry to Australia by an arbitrary Temporary Exclusion Order (TEO) issued by ministerial decree. This is not only endangering their health but violating the fundamental democratic right of citizens to return home.

Judging by family accounts and media reports, Abby’s daughter badly needs medical treatment. She suffers from shrapnel wounds in her head, hip and back, making it difficult for her to walk and causing delayed speech and development. Abby herself has a piece of shrapnel in her chest.

Nevertheless, Abby was denied permission to board the flight in the Syrian capital Damascus with the remainder of the group, despite having tickets to Sydney. She was only 18 when she travelled to Syria in 2015.

This TEO sets a wider precedent for barring the return of citizens deemed to be politically unacceptable to the government, which could include opposing Labor’s support for the ongoing US-backed genocide in Gaza, the US-Israeli war on Iran and Lebanon or Washington’s plans for a global war against China.

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 the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the domestic political surveillance agency, classified a citizen as likely to support “politically motivated violence.”

That supposed “violence” includes acts directed to “assisting in the overthrow” of a government. These vague words could extend to voicing anti-establishment or socialist views.

Neither Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke nor ASIO has provided the public with any information about their allegations against Abby. The TEO against her has been set for two years. But TEOs are not “temporary.” They can be renewed indefinitely.

As the WSWWS has explained, Labor’s TEO and its previous operations to block all the women and children constitute a historic attack on the core democratic right of citizenship, without which no other political or civil rights can effectively be exercised, such as the rights to reside, vote, politically communicate and challenge government decisions, even arbitrary detention without trial.

Speaking in parliament on Tuesday, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese again voiced his hostility to the return of the women and children. “I have nothing but contempt for anyone who has any sympathy with ISIS,” he declared. He reiterated that “the government has provided no assistance for these people” and “any breaches of the law will mean these people will face the full force of the law.”

Such prime ministerial declarations not only incite hatred, specifically anti-Muslim prejudice, but also prejudice any chances of fair trials if charges are laid.

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.

Conditions further deteriorated around them under the US Trump administration-backed Islamic fundamentalist Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) regime that seized power in Syria in late 2024. Media reports indicate that the Albanese government only eventually permitted their return, after months of delay, because Washington insisted—supporting efforts by the HTS regime to shut down the Al Roj camp, which had been operated by Kurdish forces.

On February 16, the government had prevented the return of the overall 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 Australia, only to be turned around 50 kilometres into their journey.

Earlier this month, when a group of four women and nine children

arrived in Australia, three of the mothers were arrested and charged with offences that could see them imprisoned for decades. One woman was charged with allegedly entering a “declared” area of Syria. Two women were charged with crimes against humanity, relating to allegations of keeping domestic slaves.

Charges of remaining in a banned zone were laid against Mariam Raad, another Australian who returned in 2022 and pleaded guilty, which could have meant up to 10 years’ imprisonment, but no conviction was recorded and she was placed on a 25-month good behaviour bond.

In the June 2024 verdict, a magistrate accepted that Raad was in a coercive relationship with her husband, was “immature and blindly following” him when she travelled to Syria at the age of 18, and noted her contrition and good prospects for “rehabilitation” as a single mother of four children.

This offence consists of being in a “declared area” proclaimed by the foreign affairs minister. It 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, also proscribed by ministerial decree, is engaging in hostile activity there.

A reactionary political shift

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 other Labor leaders 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.

Labor’s assault on fundamental democratic rights has escalated since the December 14 ISIS-linked terrorist shootings at Sydney’s Bondi Beach, for which the federal and state Labor governments have blamed—and sought to shut down—the widespread demonstrations in Australia against the ongoing US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza, falsely accusing participants of antisemitism.

This is a warning that the Labor leaders are willing to tear up fundamental legal and democratic rights as they compete with their Coalition counterparts to outflank the far-right anti-immigrant One Nation, whose leader, Senator Pauline Hanson, recently declared that there were “no good” Muslims.

The aim is to whip up an atmosphere of racist hysteria, 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, intensified by the criminal US-Israeli war on Iran.

This is in line with the rightward lurch in the 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.

The mothers, usually from working-class suburbs of Sydney or Melbourne, often went to Syria at very young ages. For example, Kirsty Rosse-Emile, who grew up in the outer Melbourne suburb of Dandenong, was only 14 when she was married to a Moroccan-born

dual citizen, Nabil Kadmiry, in 2008. They left Australia in 2014. He would eventually go on to become an Islamic State fighter and be stripped of his Australian citizenship in 2019.

In all the hysteria over the “ISIS brides,” one question is never posed: What were the oppressive social and political conditions that provided fertile ground for the recruitment of vulnerable young men and their partners by reactionary Islamists who posed as enemies of global imperialism and inequality, especially after the devastating US-led, Australian-joined, invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Throughout 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.

Nor is there any mention of the fact that ISIS emerged directly out of a US war for regime-change in Syria. Beginning in 2011, Washington instigated a civil war in Syria, in a bid to oust President Bashar Al-Assad, because of his ties to Iran and Russia. The CIA funnelled hundreds of millions of dollars in arms and cash to Islamist opposition groups. The US only targeted ISIS after it declared a caliphate and crossed into Iraq, threatening American dominance over oil fields.

Historically, there has never been a constitutionally protected right to citizenship in Australia. There is no bill or rights guaranteeing any basic right, including the right to vote in the 1901 Constitution, a British colonial era document adopted by the emerging Australian capitalist class.

However, ongoing struggles by working people for basic democratic rights forced a shift. 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 eroded by Hawke Labor government legislation in 1986, which mandated that at least one parent be a citizen or permanent resident.

Conclusions need to be drawn. Basic legal and democratic rights, including citizenship itself, are threatened in the hands of the ruling class and its political servants. A mass movement of the working class must be built, guided by a socialist and internationalist perspective for the total reorganisation of society, to guarantee full civil and political rights for all people, regardless of their country of birth.



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