

**Forum:** General Assembly

**Issue:** The question of the legal status for returning jihadists and their families

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## Introduction

The phenomenon of “returning jihadists”, meaning individuals who travelled abroad to join terrorist organizations such as ISIS or Al-Qaeda and later attempt to return to their home countries, represents one of the most complex legal and ethical challenges in contemporary international law. The issue extends beyond fighters themselves to include spouses and children, many of whom are victims rather than perpetrators.

States face a fundamental dilemma: balancing national security concerns with international legal obligations, including human rights, humanitarian law, and principles such as due process and non-refoulement. The absence of a unified legal framework has led to fragmented national responses, ranging from prosecution and rehabilitation to citizenship revocation and refusal of repatriation.

The collapse of the Islamic State’s territorial “caliphate” in 2019 serves as the primary inflection point for this crisis, transitioning the international community from a state of active combat to a protracted legal and humanitarian stalemate. In the wake of this defeat, thousands of foreign nationals remain in a state of legal limbo in detention camps across Northeast Syria, such as Al-Hol and Roj. This situation has exposed the friction between the traditional exercise of state sovereignty, specifically the power to determine the limits of citizenship and national belonging, and the evolving standards of international human rights law. For many states, the reluctance to repatriate is driven by the evidentiary challenges of prosecuting crimes committed in foreign conflict zones, where the chain of custody for digital and physical evidence is often broken, leading to fears of “acquittal by default” upon return (i.e. inability to prosecute).

Central to this debate is the nuanced legal classification of those accompanying the fighters. While international law increasingly recognizes women as active participants in extremist structures rather than passive “brides,” the application of mens rea (whether they were willing participants) in such contexts remains legally fraught. Furthermore, the status of children (many of whom are stateless) presents a singular challenge to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These minors occupy a “victim-threat” duality in

national policy, where their right to recovery and reintegration is frequently overshadowed by their perceived potential for future radicalization.

As the international community navigates these gray zones, the reliance on ad-hoc measures has increasingly strained the global counter-terrorism architecture. The tension is most visible in the interpretation of UN Security Council Resolutions 2178 and 2396; while the former mandates the criminalization of foreign terrorist travel, the latter emphasizes the necessity of tailored prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration (PRR) strategies. This report aims to dissect these competing legal imperatives, providing delegates with the necessary framework to evaluate whether the current international order can accommodate the return of these individuals without compromising the very principles of justice and security it seeks to uphold.

## **Term Definitions**

### **Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs)**

Individuals who travel abroad to join armed groups, often with ideological motivations, not necessarily limited to jihadist causes.

### **Returnees**

FTFs and affiliated individuals (families) who return or attempt to return to their home countries.

### **Repatriation**

State-led return of nationals from conflict zones.

### **Deradicalization / Reintegration**

Policies aimed at reducing extremist ideology and facilitating societal reintegration.

### **Blowback Effect**

Risk that trained fighters return and conduct attacks domestically.

## Background Information

The phenomenon of individuals traveling to participate in foreign conflicts is well-documented, spanning from the Spanish Civil War to the Soviet-Afghan War of the 1980s. However, the 21st-century iteration characterized by global jihadist ideology represents a significant shift in both scale and intent. The outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 served as a primary catalyst for an unprecedented mobilization, with estimates suggesting that approximately 5,000 European Union nationals from 26 member states traveled to the region since 2012 to join insurgent groups, most notably Da'esh. This massive influx of participants necessitated a shift in international legal terminology. While such individuals were historically categorized as mercenaries or volunteers, the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 in 2014 established a formal legal definition for "Foreign Terrorist Fighters" (FTFs). This framework specifically identifies individuals traveling to a state other than their residence or nationality for the purpose of planning, participating in, or receiving training for terrorist acts.

The drivers behind this mobilization are diverse and multifaceted, complicating the legal and social efforts for reintegration upon return. Ideological pull factors, such as the belief in the necessity of armed struggle to establish a caliphate, were often amplified through sophisticated online and peer networks. Simultaneously, socioeconomic push factors—including social exclusion, a lack of identity, and perceived grievances against Western foreign policy—played significant roles in the radicalization process of many European departees. It is critical for delegates to recognize that the "returnee" population is not a monolith; it comprises battle-hardened combatants, non-combatant men, women who occupied diverse roles beyond the "jihadi bride" stereotype, and children, many of whom were born within the conflict zone and lack documentation.

The international response to this phenomenon underwent a profound transformation following the high-profile terrorist attacks in Brussels and Paris between 2014 and 2015. These events shifted the political discourse from a humanitarian and preventative focus toward a framework of national security and repression. Consequently, many member

states tightened administrative measures, implementing policies such as pre-trial detention, the restriction of movement through passport seizure, and the highly controversial deprivation of citizenship to prevent the return of their nationals. This legislative convergence was further solidified by European Union Directive 2017/541, which harmonized the criminalization of terrorism-related travel across the Union, reflecting a collective "tougher" stance on the returnee issue.

The territorial collapse of the ISIL "caliphate" following the Battle of Baghuz in March 2019 ushered in the current geopolitical and legal crisis. Currently, thousands of foreign fighters and their families remain in a state of legal limbo, detained in camps such as Al-Hol and Roj in northeast Syria. These facilities are managed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which has repeatedly asserted its inability to provide indefinite detention, thereby placing immense pressure on home countries to facilitate repatriation. This has created a deep-seated legal debate between a "hands-off" approach, which often leaves nationals to face local prosecution or potential statelessness, and the obligation of states to repatriate their citizens under international human rights frameworks.

The question of returning children presents a particularly acute policy contradiction and a central challenge for international law. These minors are frequently viewed simultaneously as victims of their parents' choices and as potential future security threats due to their prolonged exposure to violence and extremist indoctrination. The resulting legal deadlock highlights the core tension that delegates must navigate: the need to balance the security imperative of protecting the state with international legal obligations regarding the rights of the child, the prevention of statelessness, and the principles of fair trial and rehabilitation.

## Countries and Organisations Involved

### France

France occupies a central position in the debate surrounding returning jihadists, largely due to the significant number of its nationals who travelled to Syria and Iraq and the direct impact of terrorist attacks on its territory. The country has experienced some of the most severe instances of “blowback,” including the 2015 Paris attacks, which were linked to individuals who had trained abroad. As a result, French policy has been strongly shaped by security considerations, leading to a predominantly restrictive approach toward returnees.

In practice, France has generally favoured the prosecution of its nationals in the regions where crimes were committed, particularly in Iraq, rather than actively repatriating them. This position reflects both political pressures and concerns regarding the potential risks associated with reintegrating returnees into French society. However, this approach has been widely criticized for relying on judicial systems that may not meet international fair trial standards, thereby raising questions about France’s compliance with its human rights obligations. While the French government has shown greater willingness to repatriate children, its overall stance remains cautious and security-driven, illustrating the broader tension between national protection and international responsibility.

### United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has adopted one of the most controversial approaches to the issue, particularly through its extensive use of citizenship deprivation as a counterterrorism measure. By revoking the nationality of individuals suspected of involvement with terrorist organizations, the UK government has sought to prevent their return altogether, thereby minimizing immediate domestic security risks. This policy has been justified on the grounds of protecting national security but has generated significant legal and ethical debate.

Critics argue that the UK’s approach risks creating situations of de facto statelessness and undermines the principle that states are responsible for their own nationals.

Moreover, it has been suggested that excluding individuals from returning may exacerbate long-term security threats by allowing them to remain in unstable environments where extremist networks can persist or regenerate. At the same time, the UK has faced legal challenges from affected individuals and their families, particularly in cases involving women and children, highlighting the growing tension between executive power and judicial oversight in this domain.

## United States

The United States has played a pivotal role in shaping international responses to returning foreign fighters, both through its military involvement in the fight against ISIS and its diplomatic efforts to encourage allied states to assume responsibility for their nationals. American officials have consistently advocated for the repatriation and prosecution of foreign fighters, emphasizing that failure to do so may result in greater security risks over time.

This position is closely linked to the operational realities on the ground, particularly the role of US-supported forces in detaining large numbers of ISIS fighters and their families. The United States has expressed concern that detention facilities in northeastern Syria are unsustainable and that continued reluctance by European states to repatriate their citizens could lead to instability, including the potential escape of detainees. From this perspective, repatriation is not only a legal obligation but also a strategic necessity, allowing states to regain control over individuals who might otherwise contribute to future waves of terrorism.

## Germany

Germany represents a more moderate and legally cautious approach within the European context, characterized by a greater willingness to engage in repatriation, particularly for women and children. While German authorities recognize the security risks posed by returnees, they have also emphasized the importance of adhering to constitutional and international legal standards, including the protection of fundamental rights.

In recent years, Germany has undertaken several repatriation operations, often accompanied by criminal investigations and, where applicable, prosecutions. At the

same time, the country has invested in rehabilitation and reintegration programs aimed at addressing the long-term risks associated with radicalization. This dual approach reflects an effort to balance security concerns with legal obligations, although it is not without challenges, particularly in relation to evidence collection and public opinion. Germany's position illustrates the possibility of a more nuanced and legally grounded response, albeit one that requires significant institutional capacity and political commitment.

## **Iraq**

Iraq plays a crucial role in the management of foreign fighters, as one of the primary territories where ISIS operated and where many alleged crimes were committed. Iraqi authorities have taken an active role in prosecuting foreign fighters detained on their soil, often at the request or with the support of foreign governments seeking to avoid repatriation. From a legal standpoint, Iraq's involvement is grounded in its territorial jurisdiction over crimes committed within its borders.

However, the Iraqi judicial system faces substantial challenges, including limited resources, concerns regarding due process, and the use of severe penalties such as capital punishment. Reports have highlighted issues such as reliance on confessions, lack of adequate legal representation, and expedited trials, all of which raise serious questions about the fairness and legitimacy of proceedings. While Iraq's role is indispensable in addressing the immediate consequences of the conflict, the limitations of its legal system underscore the broader difficulties associated with relying on local prosecution as a primary solution to the issue.

## **INTERPOL**

INTERPOL plays a fundamental role in facilitating international cooperation in the context of returning jihadists, particularly through its capacity to support information sharing and cross-border law enforcement efforts. Given the transnational nature of the threat posed by foreign fighters, effective coordination between national authorities is essential, and INTERPOL provides a platform through which such collaboration can take place.

Through mechanisms such as databases, notices, and alerts, INTERPOL enables member states to track the movements of suspected individuals, share intelligence, and coordinate responses. This is particularly important in the context of returnees, who may attempt to travel across multiple jurisdictions. By enhancing the ability of states to monitor and manage these individuals, INTERPOL contributes to addressing one of the key operational challenges identified in the literature, namely the lack of reliable and timely information. At the same time, its role remains complementary to that of national authorities, as it does not possess independent enforcement powers, highlighting the continued importance of state responsibility in addressing the issue.

## Relevant UN Treaties/Resolutions

### Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (1961)

**Objective:** This convention aims to prevent the phenomenon of statelessness by establishing rules for the granting and loss of nationality.

**Key Points:**

- Article 8 generally prohibits states from depriving an individual of their nationality if such a deprivation would render them stateless.
- An exception is provided in Article 8(3), allowing deprivation if a person's conduct is "seriously prejudicial to the vital interests of the State," which some nations use to justify stripping citizenship from jihadists.
- It imposes an obligation to grant nationality to children born on a state's territory who would otherwise be stateless.

**Signatories:** There are currently 78 state parties to the convention. Notable parties include the United Kingdom, France, and Belgium, though many states maintain specific reservations regarding national security exceptions.

### Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989)

**Objective:** This treaty sets out the civil, political, economic, social, and health rights of children and is the primary legal instrument for the treatment of returnee minors.

**Key Points:**

- Article 3 (Best Interests of the Child): Mandates that the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning them, including repatriation and legal proceedings.
- Article 7 (Right to a Nationality): Guarantees children the right to acquire a nationality and to know their parents, which is critical for children born in conflict zones.
- Article 39: Requires states to take all appropriate measures to promote the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of child victims of armed conflict or neglect.

**Signatories:** With 196 parties, it is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history. All UN Member States are parties except for the United States.

### **S/RES/2178 (2014)**

**Objective:** This landmark Security Council resolution was the first to establish a comprehensive legal framework specifically targeting the "Foreign Terrorist Fighter" (FTF) phenomenon, aiming to prevent the travel and recruitment of individuals joining extremist groups in conflict zones.

#### **Key Points:**

- It provides the formal definition of FTFs as individuals who travel to a state other than their residence or nationality to participate in, plan, or receive training for terrorist acts.
- It imposes a legally binding obligation on all UN Member States under Chapter VII of the UN Charter to criminalize the act of traveling abroad for terrorism-related purposes.
- The resolution mandates that states suppress the financing, organizing, and equipping of such travel.
- It emphasizes the necessity of international cooperation, including the sharing of information and airline passenger lists to detect the movement of listed terrorists.

**Signatories/Adoption:** The resolution was adopted unanimously by the 15 members of the Security Council during a high-level summit chaired by the United States.

### **S/RES/2396 (2017)**

**Objective:** Recognizing the territorial collapse of the ISIL "caliphate," this resolution shifts focus from preventing departure to managing the "return and relocation" of FTFs and their families.

#### **Key Points:**

- It urges Member States to strengthen border security and mandates the implementation of systems to collect biometric data (such as fingerprints and facial recognition) to identify returnees.

- The resolution explicitly calls for the development of tailored Prosecution, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (PRR) strategies that distinguish between combatants and accompanying family members.
- It highlights the importance of screening returnees to assess their risk levels while ensuring compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law.
- States are encouraged to develop intervention programs to prevent further radicalization before individuals commit terrorist acts on home soil.

**Signatories/Adoption:** Like its predecessor, this resolution was adopted unanimously.

### **A/RES/75/291 (2021)**

**Objective:** As part of the seventh review of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, this General Assembly resolution provides the broader policy framework for counter-terrorism efforts, emphasizing a human rights-centered approach.

**Key Points:**

- It reaffirms the four pillars of the Global Strategy: addressing conditions conducive to terrorism, preventing and combating terrorism, building state capacity, and ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law.
- The resolution calls upon states to address the precarious humanitarian situation in detention camps and encourages the repatriation of nationals, particularly women and children, in accordance with international law.
- It stresses that a lack of human rights protections and socioeconomic disenfranchisement are key predictors of radicalization.

**Signatories/Adoption:** This resolution was adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly.

## Previous Attempts to Solve Issue

The international community has thus far failed to adopt a coherent and unified strategy to address the legal status of returning jihadists and their families. Instead, states have pursued a variety of fragmented and often contradictory approaches, reflecting the tension between national security imperatives and international legal obligations. Academic literature identifies several dominant policy models, each of which presents significant legal, practical, and ethical limitations.

One of the most prominent approaches has been the attempt to prosecute foreign fighters in the territories where their alleged crimes were committed, primarily in Syria and Iraq. This strategy is grounded in the principle of territorial jurisdiction and, in theory, represents the most direct way to ensure accountability. However, in practice, this model has proven deeply problematic. Judicial systems in these conflict zones are often characterized by a lack of due process guarantees, including limited access to legal representation, reliance on coerced confessions, and, in some cases, the application of the death penalty. Moreover, the collapse or severe weakening of institutional structures in these regions raises serious concerns regarding the legitimacy and fairness of proceedings. Consequently, many scholars argue that such prosecutions are incompatible with international human rights standards and risk undermining the rule of law.

A second approach consists of preventing the return of foreign fighters altogether, most notably through the revocation of citizenship or the imposition of administrative barriers that effectively exclude individuals from re-entering their country of origin. This strategy has been justified on the grounds of immediate national security concerns, as governments seek to minimize the risk of terrorist attacks on domestic soil. Nevertheless, this approach has been widely criticized for creating situations of de facto statelessness and for shifting responsibility onto already fragile regions. Furthermore, there is growing recognition that such policies may generate long-term security risks, as individuals denied return may regroup in unstable environments, strengthen

transnational networks, and contribute to the persistence or resurgence of extremist organizations.

Closely related to this exclusionary model is a more passive approach, whereby states neither actively facilitate repatriation nor formally prevent it. Instead, they adopt a “hands-off” stance, leaving their nationals in detention camps or conflict zones. While politically expedient, this strategy has been increasingly criticized by both scholars and policymakers. The prolonged detention of individuals, particularly women and children, in precarious and often lawless environments has been shown to exacerbate radicalization processes and create conditions conducive to future instability. Experts have warned that such camps risk becoming “incubators” of extremism, especially for minors who are exposed to violence, trauma, and ideological indoctrination.

In contrast, some states have opted for the active repatriation of foreign fighters and their families, followed by prosecution within domestic legal systems. This approach is grounded in the principle that states retain responsibility for their nationals, regardless of their actions abroad. It also allows governments to exercise greater control over potential security threats by subjecting returnees to surveillance, judicial processes, and, where appropriate, incarceration. However, this model is not without significant challenges. Chief among these is the difficulty of gathering admissible evidence from conflict zones, which often undermines the feasibility of successful prosecutions. Additionally, domestic legal frameworks are not always equipped to address crimes committed in complex transnational conflict settings, particularly when the legal status of individuals—whether as combatants, terrorists, or civilians—remains ambiguous.

Alongside judicial responses, many states have developed reintegration and deradicalization programs aimed at addressing the long-term risks associated with returnees. These initiatives typically involve psychological support, educational opportunities, and community-based interventions designed to facilitate reintegration into society. While such programs represent an important shift towards more holistic and preventive strategies, their effectiveness remains contested. In particular, the

difficulty of assessing the sincerity of ideological disengagement and the potential for recidivism pose ongoing challenges for policymakers.

Finally, there have been proposals for the establishment of international or hybrid tribunals to prosecute foreign fighters, drawing inspiration from precedents such as the Nuremberg trials. While such mechanisms could, in theory, provide a more consistent and legally robust framework for accountability, they have thus far remained largely theoretical. Political disagreements, jurisdictional complexities, and the absence of consensus among states have prevented their realization, leaving a significant gap in the international legal architecture.

## Possible Solutions

In light of the limitations of existing approaches, it is evident that addressing the legal status of returning jihadists and their families requires a comprehensive, multi-layered strategy that reconciles security concerns with international legal obligations. A central premise emerging from the literature is that foreign fighters ultimately remain the responsibility of their home states. This principle challenges the prevailing tendency among governments to externalize the problem and underscores the necessity of adopting policies that prioritize accountability, legal clarity, and long-term stability.

A first essential step towards a sustainable solution lies in the development of a structured and coordinated framework for repatriation. Rather than treating repatriation as an exceptional or undesirable outcome, states should recognize it as a necessary component of effective counterterrorism policy. By bringing individuals back under their jurisdiction, governments are better positioned to monitor, prosecute, and, where appropriate, rehabilitate them. In contrast, leaving individuals in unstable regions not only undermines legal accountability but also increases the risk of uncontrolled movements and future security threats.

Equally important is the adoption of a differentiated legal approach that reflects the heterogeneity of returnees. The tendency to categorize all individuals associated with terrorist organizations as uniform threats fails to account for significant differences in roles, experiences, and levels of culpability. In particular, the situation of women and children requires careful and individualized assessment. While some women may have actively participated in hostilities or supported terrorist activities, others may have been coerced or subjected to exploitation. Children, in particular, are widely recognized as victims of armed conflict and indoctrination, and their treatment under purely counterterrorism frameworks raises serious ethical and legal concerns. As such, policies must move towards individualized case assessments that distinguish between perpetrators and victims, ensuring that responses are both proportionate and consistent with international law.

Another critical dimension concerns the improvement of evidence collection and judicial cooperation mechanisms. The inability to obtain reliable and admissible evidence from conflict zones remains one of the primary obstacles to effective prosecution. Addressing this challenge requires enhanced international cooperation, including the establishment of mechanisms for evidence sharing, the use of digital and open-source intelligence, and collaboration with international organizations operating in affected regions. Without such efforts, the gap between legal frameworks and practical enforcement will persist, undermining the credibility of judicial responses.

Furthermore, the integration of prosecution with rehabilitation and reintegration measures represents a more balanced and effective approach than reliance on purely punitive or purely preventive strategies. While prosecution is essential for ensuring accountability and upholding the rule of law, it must be complemented by long-term measures aimed at reducing the risk of recidivism. This includes not only deradicalization programs but also broader social policies addressing factors such as marginalization, identity crises, and lack of economic opportunities, which have been identified as contributing to radicalization processes.

The need for a child-centered legal framework constitutes another key element of any comprehensive solution. Children associated with terrorist groups should be treated primarily as victims and afforded protection in accordance with international standards, particularly those enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This entails ensuring access to education, psychological support, and family reunification, as well as avoiding stigmatization and criminalization. Failure to address the specific needs of children not only violates their rights but also risks perpetuating cycles of radicalization and instability.

At the international level, greater coordination and harmonization of legal frameworks are indispensable. The current fragmentation of approaches reflects the absence of a universally accepted definition of terrorism and the lack of standardized procedures for

dealing with foreign fighters. Strengthening international cooperation through shared intelligence, coordinated legal standards, and joint initiatives would significantly enhance the effectiveness of national responses and reduce existing disparities.

Finally, it is crucial to move beyond purely securitized perspectives on the issue. While security considerations are undoubtedly central, an excessive focus on immediate threats risks overshadowing broader legal and humanitarian obligations. As highlighted in the literature, the over-securitization of returnees may lead to violations of fundamental rights and ultimately undermine the legitimacy of counterterrorism efforts. A sustainable and effective response must therefore strike a careful balance between ensuring security and upholding the rule of law, recognizing that these objectives are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually reinforcing.

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