

New figures on European nationals detained in Syria and Iraq

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Recent developments in northern Syria, following the Turkish military offensive, shattered the last illusions of fragile stability in the region. For European governments, now concerned about the intentions and whereabouts of their fighters detained in the region, in light of the reported escapes from the Ain Issa camp and insecurity in other facilities, this is a stark reminder that problems do not go away with time – they only get worse.

Kurdish officials have regularly mentioned that they were holding some 12,000 suspected ISIS fighters, including some 800 Europeans. However, these numbers were always difficult to verify. The information was fragmented and sometimes contradictory. There was no transparency on nationalities, or on the ratio of children to adults. According to new figures compiled by the Egmont Institute, the number of European foreign fighters detained in northern Syria would be at least around 430, together with at least 700 European children. Figures in the table below likely underestimate the number of Europeans detained in the region, as most of our sources acknowledge that these are the “low estimates” – sometimes excluding for instance citizens with dual nationality. The overall European contingent is therefore larger than often assumed, at around 1,200 individuals minimum, but composed of (young) children in majority. The majority of adults are women, although male fighters are more likely to be underreported. While the figures below include detainees in Syria as well as in Iraq, more than 90 percent are said to be located in Syria.

Table: European adults (men and women) and children detained in Syria and Iraq¹

	Adults	Children
Austria	3+	n/a
Belgium	57	69
Denmark	8+	13
Finland	11-13	33
France	130	270-320
Germany	124	138
Italy	6	n/a
Netherlands	50	90
Spain	4	17
Sweden	31-45	57
UK	8+	10+
Sub-Total	432-448+	697-747+
TOTAL	1129-1195+	

Source: Egmont Institute

¹ Figures compiled by Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet. All figures were reported in 2019, prior to the Turkish offensive. Figures are more likely to be under-estimates than overestimates: sources often emphasized that they did not include a number of individuals (either due to a lack of information, or to exclude fighters with dual nationality, revoked citizenship, or unclear citizenship status). The “+” suggest cases of clear under-estimates.

About 5,300 Europeans have travelled to the Levant since 2011. Most of them joined the ranks of the Islamic State (ISIS). About a third have returned to Europe, and another third died. Following the fall of the caliphate, the remaining fighters and their families were either hiding or captured. Most European nationals ended up in either Kurdish-run makeshift prisons (for men) or in detention camps (for women and children), while a tiny fraction were held and prosecuted in Iraq. Next to them, others are still combating in Idlib province (Syria), in the ranks of different jihadi groups, in particular Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra) and Tanzim Hurras al-Din.

Since the terror attacks in Europe in 2015-16, which involved some returnees, European foreign fighters have become *persona non grata*. In order to avoid repatriating their imprisoned nationals, European governments have considered several options, all in the region, including rendition programmes, international tribunals or other specific jurisdictional mechanisms – everything but repatriation.

The European reluctance to act has come with a price. In the current chaos, it is impossible to predict what will happen to the Kurdish camps and prisons, and to their residents. It is unclear whether the Kurds will manage to maintain all the foreign fighters in custody, how many will be released or escape, and how many will be captured by Turkish or Syrian forces. In light of the deteriorating situation in the region and in the camps, it is safe to say that a number of ISIS members and their children are likely to disappear from the radar. Some may die, while others could possibly represent new threats. The net result for European governments will be more uncertainty and insecurity.

In an essay published on 13 October by [Lawfare](#), Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, researchers at the Egmont Institute, wrote: “Europe is not yet done with the challenge of returning foreign fighters, and time is not on its side.”² They recommend to European governments to quickly come to a decision with regard to the foreign fighters in detention, and to the children. As victims, children should be repatriated without debate and delay, but even adults should be considered for repatriation. “From a security perspective, the organization of a “controlled” repatriation of European nationals—men, women and children—looks to be the least bad option”, they argue. It is not only the right thing to do, in line with European laws and moral values, but also the safest way to ensure a proper prosecution and long-term monitoring. “Time can be on our side, but only if we make the right choices—swiftly.”

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² <https://www.lawfareblog.com/losing-control-over-returnees>