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# Understanding challenges to reintegration of returnees from Al-Hol camp to Deir Ezzor in Syria

Policy Report

Caitlin Procter, Sinéad Barry

Caitlin Procter is a Marie Skłodowsk Curie Research Fellow at the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding CCDP, Geneva Graduate Institute.
Sinead Barry: Analyst at Climate Diplomacy and Security, Adelphi

# Contents





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# Executive Summary

- Very little is known about the challenges facing the thousands of women and children that have returned from Al-Hol Camp to different places in Syria since 2019. Nor there is any understanding of the perceived usefulness of the reintegration programs delivered to them. This exploratory study contributes to filling this gap, and it is guided by two interrelated questions: What challenges are exclusive to returnees from al Hol to the Northeast, in comparison to the residents of Northeast; and what is the perceived effectiveness of existing activities delivered to returnees?
- 83 returnee and resident women were interviewed in two locations in Deir Ezzor: Hajin and Kasra, and the results reveal important findings and distinctions between the two sites. In each locality: participants included women who had left al-Hol and who had taken part in reintegration activities; women who had left al-Hol and had not taken part in any reintegration activities; and residents in the local community.
- The research findings suggest the following: 1) Access to services is not inherently discriminatory to returnees but is dependent on documents and availability. 2) Access to employment and livelihoods is equally limited for both returnees and residents. 3) Discrimination exists, but acceptance increases by time. 4) Returnee children are not prioritised by institutions. The research found important differences between the two sites with regards to access to services and essential goods and experiences of discrimination; but that in both locations women are profoundly concerned for the future and wellbeing of their children.
- The field study also reflected on the perceptions of both returnees and resident women on reintegration programs implemented in the northeast of Syria. The main observation is that there are short-term benefits of reintegration activities, although there is little evidence that reintegration programmes lead to longer term outcomes, such as women's ability to find work. That finding is a call for donors to reconsider the wider economic and political context when planning, designing, and evaluating future intervention programs. The interviewees also highlighted shortfalls in existing projects, and discussed existing barriers to joining reintegration activities, and identified priority areas for future reintegration activities.


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# Introduction

Thousands of women and children have returned from Al-Hol Camp to different places in Syria since 2019. IMPACT, among other organizations, provide support to women and children who leave Al-Hol. There is little known about the post return circumstances and challenges these women and children face, and more importantly, any assessment of the perceived usefulness of the reintegration programs delivered to them. This study contributes to filling this gap.

Reintegration is understood here not an end goal, but instead as a step in a wider process of social cohesion and material welfare building. From this perspective, this study is guided by two interrelated questions: **What challenges are exclusive to returnees from al Hol to the Northeast, in comparison to the residents of Northeast; and what is the perceived effectiveness of existing activities delivered to returnees?** Research was conducted in two locations in Deir Ezzor: Hajin and Kasra, and the results reveal important findings and distinctions between the two sites.

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study of its kind to be undertaken in Deir Ezzor, and specifically in the localities of Hajin and Kasra. Hajin has attracted significant attention and programmatic support within the field of reintegration and CVE work, while Kasra has not received as much support. This research is one of few qualitative studies on reintegration in NES and is based on data collection with 83 women. In each locality: participants included women who had left al-Hol and who had taken part in reintegration activities; women who had left al-Hol and had not taken part in any reintegration activities; and residents in the local community.

The research findings suggest the following: 1) Access to services is not inherently discriminatory to returnees but is dependent on documents and availability. 2) Access to employment and livelihoods is equally limited for both returnees and residents. 3) Discrimination exists, but acceptance increases by time. 4) Returnee children are not prioritised by institutions. The research found important differences between the two sites with regards to access to services and essential goods and experiences of discrimination; but that in both locations women are profoundly concerned for the future and wellbeing of their children.

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The study centres the voices of returnees and local resident women. It has been designed to develop recommendations to support future reintegration programming based on the perspectives and experiences of the people at the centre of this process. The report proceeds as follows. First, the existing knowledge base on reintegration from al Hol in NES and beyond is discussed. The key findings of our study are then presented, comparing the experiences of returnee women in Hajin and Kasra, who did and who did not take part in reintegration activities, as well as the perspectives of residents. The report then turns to the perspectives of the interviewees on existing reintegration support programs. Finally, it concludes with recommendations for programming and future research.

## Al Hol returnees: What do we know from existing research?

A review of 31 documents, including academic articles, policy papers, UN and NGO reports,[1] and media sources dating from 2013-2023 revealed the following:

There is currently no consensus in existing studies on the definition of re-integration, or integration in the Al-Hol camp context. Approaches vary widely, from a narrow conception of return (to a place of previous residence); to de-radicalisation; and to a holistic, community-oriented approach. To our knowledge, no existing research has engaged with the meaning of return or reintegration either for returnees themselves or for local communities. Research that has attempted to consider local priorities and needs has generally been survey-oriented[2] and to date the perspectives of the residents of Al-Hol have not been adequately considered[3]. Instead, security and political considerations are often prioritised over the views of returnees and their communities[4]. Moreover, the challenges of data collection in NES are significant, and quantitative studies present dramatically different numbers on a range of foundational issues. This guided our decision to use a qualitative approach in this study, and to focus on gathering in-depth data from two specific sites, rather than data at scale. Finally, many studies on Al Hol returnees often evolve around false dichotomies of victimhood and perpetration, presenting individuals as either refugees who were the primary victims of ISIS's regime, or as violent extremists who pose an outright danger to wider society[5]. This binary is misleading and masks

[1] See bibliography for a full list of reviewed documents.
[2] Blumont. *Intention Survey: Syrian IDPs in Al Hol Camp.* Arlington, VA: Blumont (2020; 2023); see also Darwich, S., and Ahmad, J. 2022. "Local Priorities and Trends in North East Syria." In *Aftershocks: The legacy of ISIS in Syria*, by IMPACT, 8-39. Berlin: IMPACT CSRD;
[3] Revkin, M., and Schadi,S. 2022. *Independent Assessment on Sustainable Solutions for Al-Hol Camp.* Deir Ezzor: NES Forum.P.4
[4] iMMAP. 2021. *Return and Reintegration Area Profiles: Central and Eastern Deir-ez-Zor Cantons.* Washington, D.C.: iMMAP (p.29).
[5]Saleh, J. 2021. "The Women of ISIS and the Al-Hol Camp." Washington Institute, Washington, D.C. Accessed June 30, 2023. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/women-isis-and-al-hol-camp; MSF. 2022. *Between two fires: Danger and desperation in Syria's Al-Hol camp.* Geneva: Médicins Sans Frontiérs; Soz, J. 2022. "The Crisis of Female Jihadists in Al-


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the complexities of the context. There are increasing calls in policy literature for more nuance to be incorporated into research and programming on reintegration, which again guided our research design.

The challenges facing returnees as described in existing literature can broadly be divided into the following four categories:

1. **Material challenges** are the primary problem facing both returnees and the surrounding community[6]. Livelihood challenges faced by returnees are described as being due to discrimination, whether because most returnees are women, or because local communities are unwilling to hire returnees due to perceived ISIS affiliations[7].
2. **Discrimination and social stigma** of returnees are often described as prevalent experiences, but the specifics, scale, and implications are unclear[8].
3. **Psychological challenges. Especially for child returnees** are described as facing urgent humanitarian concerns related to trauma, the need to take up low-wage labour to support themselves and their families, experiences of discrimination and a lack of documents[9]
4. **Social challenges. Surrounding communities** have reported in NES that they feel returnees are unfairly advantaged in terms of humanitarian and development aid[10].

This study was designed to prioritise the perspectives and experiences of returnee women and women from local communities in order to build a grounded understanding of reintegration and move away from the victim/perpetrator binary relied upon elsewhere. It sought to understand if the same challenges to reintegration were applicable in both Kasra and Hajin, and whether engagement with existing reintegration activities mitigated these challenges or not. It included data collection in surrounding communities to better understand what is needed to enable social cohesion.

## Methodology

This qualitative study sought to understand the challenges faced by returnees, and whether they differed based on participation in reintegration activities or not. It also sought to engage the perspectives of community members regarding what was needed to enable returnees to integrate. In total, 83 women took part in this research. Three sub-groups of research

Hawl Displacement Camp." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C. Accessed June 30, 2023. https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/87510.

[6] Al-Wasl, Z. 2022. "Unemployment Rates in Northern Syria Rise to 85%." *The Syrian Observer.* November 14. Accessed June 30, 2023. https://syrianobserver.com/news/80107/unemployment-rates-in-northern-syria-rise-to-85.html.

[7] Sandi, Ouafae. 2022. *Affiliated with ISIS: Challenges for the return and reintegration of women and children.* Baghdad: United Nations Development Programme Iraq (p.23).

[8] Seymour, C. 2018. *Cradled by Conflict. Preventing and responding to child recruitment: Implications for Programming.* Technical Note, Geneva: United Nations University (p.11); Sandi, Ouafae. 2022. *Affiliated with ISIS: Challenges for the return and reintegration of women and children.* Baghdad: United Nations Development Programme Iraq (p.28); Glazzard, A. 2023. *Disengaging and Reintegrating Violent Extremists in Conflict Zones.* Washington, D.C.: USIP (p.15); Parry, J. et al. 2022. *The Road Home from Al Hol Camp: Reflections on the Iraqi Experience.* MEAC Findings Report 24, Geneva: UNIDIR (p.8).

[9] O'Neil, Siobhán, and Kato Van Broeckhoven. 2018. *Cradled by Conflict: Child involvement with armed groups in contemporary conflict.* Geneva: United Nations University; IMPACT CSRD. 2021. *Al-Hol Camp: Release, Return and Reintegration of Syrian residents.* Situational analysis paper, Berlin: IMPACT CSRD.

[10] Revkin, M., and Schadi,S. 2022. *Independent Assessment on Sustainable Solutions for Al-Hol Camp.* Deir Ezzor: NES Forum (p.23)



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participants were formed: returnee women who had exposure to activities from IMPACT or other organizations in Deir Ezzor; returnee women that had not engaged in reintegration activities; and residents. Two locations in Deir Ezzor were selected: Hajin and Kasra. Hajin has attracted more attention and programmatic support within the fields of reintegration and CVE, while Kasra has not been considered as an important location in relation to return in the same way. IMPACT has a centre engaged in reintegration activities in Hajin and has a civil society support centre in Kasra. Training activities to the field researchers on the tools were quickly followed by fieldwork in Hajin and Kasra in Deir Ezzor. Fieldwork included 6 focus groups, that was followed by 13 semi-structured interviews to gain deeper understanding of the issues. In each location there were 3 focus group discussions in total: 2 focus groups included participatory activities with women who had left al-Hol in the past three years; and 1 focus group discussion with women from the communities of Kasra and Hajin (see appendix for details).

## Key findings on the challenges of returnees to Deir Ezzor

### 1. Access to services is not inherently discriminatory to returnees but is dependent on documents and availability.

Few returnee women reported feeling discriminated against when they tried to access public services or essential goods. In Hajin, interviewees did not experience difficulties in accessing documents. Having the correct documents limits differentiation between returnee and local women. However, in Kasra, many women did not have the necessary documents, and therefore were unable to access services and essential goods.

**In Hajin**, most women interviewed did not report difficulties in accessing documents from the civil registry, where staff are described as helpful in the process of accessing and renewing documents where needed. Women explained the importance of having the correct documents to access goods and services, also as a means of limiting differentiation between themselves and other members of the community. Overall, this points to the success of substantial work on the issue of access to documents in Hajin. However, not all women interviewed in Hajin had secured the documents they needed, and one explained: "…the problem here is that we lack the official documents according to which existing aid is obtained. For what is available, there is a distinction between us and the local community, who have priority. If the necessary documents were available, [one] would be accepted into schools and we would get more benefit from the health services that are offered" (female returnee, Hajin).

Women in Hajin rarely reported any experience of discrimination in terms of their ability to access to healthcare for themselves and their families, and education for their children. However, many did refer to the weak infrastructure overall in the area, which made it challenging to access quality services. This suggests that in Hajin, concerns related to limited


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access to services are more a result of the situation in the area, rather than stemming from discrimination on account of women's past experiences.

Conversely**, in Kasra** many women reported difficulties in gaining access to necessary documents. Most women interviewed in Kasra reported that they only had a family book (issued by the civil registry of Government of Syria GoS), which was not recognised by the civil registry of the Autonomous Administration in Northeast Syria (AANES). In several instances, women reported having a family book, but without their children registered in it; while other women reported that they only had a marriage contract and were unable to access a family book because they could not travel to regime-controlled areas. To our knowledge, there has thus far been limited work in relation to access to documents for returnees in Kasra. Having no other papers or ID documents at all made it impossible for them to buy gas, or to access services. As one woman reported: "They don't give you gas or aid or register you with anything if you don't have proof [ID]. If you [wish to] attend a paid meeting with an organization, they want proof" (female returnee, Kasra). One woman also explained that she was not able to attend reintegration activities with a CSO because she did not have an ID card.

In addition, in Kasra access to healthcare was not only difficult on account of limited documents, but many women interviewed in Kasra reported that the lack of female doctors meant that they were in any case unable to seek medical support when needed. From data gathered, women in Kasra therefore face dual challenges of not having the right documents to access the services they need; but also expressed their concern that even with the correct documents, it would not be possible to access services because of the overall lack of services.

From data gathered, there is a marked difference in access to documentation, and therefore access to services between Hajin and Kasra. This is likely a result of the different levels of attention given to returnees in different areas of Deir Ezzor and suggests that activities geared towards ensuring returnees have the documents they need in Kasra would support their reintegration.

## 2. Access to employment and livelihoods is equally limited for both returnees and residents

In both Hajin and Kasra, women face significant challenges in terms of access to employment and livelihoods whether they are returnees or residents. This takes place in the context of extremely limited employment opportunities in Deir Ezzor for all returnees and residents, regardless of gender. Of the sampled population, women that secured employment tended to work in agriculture, but even those who found work reported that the income was insufficient to meet their needs. Women who had undertaken vocational training activities in the scope of reintegration programs did not report that this had led them to finding work.


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Strategies for finding work differed somewhat between the two locations, primarily because many of the women interviewed in Hajin had returned to the land and houses of their families, while in Kasra returnees were new to the area.

**In Hajin**, some women cultivate land they and their families own, planting seasonal crops despite high costs of farming. Some returned to farmland they had owned prior to residing in Al Hol, cleaning, and cultivating the agricultural land on their return. Livestock was also reported as an income source, with some women earning a living from livestock, selling milk and cheese from a rented cow. Members of the local community were positive about the need to support returnees in findings employment in the community.

**In Kasra**, women reported finding work opportunities by asking neighbours if they could support them in cultivating their land. However, although members of the community who took part in this research expressed the importance of supporting women to find work in their community, they explained that to some extent, these efforts were futile because the primary reason women could not find work was because of the overarching public opinion of their continued affiliation to ISIS.

In **both locations,** women reported that work is always intermittent, and that they rely on income from a few different jobs undertaken by male family members. Many men engage in informal, daily work, taking on a variety of roles when the opportunity arises. These jobs are not paid well, but men continue to take them for a lack of alternatives. Even if women or their family members manage to secure employment, it is often insufficient to meet their basic needs given the high cost of living and low wages for workers. As a result, many women and their families do not have enough to eat, leading them to choose whether to take on debt or forgo food:

> "No one helped me find work, I am still without work except cultivating our small land despite the high costs of farming, but we are forced to do it because we have no other job...[our income mainly comes from] the produce of our small land, in addition to the monthly wages my children earn from grazing sheep. It does not cover our daily needs and these difficult living requirements" (female returnee, Hajin).

> "Sometimes we stay without food, just to not have to ask for money from anyone [to sustain until] the end of the month [when her husband is paid for his work]" (female returnee, Kasra).

**Women in both Kasra and Hajin also explained that more efforts are needed to eradicate illiteracy** among those leaving the camp. Education is a barrier to employment because returnees had not received adequate education. Despite this belief in education, due to the critical challenges in securing gainful employment many children in both Kasra and Hajin were reported to work. These roles have varied, often including shepherding (particularly in Hajin). Sometimes, this work is balanced with education, with women reporting that their children graze sheep for their neighbours after school. In other instances, children work instead of attending school. One woman in Hajin reported that her 12-year-old son was working as a


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shepherd. A woman in Kasra explained: “My boys are 16 years old and 14 years old. They should be considered as children, but according to our circumstances, they are young men. They have been working for more than 4 years, they used to study before that” (female returnee, Kasra).

When asked about the possibilities of employment for returnee women, members of the local community in both Hajin and Kasra expressed their belief that communities should offer returnee women opportunities for employment, and that this would support their integration. However, there is no evidence from this research that aspects of reintegration programmes aimed at improving labour market access – such as vocational trainings – actually succeeded in this goal. Most women in both Kasra and Hajin who reported taking part in vocation trainings also reported that they were still unable to find work. It should be noted here that despite this, women unanimously shared that the provision of these vocational same training opportunities must continue. As discussed in the appendix, this is perhaps a result of data collection being conducted by individuals known to be linked to IMPACT CSRD, and subsequently associated with the provision of assistance and activities.

### 3. Discrimination exists, but acceptance increases by time

Although returnee women in both Kasra and Hajin reported discrimination, this is an issue which dissipates over time. Overall, discrimination was reported as a stronger concern in Kasra than in Hajin. Harrasment and discrimination on account of being returnees made it harder for women to find work and had a strong psychological impact. It remains unclear what mechanisms improve acceptance in communities, other than time spent in socialization.

**In both Kasra and Hajin**, during FGDs women strongly expressed experiences of discrimination in communities, which had material consequences limiting their chances to find work. However, in interviews, these experiences were more prevalent in Kasra than in Hajin. This could be because more women who took part in this research in Hajin had pre-existing links to the community, while in Kasra women were attempting to integrate somewhere new for the first time. As residents from local communities in both locations expressed: “We feel that each area where returnees exist have a different attitude than another. Some returnees are originally from the same area [they returned to], and they are known to everyone, and they also have relatives and friends. In such cases, it is considered easy to reintegrate into society. But if the returnees are strangers [not originally from the area they came to] and their background or past is unknown, then most of the surrounding community avoid direct communication and close relations with them” (FGD participant, local resident in Hajin).

Prior knowledge of the returnees and their families was considered similarly key to acceptance in Kasra. “I do mind [having a returnee as direct neighbour], due to their extremist ideology. I fear for the safety of my family if being close to them [returnees], especially returnees who originate from other areas with whom we have no prior acquaintance” (FGD participant, local


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resident in Kasra). Better knowledge of returnees is reflected in better integration: "It goes back to my knowledge of the returnee and their background and their family background. If the returnee is originally from the area I don't mind [having them as direct neighbours]. But if they were strangers, then I do" (FGD participant, local resident in Kasra).

**In Hajin,** some women experienced discrimination when they first arrived despite having pre-existing ties to the community. Women reported disagreements with the neighbours, who accused them of being linked to destruction and robbery of their homes, due to their links with ISIS. Women in Hajin also reported that in the time immediately following their return, they experienced discrimination as a form of jealousy from the local community, due to the material benefits associated with reintegration activities that they had access to.

**In Kasra**, many more women shared details of the discrimination they faced. Some women shared that when they first returned from al-Hol the local community told them to "build your tents far from our homes", and were otherwise made to feel unwelcome: "...we could hear some phrases because of our black clothes, such as "they came like ravens" and "Daeshis' children" (directed at the children) and other hurtful words that affect us and our psychology" (FGD participant, female returnee, Kasra).

In response to comments regarding their dress, some women reported that they changed their clothing due to this harassment. More severe consequences of this discrimination, as explained by almost all interviewees in Kasra was that it meant they were unable to find work. Many women also shared the immense psychological toll this took on them:

> "I faced a lot of discrimination, no one has helped me, and until now no one has accepted me, because I come from the camp…if I ask for help, the people of this village will not help me, but if someone else asked for help they would respond. That's because I am a returnee, they look at me with shock and say that I am Daeshi… I feel a lot of humiliation in this area. There is no respect for our feelings or considering that we are just people like everyone else. [no one] says that these people [returnees] are like us... [If I were to leave here to another area] I will not say that I will feel safe, as if it's my home where I am comfortable, but I will feel safe when I get rid of the criticism and discrimination that we live with" (female returnee, Kasra).

However, all interviewees reported that experiences of discrimination diminished quickly over time:

> "When I first returned from the camp, I was discriminated against, and I felt unwanted by the people of the neighbourhood. I always felt this way, and I used to go and complain to my family about this treatment, and they would tell me that I should be patient, and that this is their [neighbours, community] point of view now, but it will not remain the same. In fact, their view [neighbours] towards me changed quickly, because they did not see anything [from me] that harms them, contrary to their original perspective" (female returnee, Hajin).


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Returnee women in Kasra, despite challenges also reported that with time, this harassment faded. Among interviewees, 2 years was generally reported as the amount of time to notice a change.

This corroborates findings of focus group discussions with residents from the community. When asked to what extent they minded if their neighbour was a returnee, 7 out of 15 people do mind being around returnees, 5 said they have no problem living next to returnees and 3 of the attendees explained that it would depend on the background of the returnee: ""I don't mind my neighbour being a returnee and I don't fear them. It's not their fault that they entered a camp and left it. But because of that they are judged with prejudices that harm them, their children, and their women" (FGD participant, local resident in Kasra). In the same discussion, another woman confirmed; "There is no fear. They acquired this "label" [returnees] just by going to the camp, and they have nothing to do with it" (FGD participant, local resident in Kasra).

While we can hypothesise that this is because more women in Hajin are returning to places they are originally from, whereas in Kasra more returnees interviewed were new to the area, we do not fully understand this question. We also do not fully understand the coping mechanisms of women resort to because of this discrimination. Future research must explore these gaps.

### 4. Returnee children are not prioritized by institutions.

Children in both Hajin and Kasra experience bullying on account of being returnees. Women did not report any support from institutions in addressing this. Both returnees and residents all stressed that more educational and psychological support was needed to enable their children to reintegrate

**Returnee mothers in both Hajin and Kasra** expressed the challenges faced by their children in relation to bullying when they first left al Hol. Children were described as 'ISIS children' or 'children of the camp', and verbally bullied both at school and in the streets. Two mothers in Kasra shared that their response was to prohibit their children from leaving the house. Other mothers explained that their children were not made to feel welcome in the wider community.

**This is consistent with the perceptions of residents in both locations**, in which some resident participants described the children of returnee families as inherently violent. Asked if they had ever conflicted with their returnee neighbours, one resident said: "One time I got into a fight with them because of their children. Their children [returnee children] always beat our children and they are fierce, and I don't want them to play with my children" (FGD participant, local resident in Hajin)


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Of great concern among mothers in both locations was their inability to provide for their children's futures. Lack of employment makes it difficult for parents to support their children in going to school, even though education is described as a priority. As one woman explained:

> "My husband and I are working to provide school supplies, but with difficulty because our financial situation is difficult, but the education of our children is a priority for us. My children face learning difficulties because some years have passed without education, and this has affected their levels of comprehension. Some of them are not even age-appropriate for the class in which they study because of their low education level as compared to their age. They also always ask us for good school bags and good type stationery, which we can't afford due to the high prices, so we bring them with cheap stationery and school bags" (female returnee, Hajin).

Most women reported that their children had taken part in some form of recreational support activity outside of school, but all expressed the need for additional educational and psychological support for their children, due to both traumas experienced in the children's lives and disruptions to any previous education. One mother in Kasra explained that she saw her child becoming increasingly nervous because of the way they were treated in the community and at school. Many mothers described their children as illiterate, and reported a lack of support from teachers:

> "Some teachers do not perform their duties to the fullest in terms of education, and some of them consider my child to be a hopeless case and do not try to get him out of his situation……No one considered my child's status as a returnee. The other children who study with him didn't suffer as my kid did, and there should be special attention given to returnee children" (female returnee, Hajin).

There was a **consensus in focus group discussions both among returnee women and residents in Kasra and Hajin** that children's wellbeing should be a prioritised to better facilitate social cohesion in the long term, but little evidence of this being done by municipal, religious or educational institutions. Only one interviewee, in Hajin, explained that the school management had supported her in finding out about additional support activities for her child to participate in. Most women interviewed said that they had little to no interaction with teachers or school management. The only additional support for children was in the form of activities supported by NGOs and other associations. However, several women explained that although they knew about such activities, it was impossible for their children to take part because they were too far away from their home.


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# Perceptions of reintegration support programs

Priority areas for both returnees and residents interviewed for this research regarding reintegration are in education, establishing economic security and psychological support. They have indicated that more work is needed to create opportunities to bring returnees and local community members together in neutral spaces to allow organic connections to develop. Current vocational training activities do not result in improving the economic circumstances of returnees, and accessibility. Familial and social connections are invaluable to reintegration, while at the same time, family members often can cause barriers to women participating in reintegration activities.

## 1. Priority areas for reintegration activities

"When we work with the returnees without targeting the surroundings, the results are somewhat ineffective." – Female returnee, Kasra

Despite differences in reintegration experiences, returnees in both Hajin and Kasra, and residents of both locations all shared broadly priorities regarding what was needed to support reintegration efforts moving forwards. Both groups emphasised that solutions towards social cohesion must be developed with returnees and community members together. While the community members who took part in this research were largely positive or neutral about returnees, they stressed that more work was needed in the whole community to dispel the idea that returnees were part of ISIS.

Economic security: Many returnee women who took part in this research had undertaken a variety of vocational and technical trainings (including sewing courses; dairy production; making cleaning products) but had been unable to find work with these skills. Returnees stressed that any future activities should be aligned with opportunities for tangible ways for them to secure an income, and residents agreed that more needed to be done to enable returnee women to support themselves economically. Trainings and employment opportunities that were open to both returnees and residents were described as a good potential way to improve material outcomes and community connections simultaneously.

Psychological support: Almost all returnee women stressed the importance of psychological support for themselves and their children. Some participants expressed that economic projects could have mutually supporting benefits to psychosocial wellbeing, helping returnees to have a sense of purpose while at the same time facilitating community inclusion.

It is critical to note that the strongest references to feelings of 'safety' in this research came from women who had returned to their homes, or places in which they had existing networks. Several participants – particularly in Kasra - expressed that tribal connections, sheikhs and imams were extremely important in supporting their integration into the community and easing


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tensions. The sense of safety they expressed came from this, rather than from any form of intervention or support they had received from organizations.

Recreational activities were cited as one area that could be helpful in supporting organic reintegration and wellbeing, for example by providing toys to children. As most women centred their hopes for the future around the wellbeing off their children, focusing on children's wellbeing could also support the mental health of mothers', either in and of itself, or by helping women to create social networks of parents. While dialogue sessions were described as helpful, there was a consensus among returnees in both Hajin and Kasra on the need for more organic, neutral opportunities for them to engage with members of the community, rather than designated 'social cohesion' activities. As suggested by some participants, these activities could be as simple as playgroups for mothers and children, for example.

Prioritising children: Unilaterally, women who had had been able to get their children into additional educational support activities described such activities as extremely helpful, and stressed the need that these continue. Residents also stressed the importance of prioritising children in reintegration efforts, and specifically addressing their educational needs.

### 2. Shortfalls in existing projects

Accessibility: Many returnee women in both Hajin and Kasra said that NGOs draw participants from the same, limited list of names, leading to the exclusion of some who are eager to participate. It was also reported that activities are not always accessible to people with disabilities, and that some activities are located too far away for them to access them easily.

Superficial activities: While some returnees reported that reintegration activities gave them an opportunity to feel heard and accepted, many more shared that activities were too short term, and not sufficiently linked to action. This was particularly prevalent in discussions of vocational trainings which did not lead to employment opportunities, but also in relation to 'discussion-based' activities which were not followed up with opportunities for returnee women to spend time getting to know residents.

### 3. Existing barriers to attending reintegration activities.

Familial acceptability: In both Hajin and Kasra, some women reported experiences of discrimination within their own families for trying to reintegrate. For instance, several women explained that they had not attended any reintegration activities because members of their families prohibited them from doing so, on account of these activities being considered as 'a waste of time'. Others explained that reintegration support offered to them was not


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considered suitable by their families, and that many families would not allow their women or children to leave the house to partake in activities.

Identity fears: In Kasra, women also shared that they did not take part in any form of reintegration activity because they did not want to be labelled as a 'returnee' and for their identity to be known. This confusion and hesitancy were not detected in Hajin. An explanation could be the overall better societal acceptance to returnees in Hajin compared to Kasra.

## Concluding recommendations

This study sought to understand what challenges are exclusive to returnees from al Hol to the Northeast, in comparison to the residents of Northeast; and the perceived effectiveness of existing activities delivered to returnees. As the key findings have detailed, returnees face specific challenges in accessing essential goods and services without necessary documentation. Returnees, both women and children, need psychological support, and illiteracy is a major challenge. When returnees lack social networks, this has a significant impact on their ability to reintegrate. No challenges were reported in relation to accessing housing, and in very few cases did women report being turned away from institutions (specifically healthcare providers) on account of being returnees. The greatest challenge returnees face is lack of employment. While many women attribute this to discrimination on account of being returnees, this must be read in the context of severe unemployment in Kasra and Hajin overall. In relation to employment opportunities, residents of Kasra also shared the challenge of overcoming public opinion that returnee women were linked to ISIS. However overall, in FGDs, residents in both Kasra and Hajin were adamant that from their perspectives, their communities were accepting of returnees.

While existing reintegration activities are welcome, they fall short of lasting change for returnees, particularly with regards to accessing work. The study also found a significant difference in experiences of returnees in Kasra and Hajin, which suggests that for reintegration programmes to be effective, they need to be carefully designed to take account of local dynamics and histories. It also suggests that it is important to expand this research to cover other locations in Deir Ezzor, because failure to adequately take account of the specific context will be detrimental to the success of reintegration efforts.

It is striking to note that there are few differences in the data gathered among women who had engaged in reintegration activities and those who had not. Women who had taken part in activities shared that these activities had been useful and must continue; but there is no clear difference in outcomes for women who took part in activities in comparison to those who had not. This does not mean that reintegration activities at present are not making a difference to returnee's lives. Rather, given the short span of exposure to these activities, it highlights that work towards social cohesion is a long-term goal, and suggests that as much attention should


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be paid to structural realities of the wider context. Reintegration activities cannot generate social cohesion on their own. It also suggests that the goals of reintegration activities may be most effective if they are modest and targeted. The provision of documentation to returnee women, couple with engagement with local institutions – and in particular schools and teachers – would have a significant impact on the daily lives of returnee women and children. The material and social benefits of creating opportunities for returnee and local women and children to spend time together and allow friendships to grow was widely reported. Finally, the importance of psychological and educational support to returnee women and children was cited by returnees and host communities alike as vital.

The following mutually supportive recommendations are drawn from the findings of this research to guide reintegration programming moving forwards.

- **Improve access to public services and the issue of civic documentation**: more should be done in terms of both advocacy and work with local authorities (particularly in Kasra) to address structural problems of issuing and recognition of documentations across the region and between the different entities. Lessons can be drawn from work in this area already underway in Hajin and should be implemented in other areas.
- **Improve access to economic and financial support:** this is fundamental to enabling returnee women and their families to integrate but must be approached carefully. Women struggle to find work on account of discrimination linked to their status as returnees, suggesting more could be done to understand employers perspectives of returnees. Few women reported any improvement in their economic situation following vocational training undertaken as part of reintegration activities. It is unclear, from the scope of this study, how relevant or effective livelihood interventions currently are for returnee women, and targeted research on employment outcomes and experiences is needed to inform what kind of trainings should be prioritized moving forwards. Prior to conducting any trainings, thorough research on the most useful vocational training, including market research, should always be undertaken. Engagement with employers from the outset of vocational training activities could be one way to ensure economic opportunities for returnee women.

  The current provision of specific financial support to returnees is problematic because this is perceived as unfair among local communities. This corresponds to other findings that segregating returnees from other members of the community and treating them as exceptional does not promote social cohesion in a context where services and economic opportunities are limited. Finding alternative models of providing financial support on a needs-assessed basis that includes the whole community could contribute to mitigating this. Future research exploring these mutually supporting benefits of economic provisions and social cohesion, is one area that could be prioritised.
- **Design programs to foster organic connections:** despite existing vocational trainings not being particularly effective in securing access to work, when asked what kind of support they would like to improve their circumstances, women still reported the need for vocational training. The space of a vocational training provides an important opportunity


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for women to meet and share their challenges. This suggests that women gain other sources of support through vocational trainings, such as the opportunity to meet, develop friendships and share their experiences. Indeed, it is clear from this research that time, and the development of organic relationships at the community level are fundamental enabling factors towards reintegration. Providers of reintegration activities should consider the importance of fostering connections and spaces of interactions between members of the community without the blunt labelling of reintegration. The importance of psychological support to returnees cannot be underestimated and should be understood as a contributing factor towards social cohesion.

- **Provide more support for children:** all women interviewed expressed profound concern for their children's futures and insisted that more support was needed to enable children to catch up with missed education, as well as to support their mental health. This opinion was shared by members of local communities, who all agreed that for social cohesion to prevail, it was vital to invest in children and their wellbeing. By coordinating educational catch-up activities with local schools attended by returnee children and engaging with teachers directly, reintegration support for children could be reinforced through the school environment.

### Additional future research avenues

**Continuing to develop studies that can highlight differences between localities in NES is critical.** One way of doing this is through engagement with service providers. At the community level, research that includes local service providers (particularly doctors and teachers) could provide a more grounded understanding of local community dynamics. Another way to is to try and better understand the coping mechanisms women draw on in the face of discrimination and material challenges, which differ depending on the context in which they are living. More in depth case-study research could be helpful in this regard.

Relatedly, efforts must be made to **better understand localised definitions of 'reintegration', and indeed of 'social cohesion'**. In the scope of this research, when returnee women were asked to define integration, it was described in terms of the ability to fully engage with society. This included adapting to a new society and adhering to its customs and traditions; and being able to make an effective contribution. Returnee women also explained the need for understanding between people, and respect for each other; but we lack understanding of what successful or meaningful reintegration means for local communities. By refining the design of questions, future research could help to articulate the 'goal' of both returnees and residents more clearly; the barriers to reaching it; and outline pathways towards solutions. Moreover, future research could delve deeper into the stated meaning of reintegration for research participants, ensuring that programmes are designed according to their definitions.


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**Understanding children's perspectives is critical to developing effective reintegration programming** designed to benefit them. Although much of this research was about children, none of it was conducted with children themselves. Understanding their perspectives on their own lives – both children who are returnees, and children who are residents and are now asked to engage with returnee children – could provide valuable insights into the kinds of coping mechanisms children are adopting, and how best to support them. Further, many mothers cited the welfare of their children as key to their own hopes for the future. Prioritising the needs of children in research and activities could serve the dual purposes of improving the welfare of children and parents alike.

Finally, **expanding methodologies towards longitudinal research could focus on exploring the difference in the experiences of women who undertake reintegration activities, and those who do not in terms of both securing employment and facing social discrimination in a long-time perspective.** Starting this work now, with a view to continuing to ask the same set of questions over a five-year period, for instance, would provide a far deeper understanding of the effectiveness of reintegration work that could then be used to substantively inform other contexts.

# Appendix: Methodology notes

This research entailed a collaboration between IMPACT CSRD teams in Berlin and in northeast Syria, with academics at the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) at the Geneva Graduate Institute. This collaboration began with extended consultations over the feasibility of this research and the safest ways to conduct this deeply sensitive work. Research design and ethics were discussed in depth. Particular attention was paid to the selection of research tools that would enable researchers to build rapport with participants, and to ensure that participants would feel able to lead the conversation and only share information that they were comfortable with. Anonymity and confidentiality were a core concern throughout this work, and great attention was paid to data protection. Informed consent was gained verbally from every participant in this research.

## Tool development and fieldwork

Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted in the two locations. To do this, a qualitative research tools were developed that would enable researchers to build rapport with participants and engage a small number of individuals in depth on questions surrounding return and reintegration. These tools were revised several times following a training with the research team in northeast Syria, and after an initial piloting phase. The primary tools developed were interview guides and focus group discussion guides. In addition to training on the tools, the research team in Syria received training in ethics, risk, and an agreed upon safeguarding protocol.


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| | FGD: Returnees participated in activities | FGD: Returnees did not participate in activities | FGD: Residents | Interviews |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hajin | 1 | 1 | 1 | 7 |
| Kasra | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| Total | 2 | 2 | 2 | 13 |

In total, 6 researchers carried out data collection in Hajin and Kasra over a period of four weeks. While data collection was modest in scale, the FGDs were up to 3 hours in length, and the interviews over an hour. The semi-structured nature of our research tools allowed women space to express themselves freely, and many participants shared their appreciation for this space to share their perspectives. Locations were selected for FGDs and interviews to be accessible to participants. At various stages during and after data collection, the research team met with members of IMPACT CSRD in Berlin for debriefing, feedback, and mentoring. Translation of data was undertaken by IMPACT CSRD, and analysis jointly conducted by IMPACT CSRD and the CCDP.

## Limitations

The approach to this research had several limitations. The study is inevitably limited in scope, due to the small number of participants. It is also important to note that there was significant divergence between information shared in the focus group discussions and interviews in both locations. For example, in the FGD setting, participants who were returnees in both locations emphasised that they experienced a high level of discrimination. However, in follow-up interviews conducted with the same women in both locations, it emerged that in fact, discrimination subsided quickly overtime, particularly in Hajin.

Researchers facilitating FGDs also felt that in some instances, women in the FGD setting exaggerated the extent to which they were seen as ‘strange’ or being ‘othered’ by the local community. There was also a diverse age range present in focus group discussions, and in several instances, younger women were reluctant to speak in the presence of older women. In the case of one FGD, the researchers facilitating the discussion were aware that many of the women had faced significant problems in al Hol, which they were reluctant to talk about: for instance, individuals would start explaining something, and then hesitated or stopped. The researchers felt this was because they did not want to share what they were going to say with the group of people in the room.

Finally, there was some contradiction in responses given to different questions posed throughout the FGDs and interviews, primarily in relation to the relevance and effectiveness of trainings provided to support reintegration. It seems likely that research participants associated the research team with the provision of support and adapted their answers accordingly.


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