



## Article

# Guilty When Innocent. Australian Government's Resistance to Bringing Home Wives and Children of Islamic State Fighters

Joumanah El-Matrah <sup>1,\*</sup> and Kamalle Dabboussy <sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> School of Social Sciences, Western Sydney University, Penrith, NSW 2751, Australia<sup>2</sup> Western Sydney Migrant Resource Centre, Liverpool, NSW 2170, Australia; dabboussy\_k@hotmail.com

\* Correspondence: joumanah.elmatrah@gmail.com

**Abstract:** Currently there are 20 Australian women and 47 children being held in the Al-Roj camp in Northern Syria, who are the family members of Islamic State fighters. The Australian government argues that it is both unsafe for government officials to rescue those held in the camp and unsafe for Australia to repatriate these women and children. This security rhetoric is commonly understood as Australia's abandonment of its citizens and their entitlements to protection and repatriation. This paper argues that the Australian government is condemning its citizens to a condition of statelessness and displacement, simulating the following conditions under which refugees and asylum seekers are forced to live: murder, violence, deprivation of adequate food and shelter, disease, and the potential hazards of the COVID-19 infection. Rendering its citizens to a condition of statelessness and displacement constitutes both punishment meted out on those deemed guilty by their presence in Syria, and provides the Australian government the opportunity to revoke the citizenship of women and children. Three Australian women who travelled to Syria have already been stripped of their Australian citizenship. This paper explores the conditions and methods by which the Australian government has erased the entitlements, protections and certainty of citizenship for Australian Muslim women and children.

**Keywords:** Muslim women; citizenship rights; security; Syria; Al-Hawl camp; Islamic State; Australian government; terrorism; criminalization; repatriation



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## 1. Introduction—A Uniquely Australian Approach

In a public broadcaster television program on Australian women and children, then in the Al-Hawl camp in Syria, Dylan Welch asks the following particularly insidious question: "Whose responsibility are they now?" (Four Corners 2019). The insidiousness of this question resides in the fact that there is no question as to who has responsibility for these women and children, it is the Australian government. Nesrine Zahab, an interviewee in the same Four Corners program, unequivocally states, "I am not a refugee, I have a country. Like, what am I doing here?" (Four Corners 2019).

Zahab's question, perhaps more than any other question posed on the plight of the women and children currently being detained in refugee camps in Northern Syria, is both the most compelling and prescient. Moreover, despite the dire situation that the Australian government has continued to subject its citizens to, this question has, to date, received no meaningful interrogation in Australia. This paper will address this gap, and will document and assess the statements and justifications of the Australian government as it has consistently refused to repatriate Australian women and children.

While the Australian government has constructed multiple narratives around the criminality and pathology of women, this paper argues that it has pursued its ultimate aims, which are to both erode citizenship rights and revoke the citizenship of as many Muslim women in the Al-Roj refugee camp as possible. This path to exile is best demonstrated by the limited number of women it is seeking to prosecute, but more so by the conditions

it has subjected women and children to, conditions associated with statelessness and dispossession. It is as if they are refugees or women seeking asylum, not the citizens of an established democratic state.

Australia's response to Muslim women appears to seek both to punish them through the revocation of their citizenship where possible, or to simulate the withdrawal of their citizenship where their citizenship has not yet been revoked or perhaps cannot be. The Australian government has justified citizenship revocation on both security and symbolic grounds (Pillai and Williams 2018), arguing that citizenship revocation is a "key counter-terrorism tool" (Karp 2019a) and that a citizenship is a privilege (Keane 2019). The narrative of threat, risk and pathology renders the Muslim women still in Al-Roj as undeserving of the rights and protections inherent in their citizenship. These two approaches suggest that women are doubly punished for their failure to be good Australians and good women.

The lives and circumstances around which forty-seven Australian Muslim women have come to find themselves in Al-Roj camp in Northern Syria today are largely unknown. The Australian government has made no information available on the women and children initially held in Al-Hawl (almost two years) and currently in Al-Roj, nor the basis for its allegations against these women. Hence, this paper draws on publicly available documents, media reporting and the perspective of Kamalle Dabboussy, whose daughter and grandchildren are among the women and children currently held in the Al-Roj refugee camp. It extensively cites the television program *Four Corners* from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, as this program is one of the rare opportunities in which the women have been allowed to speak for themselves, undermining the government's depiction of women as dangerous Islamic State (IS) adherents.

### 1.1. Changing Citizenship and Citizens

Citizenship deprivation has been adopted by several western democratic countries as part of their anti-terrorism legal and policy framework. The deployment of the label of 'foreign fighters' has reconfigured the very 'centre' of citizenship (Sykes 2016), allowing for citizenship deprivation, and eroding rights normally associated with citizenship. Governments' appetite to restrict citizens' rights in the pursuit of 'security' has 'normalized' the 'exceptional' (Williams 2011). The reconfiguration of citizenship and the normalization of exception behavior on the part of the Australian government potentially has ramifications on not only how we understand the rights of citizenship, but also how citizenship rights and deprivation may affect other minority groups.

Citizenship as a right is "the highest and most secure legal status" intended to be secure from revocation by the state, Macklin (2014). Bauböck and Paskalev (2015) define citizenship as a 'meta-right' ordering the relationship between the state and the person. Lenard (2016) argues that citizenship status is intended to be inviolable, and the claimed right/power of states to withdraw citizenship situates citizenship as dependent on the right behaviour.

In introducing citizenship stripping laws, former Prime Minister Abbott (2015) emphasized 'right behaviours' include loyalty to the state, as follows:

It's worth recalling the citizenship pledge that all of us have been encouraged to recite: I pledge my commitment to Australia and its people; whose democratic beliefs I share; whose rights and liberties I respect; and whose laws I will uphold and obey. This has to mean something. Especially now that we face a home-grown threat from people who do reject our values.

Whether citizenship deprivation is based on security grounds, such as removing a dangerous individual from the citizenry or for symbolic reasons, that is, an individual does not deserve to be a citizen, Pillai and Williams (2018) argue that both rationales are ultimately based on the notion of 'undesirable citizens'. The idea of an undesirable citizen deeply informs who has the right to enjoy citizenship. The undesirable citizen is not only the grounds on which citizenship might be revoked, but also the justification for their exclusion from political life (Sykes 2016).

Citizenship deprivation as a strategy against terrorism produces a securitized citizenship policy operating from a racialized lens (Choudhury 2017). This racialization comes into effect when deprivation is enacted; it is also evident in the treatment of Muslim women seeking to realize their citizenship right to return to Australia from Northern Syrian camps.

### 1.2. Australian Government Policy and Rhetoric on Australian Women in Northern Syria Camps

To fully appreciate the Australian government's treatment of women and children in Northern Syria refugee camps, it is important to consider Lenard's (2016) observation that citizenship does not create a set of rights to be honored, rather it designates the government as responsible for protecting those rights.

Since the decline of the Islamic State and the Australian women's arrival in the various refugee camps established in Northern Syria, the Australian government has steadfastly refused to repatriate women and children to Australia. The Australian government has alternated between the narratives of women's criminality and the risk they pose to Australia to justify what appears on the surface to be inaction; however, the stripping of citizenship and its treatment of women and children in Syria suggests that the government is fervently pursuing its own agenda.

To date, the following three women have been stripped of their Australian citizenship: Zehra Duman (Karp 2020), Suhayra Aden and a third unknown woman (Welch et al. 2021). It is likely that this punishment awaits other Australian women in Northern Syria's camps.

In February 2020, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) issued 42 arrest warrants for Muslim men and women currently in Syria. The warrants were issued "for alleged criminal offences against Australian law", and with no specific charges made public, news reports suggest they are likely to include travelling to a declared zone, or supporting or joining a terrorist organization (SBS News 2020). There is no information on how many women have arrest warrants issued against them, but the AFP spokesman stated that "All the women who are suspected to have travelled to the conflict zone are under investigation for a range of offences" and "All Australians believed to have travelled to the conflict zone are being investigated and the AFP will consider all relevant offences, capable of prosecution in Australia, in that investigation" (Doherty 2020). Nonetheless, at this point, no woman has been charged as a combatant.

The AFP have also stated that warrants would only be served on women if they were to be repatriated (Doherty and Zhou 2020). In the context of facing possible prosecution in Australia, Australian women have consistently offered to cooperate with both the government and security authorities, volunteering to submit to control orders, and to mitigate any concerns Australians might have as to the risk they pose (Schliebs 2019). In doing so, the women risk exposing themselves to a greater chance of prosecution, and in fact making themselves subject to significant police powers without a criminal conviction. If this is to occur, it will be the first time in Australian history that individuals have subjected themselves to surveillance and punishment by the State before they have been convicted of a crime. The women offering to volunteer to cooperate and submit to control orders before they have been convicted of a crime perhaps also reflects the way in which Muslims have had to manage their perceived 'risky' identities by making themselves safe and offering 'safe' identities (Mythen et al. 2013), in this instance allowing themselves to be treated like criminals before they have been convicted of a crime.

Civil groups will have to monitor the impact and complexity of placing individuals under control orders, who may not have committed a crime but who see their compliance as the only way to ensure their safety and repatriation to Australia.

### 1.3. Australia's Response in a Global Context

It would appear that authorities have undertaken significant enquiries, made an assessment of the likely offences women may have committed and the charges they may be subject to. This means that some women and men have been investigated and authorities are confident there is sufficient evidence to try them in Australia. The United States has

repatriated all its citizens from Syria, with almost a third of them facing terrorism related charges (Nakashima and DeYoung 2020). Other countries, including Germany, Finland, Russia and Malaysia, have also repatriated their citizens (International Crisis Group 2019). Yet, despite this and the good faith offers made by the women of cooperation, the then Minister for Home Affairs, Peter Dutton, has continued to present women as pathological, dangerous criminals who present a significant threat to Australia, labeling them as 'hardcore' and further stating that women "... would, in our judgment-not all of them but some of them-have the potential and capacity to come back here and cause a mass casualty event" (Greenbank 2019).

This yet to be proven criminality has been paired with an equally unsubstantiated claim of the women's pathology and immorality, demonstrated both by their dysfunctional maternal capacity and their failure to their gender. The Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, argues that he would not risk Australian lives to rescue those overseas because "I think it's appalling that Australians have gone and fought against our values and our way of life and peace-loving countries of the world in joining the Daesh fight. I think it's even more despicable that they put their children in the middle of it" (9NEWS 2019). Then the Home Affairs Minister, Peter Dutton, further argues that because of this "despicable" act as a mother, both mothers and their children should live with the consequences, as a form of 'punishment' as it were by the State: "... I think most people realise if you go into a warzone and take kids into a warzone ... you've made a decision to destroy the lives of your children and that's something you'll have to live with", (Greenbank 2019). Where women fail to punish themselves for their 'despicable' "decision to destroy the lives of their children", the Australian government will punish them by forcing them to live with the consequences.

#### 1.4. Ideology

This pathologizing of women can also be seen in the government's rhetoric on the failure of women to be appropriately appalled and resistant to the subjugation of their own gender and themselves. Julie Bishop, the then Foreign Affairs Minister, in addressing Parliament on the increasing number of women joining the Islamic State, states, "This defies logic ... given we know the attitude of Daesh towards women, if the killings and executions aren't enough, Daesh has published instructions on the treatment of sexual slaves, which includes raping and beating women. Even children are not immune, with instructions encouraging sexual assault on girls who have not yet reached puberty" (cited in McDonald 2015).

In travelling to Syria, Bishop suggests that the women both accept and endorse the abuse of other women and themselves, and this irrationality places them outside the community of women, and in this instance outside the community of the rationally empowered Australian women. According to Hussein (2019), the rise of Islamic State, or rather women's commitment to IS, has reinforced the long-standing binary of good Muslim women/bad Muslim women that has developed in the West. As bad Muslim women become "badder", she argues, good Muslim women become the ones to direct their children away from extremism. Bishop exercises this prerogative when she encourages, "Family and friends need to reach out to young people at risk before it's too late" (cited in McDonald 2015). This is also about rescuing women from themselves.

It is perhaps this culturally entrenched belief of the bad Muslim woman that Dutton calls on when he states, "So I don't think it should come as a surprise when we say we're not going to send our soldiers to rescue people of this nature" (Greenbank 2019). We are not surprised because we know bad Muslim women place us all at risk. The "nature" that Dutton refers to in his statement not only relates to the criminality and pathology of women, but also to how the very nature of Muslim women puts us at risk; they put us at risk if they come here and they put us at risk if we travel to rescue them. Everything about Muslim women puts us at risk, even when we try to save them from themselves and their dysfunctional decision making that places them and their children at risk.

## 2. Methods and Data

This article seeks to document the Australian government's refusal to repatriate Australian women and children from refugee camps in Northern Syria. It also documents the government's public justifications for its decision, by reviewing the limited publicly available statements it has made in media articles. There is insufficient information or data to allow for a detailed analysis, such as a content or thematic analysis of the Australian government's statements. This is a shortcoming of the article. However this has, in some ways, been the only way to tell the story of what has been done to Australian women and children under the guise of keeping Australians safe.

The other part of this story is the women themselves, who are they and how did they come to be abrogated of their basic rights of citizenship? There is very little in the public space about the Australian women currently entrapped in Syria's refugee camps; we do know the women who travelled to Syria, whether by manipulation, deceit or consent, were in large part drawn there by family. They are a diverse group of women, including fourth or fifth generation migrants and second generation children of refugees and humanitarian entrants.

There is no precise trajectory from the suburbs of Australia to the territories of the Islamic State; it is a complex pathway that undoubtedly differed for each woman. To document one such pathway, Mariam Dabboussy's story is included here solely for pragmatic reasons; we have information about her and we have almost no information about the other women in the camps. This case study relies heavily on Kamalle Dabboussy, co-author of this article, and the [Four Corners \(2019\)](#).

### *Case Study*

Mariam Dabboussy was born in Bankstown, Sydney. Prior to Syria, she lived a typical middle class Australian life; she was more social than studious, but after completing her studies she followed in the footsteps of her father and worked in migrant support services.

In 2013, she married Kaled Zahab, gradually becoming more devout. In 2015, Kaled, who was not an ardent traveler, agreed to take Mariam and their 18-month-old child on their first overseas holiday together. They travelled to Malaysia, then onto Lebanon, and finally onto Turkey where they were joined by Kaled's parents.

It is here that Mariam's story both converges with the story of other Australians in Syria and resembles the story of other women misled into entering Syria. Kaled's brother, Muhammad, was already in Syria, and had organized for Kaled and his other family members, including his own parents, to enter Syria.

Mariam believes that if wasn't for Muhammad, "none of us would have found ourselves here" ([Four Corners 2019](#)). She asserts that her husband was persuaded by his older brother to travel and become an Islamic State fighter in Syria. It is Muhammad's intelligence, charisma and influence over his family that is said to have persuaded them that travelling to Syria was the right thing to do. None of them could have or would have made the trip without him.

It seems that either Muhammad or Kaled, or both, understood that Mariam would not enter Syria willingly and so, without knowing, she was taken to the Turkish-Syrian border and "(w)e started hearing gunshots. I looked around thinking, what am I going to do? I'm in the middle of nowhere. I don't even know where I am, there's gunshots. I just started running". Her mother-in-law was running ahead of her with her child. Mariam was then put into a car and taken to an "official-looking house" ([Four Corners 2019](#)). On her entry, her passport and phone were taken from her.

In interviews with *Four Corners*, Mariam describes herself as 'broken', she says that "(t)he first shock of entering and being in Syria, you'd think that would be the biggest thing. But every event that happened after that only got harder and harder", ([Four Corners 2019](#)). The 'events' that Mariam is referring to include the killing of her husband, Kaled, three months after his arrival to Syria and just before she was to give birth to their child, being

forced to remarry twice, with her second husband also killed just before she was to give birth.

Like many of the women who eventually sought refuge in Al-Hawl, Mariam was forced deeper into Islamic State territory as the Syrian war progressed. Eventually, she was trapped in Baghouz under near-constant attack from coalition forces seeking to end Islamic State's regional dominance. Mariam describes that time as follows: "In front of our own eyes, three people got shot in one day. A five-year-old girl from my community was shot".

Mariam's story is not over, she is still today in Al-Roj. She contacted her father recently to request English language books to assist her children to learn English. However, the last time Mariam spoke publicly, she said "I'm finished. I am done. I'm broken. I've been through so much, I can't anymore. I'm a nervous wreck. I need my dad" (Four Corners 2019).

### 3. Discussion

The Australian government's claim that it would risk Australian lives by repatriating women and children from the Syrian camps has been questioned by those who work in the camps, and has been undermined by both the number of governments who have repatriated their nationals or are in the process of doing so (International Crisis Group 2019). In October 2020, the United States government announced it had repatriated 27 nationals, 10 were American supporters of the Islamic State facing criminal charges (The United States Department of Justice 2020). The same press release encouraged the international community to do the same, offering support to 'any other country that takes responsibility'. In addition to the support offered by the US, Australia has also been offered assistance by the United Nations (Stayner 2020a). The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led by Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) who administer the camps, have offered to transfer Australian women and children to border towns in Iraq where they can be repatriated safely by Australians (Doherty 2019). This strategy has been undertaken with other foreign nationals without the use of diplomatic staff or security personnel (Doherty and Zhou 2020). International organizations, such as the Red Cross and Save the Children, have also offered to assist the Australian government in repatriating nationals (Stayner 2020a).

Given the wide array of actors offering to facilitate the repatriation of Australians so that no Australian official is put at risk, it is difficult not to arrive at the view formed by Mat Tinkler, Chief Executive Officer of Save the Children, that "They need to be brought home as soon as possible—there is no real excuse left for the Australian government" (Stayner 2020a). The failure to act on these offers demonstrates that the Australian government's inaction on repatriation has never been about the minimization of risk, neither to the Australians who might be at risk helping the women and children repatriate, nor to the Australians here once the women and children are repatriated.

The Australian government has demonstrated it has no interest in fulfilling its obligations to its own citizens nor to the Syrian people. The Australian government, in failing to keep its citizens within its borders, now owes it to the Syrian people to repatriate, investigate and charge or set free the Australian citizens who travelled to Syria. Like many other western governments, the Australian government has understood that prosecuting individuals at home will be difficult, even with its broad anti-terrorism laws and significant police powers, but nonetheless, as the Australian government itself has demonstrated, it can be done in its issuing of 42 warrants for those in Syria.

#### 3.1. Camps and the State of Exception

Instead, the government has chosen another path, citizenship revocation and degradation; a political solution of washing its hands, arguing at every opportunity that women travelled willingly to Syria and that travel renders their citizenship tenuous. However, citizenship up until now in Australian history has never been tenuous; citizenship, once acquired in Australia, has been historically a permanent status. The criminally pathological Muslim woman who willingly travels to live under the auspices of a violent group that beheads men and rapes women is a test of how far it can go in its project of expelling

Muslims from its nation. In this regard, Muslim men are not the litmus test; only Muslim women can be because they are both good Muslim victimized women and bad Muslim victimized and victimizing women. Since the power to revoke citizenship came into effect in 2015 and the justification for citizenship deprivation is so deeply embedded in the 'war on terror' and 'foreign fighter', it may be reasonable to assume that Muslim men appear to be overwhelmingly its target, although given the level of secrecy surrounding citizenship deprivation, it is difficult to be certain of this. It is noteworthy perhaps that within two months of the Allegiance to Australia Act coming into force, Khaled Sharrouf, an infamous Australian Islamic State fighter who expressed no intention of returning to Australia and was rumored to be dead at the time (later rumored to be untrue and then rumored to have been killed in 2017), was stripped of his Australian citizenship (Pillai and Williams 2018). This appears on the surface the Australian government was prepared to denationalize a dead man. Muslim men are not an ambiguous signifier, they are violent and untrustworthy (Sides and Gross 2013) and can be expelled without cultural or political backlash.

The current plight of the women and children in first the Al-Hawl and now Al-Roj camp suggests that the Australian government can as easily dispense with Muslim women as it does with Muslim men, and that children are not a barrier to that expulsion. The Australian government's refusal to both repatriate women and children or to provide financial support to improve their living conditions in camps has subjected them precisely to conditions under which refugees and stateless persons are forced to live.

Australian women and their children have effectively been placed outside the rule of law; it is an Agambenian 'state of exception' whereby citizens of the Australian State live under all the conditions associated with statelessness, with no access to employment, education, social welfare or medical care, minimal shelter, or freedom of movement, with no right to participate politically in the nation that they belong to, and no protection from arbitrary detention. In fact, Human Rights Watch have characterized the situation of women in Al-Hawl and Al-Roj as arbitrary and unlawful detention (Scherer and Stephens 2021). According to the United Nations, the absence of the above-listed socio-economic, civil and political rights is the definition of statelessness (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees n.d.).

The Australian government has undertaken an act of violence on the very definition of refugee, which is "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (United Nations General Assembly 1951). They have abandoned and subjected women to a state of legally simulated displacement and statelessness while living in the real and dangerous reality of the Al-Hawl and then Al-Roj camps. Displacement, statelessness and camps are all the markers of being a refugee. This is itself a form of persecution that appears to be entirely based on the women's religious identity, and it is difficult to conceive of any other community of women being subjected to the conditions that Muslim women currently find themselves in.

Al-Hawl is a camp that seems to have been established so that western nations could generate refugees. It was first established in 1991 for Iraqi refugees as a result of the U.S's Gulf War (Third World Institute 2005), it was then reopened for the U.S's second war on Iraq in 2003 (Saleh 2010). It was reopened again in 2016 by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a militia backed by the U.S, to shelter those displaced by the battle against the Islamic State (De Azevedo 2020). With the assault on the Islamic State, Al Hawl came to hold an increasing number of individuals associated with the Islamic State as well as those displaced by them. The estimates of Al Hawl's capacity vary between 10,000 to 40,000 people, but by 2019 the camp was estimated to have held more than 73,000 (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2019), and in 2020, it was estimated to have held 68,000, the vast majority (94%) are women and children (De Azevedo 2020). These numbers demonstrate how profoundly over-populated Al-Hawl is, and the likely pressures on housing and the provision of aid in the camp.

### 3.2. Camps as Danger Zones

The estimates for Australian women and children in the camps can vary, but generally it is thought to be around 20 women and 47 children, most of these children under the age of six (Pearson 2020). Australian women and children spent much of their time in a partitioned section of Al-Hawl, alongside 4,000 women and 7,000 children from 62 different countries (De Azevedo 2020). Despite segregation, they have continued to face the same conditions as the rest of the camp. The International Crisis Group (2019), among others, has noted that with the fall of Baghouz and the intensification of the conflict, non-ideological women as well as those deeply committed to IS were forced to share the same space, leading to tension and confrontation; the limited delivery of food and services has stoked existing tensions, and there has been violence, breakout attempts, confrontations between women trapped in the camp and between women and the camp staff, including aid staff. Sexual abuse of women and children is pervasive and has been documented by the ICG in their interviews with aid staff and UN staff members. Women have been killed in the camp; a mutilated women's body was reported in a toilet, another woman was found burnt in her tent (Doherty 2019), with other deaths in unclear circumstances (Four Corners 2019). Some women have become militant and established an improvised sharia court that has sentenced women to death, the police have been attacked by women with knives and guns and have discovered the bodies of women who have been murdered (Mroue 2019). Azadeh Moaveni, an analyst with the Crisis Group, explains "The foreigner annex of al-Hol has been steadily violent much of the year, partly because it seems to hold a small core of organized and extremely militant women who plot and prey upon others, but also because conditions inside are so deplorable and tense" (Mroue 2019).

This context of violence that Australian women and children are living under is exacerbated by ongoing security concerns, which further intensify existing health conditions, as the capacity of aid organizations to deliver food, water and medical supplies in an unsafe environment is limited (International Crisis Group 2019). In July 2020, the UN's counterterrorism office announced that it had received information that 700 people, including children, had died in the Al-Hawl and Al-Roj camps because of a lack of medicine and food. This is consistent with the figures provided by Kurdish Red Crescent in 2019 that 511 died in the Al-Hawl camp alone (Lederer 2020).

In August 2020, the first cases of COVID-19 among those working in the Al-Hawl camp were reported and, despite the weak healthcare facilities in the camp, the Kurdish authorities were left to deal with the pandemic alone (SBSNews 2020). Rather than generating an urgency to evacuate the women and children living in appalling conditions with no access to adequate health care, the Australian Foreign Minister, Marise Payne, stated that "Movement in Syria and in the region, is now more complex than ever and at home, we see our states and territories very stretched, as an understatement in some cases, because of the impact of COVID-19 infections. We will not put our communities at home at risk, nor our officials abroad, to extract people from Syria under current conditions" (Stayner 2020a). In abandoning women to their fate in the squalidness of Al-Hawl, with its minimal health care capacity, the Australian government can arguably be said to have left them vulnerable to the pandemic.

Refugee camps are often places of despair, chaos, danger and deprivation for the many who stay there. It is the place of last resort, and people will risk their lives with traffickers rather than face the protracted and dangerous struggle of surviving in a refugee camp. However, the Al-Hawl camp is not in any meaningful sense a refugee camp any more than the Australian women are refugees. The ICG suggests that the conditions in Al-Hawl may be a result of its distinctive nature; it is not a refugee or displaced persons' camp, and it is not a wartime detention facility, so there are no guaranteed rights and services afforded to the residents of Al-Hawl and consequently Al-Roj.

This may be why, in September 2020, Australian media outlets reported that approximately four women and ten children were removed from Al-Hawl. However even then, procedurally, it was a process one might associate with dangerous criminality; it

occurred in the middle of the night, with women removed in handcuffs (Stayner 2020b). This treatment of women as dangerous and a risk to those around them is consistent with how the Australian government treats them and may have influenced how the Kurdish administrators of the camp perceive them. Kamalle Dabboussy wrote on twitter; “Father’s Day was hard enough, my daughter trapped and ignored by @ScottMorrisonMP. Today I wake with the news that 10 Aust kids are missing. Tents, beds, & clothes destroyed. No one in Govt can tell me if they are alive? Bring them home #alhol #auspol @MarisePayne. Before death” (Stayner 2020b).

The Australian government had little to say about the events except that it was aware and monitoring the situation, then returning to its well-rehearsed line, that is so inaccurate as to border on disinformation, “Our ability to provide consular assistance and passport assistance to Australians in both Syria and Iraq remains extremely limited due to the exceptionally dangerous security situation” (Stayner 2020b). Like its argument that Australian women in the camps may be radicalized and dangerous, it is designed to represent women and children as a danger to any Australian who might provide assistance. It later emerged, and it is likely that the Australian government knew of this all along, that the women and children had been moved from the Al-Hawl to the Al-Roj camp, most likely for their safety, and was a result of the Kurdish authorities’ assessment that the Australian women were less dangerous and required less security. The remaining Australians, 13 women and 30 children, were moved later that month in a less threatening way.

### 3.3. Women Are Objects Not Subjects

Like their argument that these women are dangerous, the Australian government has maintained that at least some women willingly travelled to the Islamic State (Albeck-Ripka 2019). This implies that having willingly travelled to join the Islamic State, they then willingly entered Syria and remained committed to the Islamic State throughout their time in Syria. This assertion and the assumptions underpinning it, have become increasingly subject to challenge by the women themselves and assessments by analysts. Some women arrived in Syria because they felt pressured to follow their family members or they were coerced, manipulated or deceived. This is Mariam Dabboussy’s point when she says ‘the boys conned us’; Mariam who had to run across the Turkish–Syrian border pursuing her child and family in the midst of bullets (Four Corners 2019). Suhayra Aden, recently arrested for trying to enter Turkey illegally from Syria and having lost her Australian citizenship for being in Syria, reported to Dylan Welch that when she originally arrived in Turkey to be escorted into Syria, she changed her mind and called her mother, but was nonetheless taken into Syria (NewstalkZB 2021).

The International Crisis Group reports that governments now have come to privately accept that there is not a typical IS woman in the camps, even those who joined IS willingly found themselves disenchanted with the reality of IS. However, remaining in IS territory should not be understood as commitment to the group, as one interviewee states, “I couldn’t escape earlier, how could I, a woman alone, with rockets and mortars falling everywhere?” (International Crisis Group 2019). Mariam Dabboussy again brings this point home, “I had nowhere to hide. There’s nowhere for you and your kids to hide. I do not know how we got out in one piece. It was ridiculous, and for what? There was no other way out anyway. There was no way out anyway. For anybody” (Four Corners 2019).

Some have argued that women, even women who consented to travel, were ‘groomed’ by the Islamic State, rendering their consent problematic (Binetti 2015). Binetti, like Kamalle Dabboussy, points out that women were trafficked by the Islamic State for sexual and reproductive exploitation. Dabboussy states, “These women that we are dealing with have all been duped and they are the victims in the processes as well, Mariam included and the other women as well. They were trafficked, their role was seen to as child carers, bearers of children and they were taken for this purpose. What do you do when you see a 19-year-old woman who in four years has had four children? Or an 18-year-old woman who’s had three children in three years? Twenty-four-year-old woman who’s been married three

times, one after the other. They are victims of this situation” (Four Corners 2019). As in the grooming context, consent becomes problematic. Bloom and Winter (2015) argue that women were crucially important and, therefore, uniquely exploited by IS; women were used by the Islamic State to attract men and maintain their loyalty and service by providing them with spouses, children, jobs and wages. The authors point out that the Islamic State remunerated fighters for every child they had in the Islamic State’s territory. Enrelle (2015) states that foreign women recruits and enslaved women were used by the Islamic State to attract men globally to become fighters for IS. Women who did not join IS voluntarily were enslaved and treated as commodities to be purchased, sold or exchanged by IS fighters. This power was believed to instill loyalty in men to IS. The exploitation of women marked every aspect of the society Islamic State sought to create.

#### 4. Conclusions

For almost two years now the Australian government has subjected its nationals to conditions usually suffered by those who are refugees, stateless or dispossessed, not as citizens of a stable, affluent democratic western nation. It has placed them in circumstances that have left them exposed to disease, illness, hunger, violence and potential death. It has placed them in camps while simultaneously blaming them for being in camps. It has called them dangerous while it has subjected them to alarming levels of violence, death and killing. It has vilified them for endangering their children, while it has continued to endanger their children. It has blamed them for their situation as it prevents them altering it by not allowing their return home.

All of this has been done, not because they cannot be brought back to Australia because of the threat they pose, not because it is dangerous for Australians to rescue them, not because they cannot be prosecuted in Australia if the women have indeed committed crimes, it is not even because of the contempt that the Australian government so clearly has for all those left alive in the aftermath Islamic State’s demise.

The women and children currently in Al-Roj have, in almost every practical sense, been living the lives of refugees and the displaced; for the last two years this is what they have been. The ‘optics’ of their situation only further facilitates their exile from Australia, a loss of citizenship does not alter what Australians have seen for the past two years, which is lost women living in deplorable conditions.

While women have continued to suffer in Syrian camps, in 2020, the process of stripping the citizenship of dual citizens (this can mean that a person simply has an entitlement to the citizenship of another country) in Australia became an entirely political act (Karp 2019b). It moved from an ‘operation of law’ process of citizenship loss to one of ministerial decision making (Zhang 2020). In this process, the Home Affairs Minister has only to be satisfied that an individual has engaged in behavior that triggers citizenship loss. This conduct does not necessarily have to be that which has attracted a conviction.

In addition to negligible safeguards protecting people from inappropriate findings made by the Minister, there are weaker safeguards for rendering individuals stateless, and the threshold for citizenship loss has also been lowered from the amendments made in 2015 (Human Rights Law Centre 2019). The maximum penalty for a terrorism offence has now been lowered from six to three years imprisonment (Zhang 2020). It is difficult to conceive of the 2020 amendments being designed to do anything but facilitate the government’s political will to strip as many people of citizenship as it possibly can. These reforms facilitate the stripping of women and children of their Australian citizenship while they languish in the Al-Roj camp.

The plight of these Australian women and children demonstrates that citizenship is no longer a protection against displacement, the abrogation of human rights and statelessness. This is, therefore, potentially a greater threat than is currently understood, because it may have the power to be applied to migrants, refugees and their descendants in Australia. It has been proved that citizenship, once acquired, is no longer a permanent status and that while the gaining of citizenship may be a legal process, its removal is a political one.

There is no reason why the Australian government will restrict its activities to women and children in remote Syrian camps.

The Australian government is now free to treat citizenship as a temporary legal status. Immigrants and refugees who believed that citizenship protected them from once again facing the precarity of the migration process, or the vulnerability of being a refugee, must now recalibrate their assessment of safety and stability. The loss of this certainty, in the context of established and stable western nations for immigrants and refugees, now means that once a refugee always a refugee, once a migrant always a migrant, once an outsider always an outsider.

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