



Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

Repatriating children from conflict zones is a matter of urgency

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More than a year after the adoption of [Resolution 2321 \(2020\)](#) and [Recommendation 2169 \(2020\)](#) on “International obligations concerning the repatriation of children from war and conflict zones”, the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development remains deeply concerned about the plight of children in Syria and Iraq whose parents, believed to be affiliated with Daesh, are citizens of Council of Europe member States.

Many European children are still being held in camps in Syria and Iraq.¹ These children, who are living in wretched conditions, have had to cope with not only another winter but also the Covid-19 pandemic. Overcrowding, disease and violence are rampant in these camps. Of these children, 90% are under twelve years old.²

Member States are able to exercise their jurisdiction over the Syrian camps³ and must ensure that these European children in Syria and Iraq are treated and protected in accordance with international commitments. At a time when a handful of member States were repatriating a number of the children,⁴ following the urgent debate in January 2020, some were pulling out all the stops to organise mass repatriations of their citizens stranded abroad because of the Covid-19 pandemic. On 2 November 2020, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child criticised this case-by-case approach, after receiving complaints from several French families in 2019.

Growing up in a refugee camp is a violation of human rights and contrary to the principle of the best interests of the child. Children in this situation are vulnerable to exploitation, sexual abuse and trafficking in human beings. They are also at risk of being radicalised by those around them and by their living conditions, thus creating a threat to peace and security.

The Parliamentary Assembly has a moral responsibility to ensure that these children are not forgotten. They deserve, here and now, to be able to live in peace, to have access to protection and basic health care, to go to school and to exercise their right to grow up in a safe environment, free from terrorism and destitution.

In view of the gravity of the situation facing these children, the Committee calls on member States to deploy, as a matter of urgency, the necessary means to return them, both in the best interests of the children concerned and for the sake of the well-being and security of our societies.

¹ The Egmont Institute puts the number of European children in Syria at between 610 and 680, mostly from European Union countries: https://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2020/10/SPB130_final.pdf?type=pdf

² Save the Children, 1 February 2021, <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/repatriation-foreign-children-syria-slowed-covid-19-new-footage-emerges-life-camps>

³ *Libération* newspaper, 3 December 2020, « *Camps syriens : enfants abandonnés, la France désavouée* », https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2020/12/02/camps-syriens-enfants-abandonnes-la-france-desavouee_1807484

⁴ Finland, France, Germany and the United Kingdom