Nermina Trbonja

Inside Roj, al-Hol, and Houri

Camps Under Pressure Since January 2026

BIRN
Balkan Investigative Reporting Network
BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

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Author:
Nermina Trbonja

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Author:
Nermina Trbonja

Editor:
Denis Džidić

Photos:
Nermina Trbonja and Jordan Bryon

Project manager:
Katarina Zrinjski

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Contents

Executive Summary	6
Key Findings	7
Introduction	8
Our experience	9
Understanding the context	10
The Roj "camp"	13
Situation since 13 January 2026	20
International Law and the Legality of Detention	21
Developments Since January 2026: Camps Under Pressure	23
Situation in Hol camp since 13 January 2026	25
Situation in detention centres for boys and prisons for man	30

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This investigative report documents conditions in detention camps in northeast Syria holding approximately 2,300 women and children from 50 countries, including nationals from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. Based on a December 2025 visit to Roj camp and Houri detention centre, the report examines how these facilities function as indefinite prisons for families associated with ISIS, many detained since 2017–2019 without trial or judicial review.

The camps are located in Syria's oil-rich northeast, historically been managed by the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration with U.S. military support. The January 2026 Syrian government offensive against Kurdish forces and subsequent ceasefire have created acute uncertainty over camp control and detainee futures. The dismantling of al-Hol camp in February 2026 resulted in poorly documented dispersal of residents across Syria, including Bosnian nationals now in Idlib, raising concerns about potential re-engagement by radical networks in an environment with minimal oversight.

KEY FINDINGS

Detention Conditions and Child Impact: Roj operates as a highly securitised facility where detainees pay for basic survival including tents, electricity, food, and medical care. Children, comprising two-thirds of the population, have grown up entirely within detention, showing signs of developmental delay, malnutrition, and depression. Boys are removed from mothers around puberty (age 11–13) and transferred to centres like Houri for open-ended detention justified by presumed ideological risk rather than specific offences.

Abuse and Deteriorating Security: Women report systematic patterns of humiliation, beatings, theft of belongings, and solitary confinement. Following the January 2026 offensive, widely circulated accounts describe intensified collective punishment including night raids, tent destruction, confiscation of valuables, and forced political performances, particularly targeting Russian nationals. Humanitarian actors warn that military escalations typically coincide with worsening camp conditions and reduced oversight.

Legal Violations: The report argues that indefinite detention of women and children without judicial review violates core international humanitarian and human rights law, including Geneva Convention prohibitions on collective punishment and Convention on the Rights of the Child requirements that child detention be a last resort measure. Human Rights Watch warns that blanket detention of families associated with alleged ISIS members may constitute a war crime.

State Inaction and Transfer to Iraq: Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia have not sent officials to visit their detained citizens. While Bosnia's Foreign Minister stated in late January 2026 that the country has U.S. approval to repatriate nationals, no timeline or operational plan has been announced. Male detainees, including 23 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, were recently transferred to Iraq at Baghdad's request with U.S. backing.

Historical Context and Radicalisation Origins: The report traces radicalisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina to legally operating centres and NGOs that offered scarce educational opportunities while gradually introducing rigid Salafi interpretations, often targeting children. Public discourse tends to frame women's departure to Syria as purely individual choice, obscuring these enabling environments and the limited agency many women describe having in decisions to travel or remain.

Introduction

Roj and al-Hol have long been discussed in our region as problems located somewhere else—geographically distant, politically inconvenient, and morally uncomfortable. Yet the people detained there are not abstract. They are mostly children and their mothers, held in what is officially described as camps but functions in practice as open-air prisons. Some have been detained since 2017, most since 2019. Public debate often places the entire blame on those who travelled to Syria, overlooking the environments in which many were first shaped. "They went there by choice. Now they're crying to come back, who else is to blame?!" In Bosnia and Herzegovina, some individuals passed through radicalisation centres that operated openly and legally, often under the cover of NGOs or informal religious associations. These spaces were frequently presented as religious schools or morally "safe" environments. In villages and small towns where public services were scarce, they sometimes offered the only available classes in foreign languages, computer skills, or informal education.

Children were at times specifically targeted through schools and community programmes. In some cases, these NGOs or affiliated groups financed their studies or provided educational support in exchange for exposure to, or acceptance of, rigid Salafi interpretations of Islam. These arrangements were rarely framed as radicalisation. Instead, they appeared as opportunities in contexts where families had few alternatives. Ideology entered gradually, embedded in structures of care, dependency, and social mobility rather than through overt coercion.

Until now, no official representatives from Bosnia and Herzegovina nor Serbia have travelled to the camps to speak directly with these families. In the absence of formal state visits, it has been researchers, journalists, documentary makers, and members of civil society who have gone in their place, seeking to understand and to document a situation that continues to exist without resolution.

Our experience

We were travelling to northeast Syria to visit them for the first time in the last half of December 2025.

The journey to Roj is not defined by miles, but by permissions and complex logistics. It begins in Sarajevo, though Istanbul, followed by a night flight to Erbil in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. By the time we land, the sense of distance has already shifted. Geography slowly gives way to jurisdictions, permissions, and conditions of access. From Erbil, the journey continues by car, east toward the Syrian border.

The crossing point is not an official international border. It is the unofficial entry into Kurdish-controlled northeast Syria, administered by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Access is restricted. Civilians cannot cross for tourism or private reasons. We are allowed through only because we carry press cards and prior authorization. Documents are examined carefully, exchanged, discussed. The procedure is calm and methodical.

The border is marked by a river that until recently had to be crossed by boat. Today, traffic moves over a narrow metal bridge, barely wide enough for buses and trucks. The crossing is slow and exposed, almost anticlimactic. There is no clear moment of rupture. The difference appears only once the bridge is behind us, when travel is no longer a matter of roads but of authorization, escorts, and checkpoints. From the border, the road continues north to Qamishli, one of Syria's main Kurdish cities and the logistical base from which access to the camps is organized. It is here that we are based. Qamishli is busy, noisy, visibly alive. Shops stay open late. Generators hum where electricity cuts out. Kurdish, Arabic, and Syriac appear side by side on shop signs and official buildings. Military presence is embedded into the city's rhythms unremarkable and constant. Beyond the city, checkpoints multiply. Cars slow. Documents change hands. Men with rifles gesture calmly. The process is repetitive, procedural.

Understanding the context

In Syria's Kurdish-administered northeast, oil dominates the landscape. Pumpjacks dot the flat terrain, their metal arms rising and falling in a steady, mechanical rhythm. Pollution is constant in the entire region. Traffic fumes mix with oil residue and dust. It is impossible to keep car windows open. Even inside hotel rooms, the smell seeps in. This is one of the country's most resource-rich regions, yet also among its poorest. The contradiction is structural, our guide from Kobani explained, rooted in decades of extraction without local benefit.

Syria's oil and gas production has long been concentrated in the east, particularly in Deir ez-Zor and Hasakah, where fields such as al-Omar, Tanak, and Rmelan form the backbone of the country's energy wealth and the backbone of its wartime disputes.

Before the war, Syria's oil sector generated substantial revenue for the state. With production reaching nearly 380,000 barrels per day, oil accounted for roughly a quarter of government income and the vast majority of export earnings, most of it destined for European markets. Those revenues were centralized in Damascus, while oil-producing regions in the northeast remained politically and economically marginalized.

That system collapsed in 2011 when the Syrian uprising began in the context of the Arab Spring. According to World Bank assessments, Syria's formal oil and gas economy has been largely cut off from international markets since 2011, when the European Union and the United States imposed sanctions on the Syrian state in response to the violent repression of civilian protests by the Assad government. These measures targeted state institutions and official export revenues, particularly oil, with the aim of limiting the regime's capacity to finance the war. They were not designed to regulate extraction on the ground, nor did they apply to armed non-state actors.

The result was not the end of oil and gas production, but the collapse of oversight. Official exports fell sharply, while extraction continued and fuel demand remained. In the absence of functioning state control and formal markets, oil was pushed into informal and illicit trade networks. Research on Syria's conflict economy shows that this shift created ideal conditions

for smuggling, allowing private intermediaries, traders, transporters, and armed actors controlling territory and checkpoints to capture most of the profits. The resources were sold cheaply at the source and resold multiple times as it crossed frontlines and sanction barriers, generating private gain while responsibility for regulation, safety, and reinvestment disappeared.

Between 2014 and 2016, this fractured oil economy was exploited on a larger scale by the so-called Islamic State. World Bank estimates, supported by U.S. Treasury assessments, indicate that ISIS generated up to around one million dollars per day at peak from oil when it controlled major fields in eastern Syria and parts of Iraq. The group sold crude well below market prices through smuggling networks, operating entirely outside the sanctions regime that targeted the Syrian state. The legacy of that period with damaged infrastructure, environmental destruction, and normalized unregulated extraction, continues to shape the region long after ISIS lost territorial control.

Following the defeat of ISIS in much of northeast Syria between 2016 and 2017, control over the territory and region's recourses passed to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), a Kurdish-led governing authority that emerged during the war. Backed militarily by the U.S.-led coalition in the fight against ISIS, the administration operates as a de facto authority, running local councils, security forces, courts, and basic services across a multi-ethnic territory. It is not internationally recognized as a state and remains outside the control of Damascus.

According to researchers and reporting on the region's war economy, the administration relied on oil revenues primarily to sustain basic governance, including public sector salaries, security provision, and essential services. Lacking international recognition and access to formal markets or development financing, resources income became one of the few available sources to keep administrative structures functioning.

On 13 January 2026, the fragile balance in northeastern Syria shifted as United States backed, Syrian government forces moved to retake key oil and gas fields in the east, including strategic sites that had been under SDF control for years. On that date, the Syrian transitional government launched a coordinated military operation into SDF-held territories in northeastern Syria after months of tensions and stalled negotiations over integration and control of territory. The offensive initially focused on areas in eastern Aleppo Governorate and then expanded to Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Al-Hasakah governorates. The advances marked the most significant reconfiguration of territorial and energy control since ISIS's defeat.

A ceasefire agreed in mid-January combined an immediate halt to fighting with a proposed reintegration framework whose implementation remains uncertain. Under its stated terms, Syrian government forces are to regain control over key cities, border crossings, and oil and gas fields, while Kurdish forces are expected to withdraw from frontline positions. SDF fighters are to be integrated individually into state military and security institutions, ending their role as an autonomous force. Responsibility for prisons and camps holding people

detained in connection with the conflict, including women and children, is slated to shift to the Syrian state with UN support, even as coordination against ISIS formally continues. If fully implemented, the agreement would bring an end to Kurdish administrative autonomy in the northeast. The cease-fire expires on 8th of February 2026.

The shift in U.S. politics, in practice, means that the U.S. supported the SDF militarily against ISIS but avoided developing meaningful connections with its civilian institutions, a choice rooted in Washington's desire to avoid becoming entrenched in Syria's complex internal politics. *Al-Jumhuriya*[1] quotes U.S. officials as saying they did not intend to create "an American-supported Kosovo" in northeast Syria, signalling a conscious refusal to endorse or sustain a Kurdish-led statelet. While the SDF was presented publicly as Washington's main partner in Syria, US engagement on the ground was more complex. In parallel, the United States maintained informal and indirect channels with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an Islamist armed group that emerged from Syria's former al-Qaeda affiliate and long controlled parts of northwest Syria, particularly Idlib. As early as 2016, areas under HTS control featured in US counter-ISIS calculations, a relationship later reported by *The New York Times*. The logic behind this dual approach was pragmatic rather than ideological: alliances were shaped by immediate military utility. In the northeast, the SDF functioned as the primary force against ISIS; in the northwest, HTS was treated as a de facto interlocutor because it was fighting ISIS while holding territory outside state control. This dynamic has taken on new significance since late 2024, when HTS's former leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa, became Syria's transitional president, reshaping negotiations over authority, security, and reintegration across the country.

1 Williamson, Hunter. *"Switching Sides: Why the US Severed Relations With Its Syrian Kurdish Partner." al-Jumhuriya,* 24 Jan. 2026, https://aljumhuriya.net/en/2026/01/24/switching-sides/. Accessed 27 Jan. 2026.

The Roj "camp"

Roj is located precisely in the middle of the desert oil landscape, in Syria's far northeast, near the town of Derik (al-Malikiyah), close to the Iraqi border and south of Turkey, roughly an hour's drive east of Qamishli. It was established in 2016 by the Kurdish-led authorities in northeast Syria in response to a growing number of foreign women and children who arrived under different circumstances as ISIS lost territorial control. Some fled the group and used its collapse as an opportunity to escape, while others were captured by Kurdish-led forces after remaining in ISIS-held areas.

Currently, Roj camp holds around 2,300 women and children from roughly 50 nationalities. Approximately two-thirds of the population are children. Many arrived as infants and have lived in the camp for nearly a decade. Whatever its administrative designation, Roj functions in practice less as a camp than as a prison for these children, a place of confinement they entered before they could walk and have never been allowed to leave. A significant proportion of the residents are Russian nationals.

Roj becomes identifiable only at close range. From a distance, it blends into the surrounding terrain. As the car approaches, its perimeter comes into view: successive layers of fencing, a recently constructed concrete wall, and watchtowers positioned at regular intervals, one staffed by an armed guard. A small number of unfinished private houses stand nearby, built with limited means, sharing the same landscape without visible interaction with the camp.

At the entrance, filming protocols change. The camera is lowered and faces are not recorded, as staff could be targeted by ISIS. Entry is surprisingly brief and procedural. There are no scanners or secondary checkpoints, just metal doors. Few guards are present, most of them women in military uniform. We are not searched and no documents are requested.

We are accompanied throughout by two women, both in military uniform, whose role's to structure movement inside the camp.

The first is an appointed IPG public relations officer in her thirties. She speaks on behalf of the administration and presents the Kurdish authorities as humanitarian actors responsible for containing what she describes as the remnants of ISIS, left behind by the rest of the world. In her account, the camp is not only a place of detention but part of a broader effort to protect people beyond Syria's borders. She is clear, women and children in the camp are dangerous. She avoids speaking about herself, returning instead to themes of responsibility, shared burden, and security.

The second is the camp's head of security, a woman in her forties who has held the position for more than a year. She joined the Kurdish armed forces at a young age. During the war, she lost her entire family, several close relatives killed brutally by ISIS. Only one distant uncle remains alive. She speaks sparingly and never about how she feels. Like the public relations officer, she presents her life as fully committed to the army, with no space for private life before what she describes as the country's freedom and security.

Both seemed genuinely glad that we had come, remarking that the camps were no longer a regular subject of international reporting, despite the fact that managing them remains a key element through which Kurdish authorities demonstrate their role as international security providers and argue for the legitimacy of their semi-autonomous status.

Both women remain with us at all times, citing security as the reason. Their presence structures our movement through the camp, as we cannot move independently. Conversations take place in English or Arabic; Bosnian is not permitted. Our access is limited to two hours per day inside

the camp, and even within that window, contact with the women must be mediated through the administration. Requests are relayed by our escorts, who do not always appear to fully understand what kind of access we are seeking. We wait. Individuals will be called by name and brought to us. These constraints of time, language, and movement shape what can be seen and heard, and delimit how everyday life in the camp can be observed and understood.

Inside the camp, order replaces spectacle. Rows of identical shelters stretch outward, intersected by paths of mud and dust. Very few guards are visible. The camp is divided into three zones. People placed in one zone are not permitted to cross into or meet those in the others. The logic of this division is chronological rather than risk-based. The first section was built to host foreign nationals who arrived in 2016 and 2017. As the camp expanded, additional zones were constructed to accommodate later arrivals. The most recent residents of Roj were transferred only recently from al-Hol camp.

As we enter, children run toward us with curiosity and smiles. The administration warns us that they may become aggressive at any time and this is why we cannot move independently or interact freely. Walking between the tents or entering them is considered particularly dangerous. Instead, we are instructed to wait in a large open area near the administration building, where individuals "from Bosnia" will be called to come to us.

While we wait, staff brief us on what they describe as the radicalization of women and children in the camp. The statements are categorical, delivered as established fact. "Children here know how to train dogs to kill," one staff member says, as children no older than eight play nearby with puppies, laughing and chasing each other across the dust. Children "know how to make and use weapons, knives and other objects." Other allegations follow, including claims that women rape adolescent boys in order to give birth to more ISIS fighters. When we ask whether there have been any newborns in the camp, the answer is unequivocal. According to the administration, no births have occurred in Roj, despite the camp holding more than 2,300 people for nearly a decade. Staff add that births in al-Hol have been extremely rare- less than 5 babies in almost 10 years, despite its far larger population- at its pick the camp detained more than 75,000 people.

Deaths, however, are far more frequent. Precise cumulative data are unavailable, but humanitarian organisations have documented repeated child fatalities in the camps over the years, linked to illness, accidents, violence, and delayed access to care. One case concerns a child from Bosnia and Herzegovina: in 2021, a four-year-old boy died in al-Hol after being struck by a fuel tanker, according to Radio Free Europe.

The first women we meet are from Serbia. Both say they escaped ISIS before its defeat and later surrendered to Kurdish forces. One has five children from two marriages; the other has four children from one marriage. Three of her children are with her in the camp. Her eldest son, now twenty-one, was taken away by the Kurdish authorities from the camp when he was fourteen and placed in a separate detention facility for boys, often referred to as a "rehabilitation centre," called Houri centre.

They say the decision to come to Syria was made by their husbands, both Bosnian. At the time, they explain, they had little say in the matter, describing relationships shaped by traditional patriarchal expectations. “We were young,” one says. “If I had been older and understood more about life, I would have refused. “

Both husbands were later killed in hostilities. The women speak about this without emphasis, as part of a sequence of events rather than a turning point. What follows is exhaustion rather than ideology. “I just want to leave here and forget everything,” one of them says. “There are no men for me anymore. You understand—no more men.”

They speak calmly, but their bodies tell a different story. Both appear exhausted, restless, struggling to maintain focus as they talk, as if their nervous systems have been under strain for too long. They describe feeling constantly on edge, unable to rest, waiting for news that never comes. The women report that Serbian authorities contacted the camp about them for the first time at the end of November 2025. Beyond that inquiry, they say they have received no information about possible repatriation procedures or timelines. Neither woman is wearing a niqab, and neither presents herself as adhering to extremist ideology.

The next woman we met is Bosnian and asks us not to film her face. It is covered, and only her eyes are visible. She explains that this is not for religious reasons but out of fear: if she returns to Bosnia and Herzegovina, she worries that people might recognise her and harm her or her children. Visibility, she considers, is not protection. It is risk.

We learn that, in the first section of the camp, there are twelve Bosnian women and twenty-six children. In the second section, there are five women and eight children, a part of Roj which we were not permitted to enter. Most of the women in the first section arrived before the territorial defeat of ISIS, having fled the group and surrendered to Kurdish forces as soon as they were able. The women from the second part were later transferred from al-Hol to Roj.

At the centre of Roj camp is a small marketplace, where women and children are allowed to shop on assigned days, scheduled by zone, for food and basic goods. Families in countries of origin can send funds through approved and “secure” channels, though the amounts are strictly limited and generally low.

We are soon surrounded by Bosnian women, all wanting to speak with us. Aside from some wearing the niqab, nothing in their appearance or behaviour suggests radicalism. “ISIS is not Islam,” they say. They explain that they were young and believed they were travelling toward a better life. “Some people went to Germany,” one woman tells us. “We were offered Syria.” It was presented as a good place to live. “We didn’t really know what it was,” another adds. “When we arrived, our passports were taken from us,” they say. “After that, there was no choice, no choice about how to live, what to say or do, or where to go. Many of us spent time in ISIS jails too, after trying to escape or not wanting to take part in their activities“.

Talking about life in the Roj camp, we slowly draw a different picture. They said they are required to pay for the plastic sheeting of their tents, around one hundred dollars, either annually or when replacements are needed, as well as for electricity, which is available twice per day in the morning hours and in the late afternoon hours. Most food must also be purchased, as humanitarian aid covers only the most basic items and is often insufficient. Medical expenses are borne by the women, including dental care, glasses for children, and any other essential needs. In practice, this shifts the cost of daily survival onto detainees themselves, blurring the line between "humanitarian assistance" and a system of prolonged, self-financed detention.

The tents are arranged with mattresses laid directly on the ground and basic equipment for cooking. Some contain small decorations, images, empty perfume bottles kept as objects rather than used items. The women organize the tents as domestic spaces, arranging them as homes rather than shelters. In a few cases, strings of decorative lights are hung inside. The tents are meticulously clean, as are the small, carefully maintained paths separating them from the surrounding dust.

Toilets and showers are located outside the tents. Water must be carried in and heated manually. Washing machines are improvised and placed outdoors. After nearly a decade, daily life has settled into routine. A television, switched on for a few hours each day to follow the news, becomes the only regular connection to the outside world.
When asked about the most difficult part of life in the camp, the women return repeatedly to the same point: the situation of the children. Many of the children were infants when they arrived. Some were born in the camp, their mothers arriving pregnant, often without access to medical care. The women say these children know nothing of the outside world. They have never seen a river or a mountain. Some cannot distinguish between a chicken and a horse. "We try to teach them," one woman says, "but the outside world is too abstract for them". There are no books and few materials. They say they do what they can, but it is not enough.

There is a school in the camp, taught in Arabic, but the women describe the programme as repetitive and limited. The same lessons are taught year after year, regardless of a child's age. Some children have attended for eight years without progression. Classes are short, and materials are scarce. For many children, schooling has become another form of waiting.

Food is insufficient, and the effects are now visible. The women point to children they describe as underdeveloped, growing up on limited and repetitive diets. As these children reach adolescence, the women say many become depressed. They explain this not as an illness but as a response to growing up entirely inside detention centres, in fear and with a sense of unfinished detention, without stability or prospects, and with no experience of ordinary life outside the camp. Adolescence, they say, brings questions the camp cannot answer.

According to the women, the rule in the camp is that boys who reach puberty often around the age of thirteen, sometimes younger, are removed by force, and transferred to separate detention facilities for boys, including the centre in Houri, which we also visited. Some mothers say they tried to hide their sons, digging shallow holes beneath the tents and keeping the boys there to prevent them from being taken away. The principle is the same as in other detention camps: an indeterminate detention facility reserved exclusively for boys, with no clear timeline or criteria for release.

For some, this separation continues into adulthood. When boys reach eighteen, they may be transferred to men's prisons or, in some cases, lose contact with their families altogether. Others remain in these facilities for years; the oldest detainee we were told about is close to thirty. Camp managers justify the indeterminate detention of boys by pointing to what they describe as the enduring pull of ISIS ideology. According to this logic, even boys who have committed no crime are considered a security risk, not because of their actions, but because of what they might become. Ideology is treated as something permanent and contagious, assumed to survive years of isolation, injury, and childhood itself. It is this presumed future risk, rather than any specific offence, that is used to justify keeping children in detention without a defined end.

At the al-Houri centre, we speak with a Bosnian boy, now seventeen. He arrived in Syria when he was three years old and was separated from his mother and sisters at the age of eleven. He tells us that he suffered a head injury during airstrikes before they arrived to Al Hol camp and remembers little from that period of his life. According to the centre's management, when he arrived at al-Houri he was unable to speak for a time because the injury had affected the part of the brain responsible for speech.

When we ask him why he thinks he was taken away from his family, he answers simply that it was because he used to throw stones and take other children's toys, and that this was "not a good thing to do." He tells us that he lives fine in the centre and people are nice to him but that his only wish is to be with his mom and sisters and all come back to Bosnia. He has occasional access to classes and to a small sports field. Football, he tells us, is what he likes most. What is offered is described as education, but it is limited to deradicalisation rather than learning practical skills for life beyond detention. He barely speaks Bosnian anymore. He shares a room with nine other boys. There is a television, playing the same cartoons on repeat. There is no broader education for the future, only deradicalisation activities. His responses come quickly, precisely, as if rehearsed. He tells us he is trying to learn everything he can. He studies and is learning to play an instrument, which he hopes one day to show to friends in Bosnia if he is repatriated. He speaks of the possibility to go out quietly, as homework rather than expectation.

Back to Roj, mothers describe the situation as particularly distressing because the boys are held alone and information about their treatment is scarce. They speak of rumours and fragments of information circulating between families. Contact, when it exists, is limited to monitored phone calls once a month.

According to information shared by the mothers, there are three boys from Bosnia and one from Serbia currently held at the al-Houri centre. The centre's management did not confirm these figures, and during our visit we were unable to locate the boys. We were told they were not present at the time, allegedly participating in preparations for a staged performance involving the burning of a place of worship.

When we are briefly left alone and able to speak in Bosnian, the women speak more openly. They describe what they call inhuman treatment by some guards in the camp. They talk about humiliation, violent behaviour, and theft, for example money, food, and personal belongings taken or destroyed. They say such incidents do not happen constantly, but often enough to shape how they move, what they say, and when they choose to remain silent. They say that each of them has been beatenby guards on several occasions. Some describe being held in small, isolated prison cells, which they refer to as solitary cells for days or, in some cases, months. According to the women, such punishments are imposed for alleged rule violations, including possession of a mobile phone or other prohibited items, and sometimes, they say, arbitrarily. These accounts are shared quietly, framed less as individual incidents than as part of the conditions under which they have learned to survive.

Situation since 13 January 2026

The Syrian government's offensive against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) began on 13 January 2026, when the Syrian transitional government launched a coordinated military operation into SDF-held territories in northeastern Syria after months of tensions and stalled negotiations over integration and control of territory. The offensive initially focused on areas in eastern Aleppo Governorate and then expanded to Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Al-Hasakah governorates.

International Law and the Legality of Detention

The system in place in Roj, al-Hol, and related detention sites in northeast Syria echoes a logic that modern international law was designed to abolish. Under Stalin in 1937, the Soviet state institutionalized punishment by kinship through measures such as NKVD Operational Order No. 00486, which mandated the detention, displacement, or institutionalization of the children of those labelled "enemies of the people."[2] Children were deprived of liberty not for acts they committed, but because guilt was treated as inheritable.

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2 These practices are extensively documented in historical research, including Cathy A. Frierson and Semyon S. Vilensky's *Children of the Gulag,* and are now universally recognized as grave violations of fundamental rights. Frierson, Cathy A., and Semyon S. Vilensky. *Children of the Gulag.* Yale University Press, 2010.

It was precisely to prevent the return of such reasoning that the post–Second World War legal order established clear prohibitions. Under Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, collective punishment is strictly forbidden. Under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), any deprivation of liberty must be lawful, necessary, proportionate, and subject to judicial review. Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the detention of children must be used only as a last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time, with children treated as rights holders and potential victims, not security threats.

Human Rights Watch argues that the detention regime in Roj and al-Hol camps, as well as in separate detention facilities holding boys, violates these core principles. Roughly two-thirds of those held in the camps are children, many of them very young and some born in detention. None of the foreign women or children in these sites have been brought before a court or given access to legal review, rendering their detention arbitrary and unlawful under international law. Human Rights Watch has warned that the blanket, indefinite detention of family members of alleged ISIS suspects may amount to collective punishment, which constitutes a war crime.

Developments Since January 2026: Camps Under Pressure

The situation in Roj and al-Hol camps deteriorated sharply following the Syrian government's military offensive against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which began on 13 January 2026. On that date, the Syrian transitional authorities launched coordinated operations into SDF-controlled areas in northeastern Syria, following months of unresolved negotiations over governance, security, and the future status of Kurdish-administered territory. Fighting spread across parts of eastern Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and al-Hasakah governorates, directly affecting the broader security environment in which the camps operate.

A ceasefire brokered with U.S. support came into effect later in January and is set to expire on 8 February 2026. Under the framework of the agreement, Kurdish forces would be gradually integrated into state structures, effectively ending the Autonomous Administration's control over the northeast if fully implemented. While the ceasefire has temporarily reduced large-scale hostilities, it has done little to resolve underlying tensions or clarify the future of camps holding women and children linked to ISIS.

Inside Kurdish-controlled territory, tensions have risen significantly. Years of war, displacement, and political marginalization have hardened nationalist sentiment among segments of the Kurdish population, and the prospect of losing hard-won autonomy has generated anger and fear. Many Kurds see themselves as having acted, for years, as a frontline buffer against the Islamic State, bearing the burden of securing camps holding tens of thousands of women and children whom other countries were unwilling or unable to repatriate. This role, built with the military and political support of the United States, has become a central part of the administration's self-understanding and public narrative. The possibility that this responsibility could be absorbed or abandoned under a new political order has intensified resentment and uncertainty across the region.

The head for security at Roj, whom we met during our visit in December, expressed this frustration bluntly in an interview with CNN on 26 January 2026[3]:

“We fought the Islamic State on behalf of the rest of the world, and now the rest of the world is turning its back on us,” she said. “I hope all these women and the prisoners go back to their countries and start attacking them.”

Within the camps, these dynamics are felt acutely. Since the start of the fighting in mid-January, women detained in Roj describe a sharp rise in fear and uncertainty. Several told us they believe their safety depends on the continued presence of U.S. forces and fear retaliation if Kurdish authorities are left without external support.

Messages circulating among women in the camp since late January describe alleged abuses by camp guards following recent military setbacks suffered by the Syrian Democratic Forces. In these accounts, detainees report acts of intimidation and forms of collective punishment. Guards are said to have disproportionately targeted certain groups, particularly Russian nationals, who are perceived to have greater financial resources than others. The allegations include night raids on tents, the destruction of shelters, and the confiscation of personal belongings, particularly money and other valuables, alongside reports of prolonged exposure to cold and instances of physical violence, including against children. Some messages further claim that detainees were coerced into singing Kurdish patriotic songs or making recorded statements opposing the new Syrian authorities and expressing support for the Syrian Democratic Forces.

These accounts, which could not be verified with supporting visual materials, but were confirm by NGO’s operating on the ground and media outlets visiting the camp in the course of January, have spread rapidly inside the camp and families in home countries and have contributed to widespread panic. Women told us that camp guards warned them that a withdrawal of U.S. support for the Kurdish authorities would leave them vulnerable to deadly violence.

Humanitarian organizations operating in northeast Syria have repeatedly warned that periods of military escalation are often accompanied by deteriorating conditions inside the camps, where oversight is limited, access is restricted, and detainees have no effective mechanisms to report abuse or seek protection. In this context, fear itself has become a defining feature of daily life in Roj since January 2026.

3 “Syrian Forces, Kurds and ISIS Detention Center in Northeast Syria.” CNN, 26 Jan. 2026, https://edition.cnn.com/2026/01/26/middleeast/syria-kurds-isis-detention-center-roj-intl. Accessed 26 Jan. 2026.

Situation in Hol camp since 13 January 2026

Women detained in the al-Hol camp between 2018 and early 2026 describe their final weeks there as marked by acute uncertainty and fear, as the camp's long-standing order rapidly collapsed. The situation shifted decisively last month, when Syrian government forces took control of the facility following a military operation against the YPG, which had administered the camp for years. In the aftermath, the camp, once home to tens of thousands of women and children with alleged links to Islamic State, was effectively emptied.

According to Syrian officials, the final organized convoy departed the camp in the last days of February, marking the end of its function as a large-scale detention site. The remaining hundreds of residents were transferred to Akhtarin camp in Aleppo province, while others were repatriated, particularly to Iraq. Prior to the takeover, data from January indicated that approximately 23,400 individuals remained in the camp, including more than 6,000 foreign nationals from over 40 countries. At its peak in 2019, the population had reached around 73,000.

The dismantling of the al-Hol camp unfolded in a context of instability and limited oversight. Humanitarian access was restricted due to unrest, and multiple sources reported that a number of residents left outside organized convoys, some departing individually and others reportedly being taken by relatives or unknown actors. Bosnian women held in the camp indicated that, during a period when the site was left unguarded, significant numbers of people fled, dispersing across different parts of Syria. The section of the camp known as the annex—where Bosnian women were also housed, alongside foreign nationals and individuals considered among the highest risk—was reportedly found empty. Authorities have since stated that efforts are underway, in cooperation with international partners, to track individuals deemed of concern.

All Bosnian nationals have since left al-Hol. Like many others who departed during or immediately after the collapse of camp structures, they were reportedly transferred to Idlib or moved through other parts of northern Syria under unclear and largely undocumented circumstances. Several women report that they were informed by unidentified intermediaries that any eventual return to Bosnia and Herzegovina would be coordinated from Idlib. They are currently residing in private apartments, awaiting formal instructions from either Syrian or Bosnian authorities. After nearly eight years of de facto detention, many describe being left to navigate a fluid and uncertain environment with minimal institutional guidance and no clear guarantees of safety.

Concerns have also been raised regarding the possible involvement of Nusret Imamović, a radical Bosnian cleric who left the country in 2013 and later joined jihadist groups in Syria. His reported re-emergence after a prolonged period of relative absence has been noted with concern by several observers. Imamović has been designated by the United States as a global terrorist, is listed among the most wanted individuals, and is subject to an Interpol Red Notice. He has also been linked by security agencies to the recruitment and radicalisation of individuals from the Balkans who travelled to Syria. According to messages received, some women fear that the current instability and dispersal of former camp residents could create conditions for individuals previously associated with recruitment networks to reassert influence and potentially exert control over the fate of women and children.

Unverified messages circulating among former detainees also refer to another Bosnian individual, identified as Azur Marjanović, who is alleged to be operating a Telegram channel under the handle “@Murabitun33” and soliciting financial contributions

purportedly to assist women who have left the camps. A fundraising appeal titled "Help to our sisters from Syria" has been observed circulating online, including on social media accounts described as pro-Salafist, such as a Facebook page called "Da'va tim," reportedly followed by approximately 129,000 users, and an Instagram account under the name "@ muvahidahforlife," which appears to have been created recently. The content disseminated on these platforms combines conservative religious messaging directed at women with themes of piety, obedience, and marital devotion. Analysts familiar with extremist online ecosystems note that such narratives have in the past been associated with environments that facilitate further radicalisation and reinforce restrictive gender norms. The identities of those managing these accounts, as well as the ultimate destination of any collected funds, remain unconfirmed.

The fate of the smaller Roj camp in northeastern Syria remains uncertain. Unlike al-Hol, it is reportedly still under the control of the YPG. The majority of its residents are foreign nationals whose countries of origin have, in many cases, been reluctant to repatriate them. Women from the Balkans detained in Roj report being deeply shaken by the rapid dismantling of al-Hol and the subsequent, often unregulated movements of its former residents. They have expressed clear opposition to being relocated to areas such as Idlib and are instead calling for repatriation to their home countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

In recent weeks, they have attempted to contact their respective authorities through various channels and intermediaries, seeking clarity on potential repatriation efforts as well as guidance on how to respond should a similar breakdown occur in Roj. As of now, they report having received no formal response, leaving uncertainty and speculation to fill the vacuum. They emphasise that they are actively seeking safe and lawful pathways and do not wish for their situation to be instrumentalised by political or armed actors. After years of confinement, they reject any further politicisation of their cases and any attempts by individuals or factions to exert control over them or use their circumstances for broader agendas.

According to sources familiar with the situation, women from the Balkans have consistently cooperated with international human rights actors, researchers, and media reporting on conditions in the camps, often speaking openly in their appeals for due process and return. A response from a contact within the United Nations acknowledged the rapidly evolving realities on the ground and the absence of clear operational guidance, underscoring that even international actors currently face limited visibility over developments and available options in the post-camp environment.

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The dismantling of the camp unfolded in a context of instability and limited oversight. Humanitarian access was restricted due to unrest, and multiple sources reported that a number of residents left outside organized convoys, some departing individually and others reportedly being taken by relatives or unknown actors. A security source indicated that during a period when the camp was left unguarded, significant numbers of people fled, dispersing across different parts of Syria. The section of the camp known as the annex, which housed individuals considered among the most high-risk, was reportedly found empty. Authorities have since stated that efforts are underway, in cooperation with international partners, to track individuals deemed of concern.

All Bosnian nationals have since left the al-Hol camp. Like many others who departed during or immediately after the collapse of camp structures, they were reportedly transferred to Idlib or moved through other parts of northern Syria under unclear and largely undocumented circumstances. Several women report that they were informed by unidentified intermediaries that any eventual return to Bosnia and Herzegovina would be coordinated from Idlib.

Bosnian women currently in Idlib have, in some cases, encouraged those still detained in the Roj camp to relocate there, suggesting that conditions are stabilising and that children may soon be able to attend school. However, other women and relatives familiar with their situation express concern that these communications may not reflect freely expressed views. Some fear that those now in Idlib could once again be under the influence or control of radical networks, raising doubts about the extent to which open and independent communication is possible.

At present, the women are residing in private apartments in Idlib under the custody of an unidentified individual or group and, as of late March 2026, say they are still waiting for formal instructions from either Syrian or Bosnian authorities.

Some of these women have, in their communications, encouraged those still detained in the Roj camp to relocate to Idlib, suggesting that conditions are stabilising and that children may soon be able to attend school. However, other women and relatives familiar with their situation express concern that these messages may not reflect freely expressed views. There are fears that those now in Idlib could once again be under the influence or control of radical networks, raising doubts about the extent to which open and independent communication is possible.

According to a local informant, Syrian authorities and international actors are aware of the situation in Idlib and are monitoring developments closely. Some observers suggest that the current configuration may function as a trap for individuals linked to radical networks, although this interpretation could not be independently verified.

After nearly eight years of de facto detention, many describe being left to navigate a fluid and uncertain environment with minimal institutional guidance and no clear guarantees of safety.

Concerns have also been raised regarding the possible involvement of Nusret Imamović, a Bosnian Salafi cleric who left the country in 2013 and later joined jihadist groups in Syria. Imamović has been designated by the United States as a global terrorist, is listed among the most wanted individuals, and is subject to an Interpol Red Notice. He has also been linked by security agencies among the lead to the recruitment and radicalisation of individuals from the Balkans who travelled to Syria.

According to messages received from women who recently left the camps, some fear that the current instability could create conditions for individuals previously associated with recruitment networks to reassert influence. These claims, however, could not be independently verified.

Unverified messages circulating among detainees also refer to another Bosnian individual, identified as Azur Marjanović, who is alleged to be operating a Telegram channel under the handle “@Murabitun33” and soliciting financial contributions purportedly to assist women who have left the camps. A fundraising appeal titled “Help to our sisters from Syria” has been observed circulating online, including on social media accounts described as pro-Salafist, such as a Facebook page called “Da’va tim,” reportedly followed by approximately 129,000 users, and an Instagram account under the name “@muvahidahforlife,” which appears to have been created recently. The content disseminated on these platforms combines conservative religious messaging directed at women with themes of piety, obedience, and marital devotion. Analysts familiar with extremist online ecosystems note that such narratives have in the past been associated with environments that facilitate further radicalisation and reinforce restrictive gender norms. The identities of those managing these accounts, as well as the ultimate destination of any collected funds, remain unconfirmed.

Although formal responsibility for the management of the al-Hol camp was expected to shift to the United Nations at the turn of the year, the deteriorating security environment has prevented the organisation from assuming full operational control. Access to the camp remains restricted, security continues to be largely handled by local forces, and humanitarian actors report that their ability to monitor conditions or intervene remains severely constrained. Responsibility, as a result, appears fragmented at a moment of heightened vulnerability.

Situation in detention centres for boys and prisons for man

With regard to male nationals held in prisons and juvenile detention centres, as the Houri centre we visited, in northeastern Syria, their transfer to Iraq took place in recent weeks as part of the broader security reconfiguration that followed the ceasefire and the shift in control over detention facilities. As authority over prisons previously managed by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces began to change, Iraqi officials formally requested the transfer of detainees, arguing that Iraq was better positioned to ensure secure custody and pursue prosecutions under its counterterrorism framework. The transfers were coordinated between Iraqi authorities and local security actors on the ground, with logistical and political backing from Washington, which described the move as a precautionary step aimed at preventing security gaps and reducing the risk of prison breaks during a volatile transition period. Former U.S. official James Jeffrey has characterized the decision not as a signal of political distrust, but as a security-driven precaution in response to shifting dynamics and the persistent threat posed by ISIS networks.

The operation concerned all male detainees held in those facilities, regardless of nationality, and included both adult men in high-security prisons and adolescent boys detained in separate centres for minors. According to figures drawn from documentation attributed to Iraq's Ministry of Justice and the Iraqi Correction Service, 37 nationals from Western Balkan countries were among those transferred. Bosnia and Herzegovina accounts for 23 detainees, Albania for eight, Kosovo for three, Serbia for two and North Macedonia for one. These figures align with information obtained by BIRN indicating that men and adolescent boys from these countries were previously held in prisons and juvenile detention centres before being moved to Iraqi custody. Since the escalation of fighting in mid-January 2026, civic initiatives, legal bodies, and human rights organisations across Europe and beyond have expressed concern for the fate of children held in Roj and al-Hol.

In Bosnia, Foreign Minister Elmedin Konakovic said in January that Sarajevo had received the "green light" from the United States to proceed with the repatriation of its citizens from northeast Syria.

No timeline, operational details, or confirmed transfers have been made public, and no repatriations have been reported as of the end of January.

As we drove away through the oil fields, the camp shrinking into the flat horizon, the pumpjacks continued their steady mechanical rhythm, indifferent to what lay behind the fences. It was impossible not to think about how this moment will one day be written, how scholars will dissect the policies, the legal formulas and the administrative vocabulary that rendered prolonged detention acceptable in the name of security. We have seen such chapters before. History has documented how systems, convinced of their necessity, have confined children and justified it through language of protection, order or prevention. Those periods are now analysed in books and lectures as warnings from the past.

Yet witnessing it in the present unsettles any comfortable belief in moral evolution. After nearly a decade of compressed lives, children growing up without horizons and women suspended in bureaucratic uncertainty, what strikes hardest is not spectacle but normalisation. The danger is not only violence itself, but the way it becomes procedural, photographed, reported and absorbed into routine. We hope, one day it will be studied as part of institutional history. Today, it feels closer to what Hannah Arendt warned about, the quiet transformation of extraordinary suffering into something administratively manageable. Not monstrous enough to interrupt systems, yet profound enough to mark a generation.

As global attention shifts toward escalating geopolitical tensions, particularly the ongoing war on Iran, the situation of women and children held in Northern Syria, has increasingly faded from view. In this changing landscape of priorities, their future remains uncertain, and for now, no clear answers have emerged.

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