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Time to Bring Home ISIS Families

The U.S. Central Commander this month [warned](#) that the camps holding ISIS families are “ticking time bombs.” And he’s right. The wives and children of ISIS fighters are living in squalid camps, subjected to daily indoctrination and degrading conditions. It’s time for their home countries to bring them back — or risk empowering the next generation.

The Biden administration can play a constructive role in encouraging our partners to follow a proven model to help them rejoin society. It’s both a legal and moral obligation.

Recent [reports](#) suggest that only a few hundred of the thousands of families that remain have been repatriated to their home countries. And there remains no plan for what to do with the rest who are still languishing. Without action from the international community, al-Hol and other camps run by coalition partners will be overrun — helping ISIS replenish its ranks and inspire a new cadre of fighters.

The situation is quickly deteriorating. A wave of violence erupted [last](#) month at a massive camp in Syria where the families have been living since the caliphate collapsed. Home to nearly 70,000, al-Hol is Syria's largest refugee and displacement camp, and women and children make up more than 80 percent of the population. [Many](#) of them are being groomed to be future terrorists.

As U.S. Central Commander Frank McKenzie [said](#) in his remarks last week, “unless the international community finds a way to repatriate, reintegrate into home communities, and support locally grown reconciliation programs, we will bear witness to the indoctrination of the next generation of ISIS as these children become radicalized.”

Fortunately, there is a solution to all of this. Kazakhstan is among the few states around the world to respond to the U.S. Government’s call for returning of its

citizens from the war zones in Syria. The U.S. State Department and academics have called it groundbreaking and is “setting an [example](#) for the world.”

Known as Operation Zhusan, which roughly translated means “smell of the homeland,” the program has become an essential lifeline for these families. Most of them have been exposed to extreme trauma. Without it, they would still be languishing in a Syrian refugee camp or in prison. Kazakhstan is rehabilitating and reintegrating them by providing a safe and secure environment.

Roughly 600 of women and children are in the program, and it’s grown significantly – from one national center to 17 rehabilitation centers scattered around the country staffed by a psychiatrist, psychologists, social workers, theologians, lawyers, teachers, and NGOs experienced working with vulnerable children and with religion, [according](#) to a US expert who visited the country.

The program is seeing remarkable success. Preliminary results show that, out of 187 repatriated women, 160 have renounced their radical ideology.

Upon arrival to Kazakhstan, each group of returnees are placed in specialized adaptation facilities where they were given special medical and psychological examination. Psychologists, teachers, doctors and social workers work with them for a month to identify the most accurate problems of each individual. These rehabilitation and adaptation programs are carried out by local government bodies in partnership with local NGOs, as well as assistance of our international partners nationwide.

Over 200 kids are now enrolled in preschool education, and another 200 kids are enrolled in grade school. More than 140 children were given an opportunity to participate in sports and additional activities outside school curriculum. These kids lacked any type of education, so we're trying to eliminate educational gaps.

What's important about that is individuals are being given the opportunity to reintegrate back into their communities close to their communities, where they can have the maximum support and where reintegration is optimized. Needless to say, some of the returnees were charged with a participation in terrorist activity. The Kazakh law is strict for those who were affiliated with extremist group like ISIS.

This year marks 30 years since the establishment of bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and the United States. We will continue to work closely with our American partners to strengthen international and regional security through programs like Zhusan.

Erzhan Kazykhanov is Kazakhstan's Ambassador to the United States.