

Report

Reception and (re)integration of returning children from detention camps in Northeast Syria

The return



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In this first report, we discuss two important themes that we believe deserve extra attention in the repatriation and integration process of children returning from the detention camps set in Northeast Syria. The report is based on what we have learned over the past three years from our observations, reflections, (game) activities, informal conversations and interviews with children, youth, mothers, grandparents, families, teachers and caregivers during our participation in the reception, guidance and (re)integration of 28 of the 32 returning Belgian children and teenagers.

1. The return

Despite the reluctance of the Belgian government to repatriate Belgian children and their mothers from Northeast Syria after the fall of Raqqa in October 2017, seven women managed to leave the Kurdish detention camps to return to Belgium with their children via Turkey. This resulted in the return of 15 children since the beginning of 2019. In June 2019, the Belgian government repatriated six unaccompanied minors, who had been living without parents in the Kurdish detention camps, either as orphans or as children taken by a parent who has since passed away. In addition, at the end of December 2020, the government repatriated a 9-year-old boy at the request of his mother. She was willing to let her son return to his father in Belgium without her and the other children. This led to the return of 22 Belgian children.

On March 4, 2021, the federal government decided to repatriate all Belgian children up to the age of 12 from the camps, together with their mothers, if they distanced themselves from the IS ideology and did not pose a threat to Belgian society. Of the 31 Belgian children held in the Kurdish detention camps at that time, 96% were younger than 7 years old with an average age of 4.6 years. The decision led to the repatriation of ten children and six women from the Roj detention camp on 16 July 2021, bringing the number of Belgian children returned up to 32.

Twenty-one Belgian children were not repatriated. Fourteen of them were in the highly radicalized and inaccessible Al Hol camp. The seven other Belgian children stayed in the Roj camp. They were not brought along, because for three of them (two six-year-olds and one four-year-old) the Belgian nationality was taken from their mothers, so they were no longer considered Belgian. For the four remaining children, the mother chose not to return to Belgium. These children also remained in the detention camp.

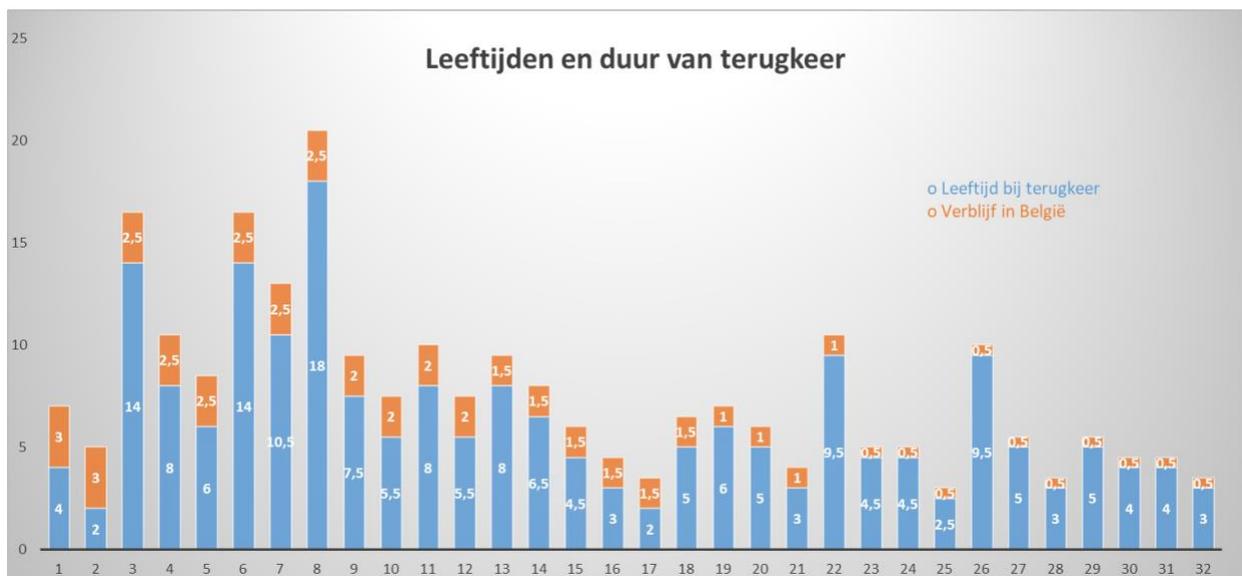


Figure 1. Ages (blue) and duration (orange) of return on January 1, 2022

The graph above shows us the age at which each of the 32 children returned, as well as the duration of their stay in Belgium until January 1, 2022. The first two children returned at the beginning of 2019 at the ages of 4 and 2 years and have been living in Belgium for 3 years now. They are raised within the framework of foster care by the grandparents on the mother's side and have been attending a village school in the area since April 2019. Both children are doing very well at home and at school. They are fully integrated and grow up like all other children, although they are still waiting for their Belgian nationality to be granted. They have been staying in our country as stateless persons for three years with a temporary residence permit for which an annual extension must be requested. However, nationality legislation provides that a child born abroad to a Belgian parent automatically becomes Belgian if he does not have another nationality.

The following six children and teenagers (graph: 3-8) were repatriated by the Belgian government on June 13, 2019. This concerns the unaccompanied minors who had stayed in the Kurdish prison camps without a parent. The ages of these children and teenagers were between 6 and 18 years, which meant, among other things, that all Belgian youths older than 10 years were repatriated. The six unaccompanied minors have now been in Belgium for two and a half years. Their experiences with reception, guidance and (re)integration into society are quite diverse. One of the downsides for the French-speaking teenagers was the lengthy hospital stay after arriving in Belgium. After the psychological and medical examinations, which indicated good health, they did not understand why they were not allowed to visit their families. They experienced the hospital as a place of boredom, separating them needlessly

from their families. They felt punished and locked up, partly due to the permanent presence of police at their hospital room.

On November 20, 2019, a French and two Belgian women, along with nine children, crossed the Syrian-Turkish border after being forced to leave the Kurdish detention camp of Ain Issa in Northeast Syria and wandering in the desert for six weeks. Crossing the border took a nine-hour walk in the freezing cold at night. After reporting to the Turkish police in the town of Sanliurfa, the four eldest children (5-8 years) were separated from their mothers and placed in a Turkish youth institution where they stayed for eight weeks without understanding the language and being able to communicate fluently. On January 20, 2020, they were transferred to our country and received care in a children's hospital where they stayed for one week with both their grandmothers. The psychological distress of these children in response to the separation and detachment from their mothers was evident. They clung to their grandmother, tried to stay with her as much as possible and lost themselves in screaming, crying, hitting and kicking when separation threatened. At night they slept alongside in one bed near grandmother. They often woke up anxious and crying, asking about their mothers. It required intensive supervision to support the grandparents and family in the psychological care of the children. They have been in Belgium for two years now and we are still seeing how strong this detachment theme is present.

The situation was different for the following six children (graph: 13-18) who returned with their mothers on July 1, 2020. These children were separated from their mothers upon arrival at Brussels airport. The mothers had informed the children in advance and prepared them for what would happen upon arrival. The children knew that their mothers would go to prison and they would be taken to a children's hospital, where the grandparents would be waiting for them. The decisions of the (juvenile) judges to quickly restore contact between mothers and children also contributed to the prevention of psychological distress. Between mothers and children there are daily telephone conversations and weekly digital conversations or visits in prison. These children have also been in Belgium for a year and a half now.

Turkey extradited the following three children (graph 19-21) along with their mother to Belgium fifteen months ago, on October 15, 2020. This Belgian woman fled the Kurdish detention camp Ain Issa with her children in early 2018. She lived in hiding for two years from both IS and the Syrian regime in a Syrian village near the Turkish border. She stayed there for fear of losing her children in the event of a possible extradition and arrival in Belgium. The reports about the reception of returned children by grandparents and relatives and the assured contacts between the children and their mothers in prison convinced her to return to Belgium via Turkey. She also prepared the children for what would happen upon arrival in

Belgium. The children knew that their mother would be taken to prison and they would go to their grandparents. The Brussels juvenile court decided to place the children in a youth institution.

For months there was no contact between the children (3-6 years) and their mother. A first video call meeting took place after 3 months and the next video call was two weeks later. At the first meeting, the children initially reacted uncomfortably and reluctantly, but gradually they opened up and became more enthusiastic. The next video call after two weeks was very difficult. The children were dismissive and apathetic, and they cried regularly. The conversation ended with mother crying because she was having a hard time seeing her children unhappy.

The first physical contact between mother and children took place after more than four months in a neutral place and under the supervision of youth care. From then on, supervised visits were organized weekly. Even during the subsequent period that mother was temporarily free, pending a new criminal trial, the visiting rights were limited to two hours a week. At the beginning of May 2021, six months after returning, the weekly visits were expanded to include six hours of joint outdoor activities of choice on Saturdays. The purpose of this was to restore and rebuild the bond of trust between mother and children. Returning the children to the institution was always a difficult moment. The children clung to their mother, refusing to let go of her, screaming and crying inconsolably, "I want to stay with you." "Mommy, stay with me, sleep next to me." "Take me with you. Why can't I go with you?" "Why do we have to stay here?" There were several instances where the educators of the institution telephoned the mother with the request to comfort the children. The children began to react angrily and dismissively to mother. They no longer accepted that she was not taking them out of the institution.

In early June 2021, mother was sentenced by the criminal court to four years in prison with immediate arrest. The lawyers' request to postpone the arrest until after the planned child visit two days later was rejected. The children were not given the opportunity to say goodbye to their mother. Only a 10-minute phone call was allowed during the weekend. After that they had no more contact. Two weeks later, the indictment chamber decided to release mother again pending a decision by the appeals court. The weekly visiting schedule of two hours on Wednesday and six hours on Saturday for 6 outdoor activities was reintroduced. From the summer holidays onwards, there was an increase in visits of three times six hours a week, on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays. Every Saturday evening the children had to be taken back to the institution to be picked up again on Sunday morning. The constant going back and forth to get the children led to untenable situations of running away, kicking against walls and

mirrors, "I am going to destroy this (social group), then I can stay with you and sleep alongside you." Mother was no longer in control of her children's behavior.

The repatriation of the ten children (graph 23-32) and six women started very early in the morning on July 16, 2021. One of the women testified: "At 5 a.m. I got up to dress the children. We had to be ready at 6 a.m. at the Kurds' building to be distributed among several cars that took us to the spot where the Belgian team was waiting for us. It was summer and very hot. Corona tests were taken, the children were medically examined, our luggage was checked and a search followed. Then we drove to the Syrian-Iraqi border to cross the river. The kids really liked it. It was the first time they saw a river. The Belgian supervisors had brought toys and were very kind to the children. When we were taken to the plane, I asked one of them what was going to happen to us. "Honestly? We don't know anything," she replied. "We'll drop you off at the plane, but we're not going with us ourselves." When I saw the plane and started to sigh, she asked, "Aren't you happy?" I said, "What awaits me is not easy. I'm going to have to say goodbye to my kids, aren't I?" "Yes that's right." I had very mixed feelings. I was happy, I was finally out of the camp, but I was also under a lot of stress. No one had told me what was going to happen upon arrival. On the plane we were all separated of our children with a police officer next to us. The closer we got to Belgium, the closer the farewell approached. The children had fallen asleep by now. I couldn't get to sleep, too much stress. On arrival we each had to leave the plane separately with our children. I couldn't wake up my youngest son. He was in too deep of a sleep. I picked him up and got out with the oldest one holding my other hand. There were soldiers everywhere. I thought we would land and arrive through the arrivals hall in Zaventem, but this was a totally different place with so many soldiers in combat clothes. I thought, "Is this serious? Why are you doing this? We are only six women and 10 children." I was scared to death. Some police officers introduced themselves and told me they were going to take my children. You just landed. You are only back in Belgium after 7 years and they tell me we are going to take your children. We enter a building, go up the stairs and into a room with round tables. I sit down at one of the tables and see one of the other women also sitting at a table in the hall with her children. I never saw the other women who came along. I start to cry and cry. "Didn't you know this?" one of the officers asks. "Even if I knew this for five years, you can't prepare for something like that." My oldest son sees me crying and starts to cry too. He senses that something is going to happen. "You go to the hospital and mommy somewhere else, but grandma is waiting for you." My son starts to cry louder and we are asked to go to another room. I sit down with the children to say goodbye to them. Suddenly the interpreter picks up my eldest son and goes outside with him. I see him wringing, hitting, weeping and weeping. He shouts: "I'm not going. I'm staying with mom." My youngest son is also taken. He's still sleeping. I quickly give him a

kiss. I stay behind crying. Moments later I was searched, handcuffed and blindfolded and taken to prison. That night I regretted coming home.”

Like the other five women, this mother was also concerned about the impact on the children of what happened after the landing. She was especially concerned about her 3-year-old son, who was taken away while sleeping. What did it mean to him to wake up in the arms of a stranger in a completely new world where he knew nothing and nobody, while he had fallen asleep in his mother's arms? When mother first heard her children on the phone, her oldest son began to cry angrily and disappointed: “Where are you? When are you coming? You left us here. Where are you? You have taken too long (of a time).” Her three-year-old son had trouble falling asleep. He could only fall asleep when someone was sitting next to him. When he lay alone in bed, he could not and would not sleep. For months he cried and cried incessantly.

The other mothers also told similar stories. When they arrived in Zaventem, several of them thought they would go to the hospital with their children. They did not expect to be separated from the children immediately upon arrival at the airport. The children were not prepared for this either. When they were separated from their mothers on arrival and taken away by strangers, they did not understand what was happening. For most of them, it was the first time they were separated from their mothers. The children screamed, cried, kicked, punched and wetted their pants. A three-year-old boy, who was taken in by a youth institution, stopped talking after the separation. His speech was limited to one-word expressions until he and his brother (4 years) saw their mother for the first time after almost 2 months during a visit to the prison. Seeing mother, his brother started to cry loudly, grabbed mother and wouldn't let go of her. He himself kept his distance, staring at his mother but refusing to speak or approach her. When she took him in her arms, he too began to cry loudly and speaking became possible again.

2. The detachment

Table 1 shows the course of contacts between mothers and children after return. This shows that 10 of the 23 children had no contact with their mother for two to three months. These 10 children were between 2 and 9 years old with a mean age of 4 years. The other children had regular contact with their mother from a few days up to a month after their return. This major difference in approach indicates the lack of an unambiguous, coherent and, above all, a well-thought-out developmental psychological return policy.

The first physical contact between children and mothers took place one up to four months after their return, with an average of two months. The COVID-19 pandemic played an important role in this, especially for the last returnees, but also other factors, such as the distance between the place of residence of the children and the prisons where the mothers were taken. The average distance between the children's place of residence and the mother's prison is 76 km. Only for 2 out of 10 mothers the children live at a reasonable distance of 24 to 30 km. For the others, the distance is 60 to 183 km, which excludes the possibility of regular visits. For several children, the visit to the mother is limited to one hour per month. This shows that little account is taken of the visiting possibilities between mothers and children. This is all the more true for the eight children who were cared for in youth institutions. The distances make it practically impossible for the institutions to visit the mothers in prison with the children. Telephone contacts and video calls are also not evident, due to the limited access to the internet, the planning and activities of the institution and the negligent handling of contact agreements. Weekly or biweekly video calls of 20 minutes are regularly reduced to a few minutes, because contact is not foreseen and the children are not immediately available.

Table 1. Contact course between mothers and children after return

Age on arrival in Belgium	Duration to first contact	Distance to prison	Contact arrangement
1) 7,5 years 2) 5,5 years 3) 2 years	By phone: 2 days Visit: 1.5 months	72 km	Daily telephone calls; video calls and visits on request
1) 8 years 2) 5,5 years 3) 5 years	By phone: 1 week Video call: 1 month	72 km	Daily telephone calls; video calls and visits on request
1) 8 years 2) 6 years 3) 5 years 4) 3 years	By phone: 2 days Visit: 1 month	60 km	Daily telephone calls; video calls and visits on request
1) 6 years 2) 5 years 3) 3 years	Video call: 3 months Visit: 4 months	83 km	Currently fortnightly one Wednesday afternoon and one weekend
1) 4,5 years	By phone: 1 month Visit: 3 months	183 km	Initial contact ban; after 1 month by telephone and weekly digital contact (20 min); visit under the supervision of youth care
1) 4,5years 2) 2,5years	Visit: 2.5 months	24 km	Initially by telephone and digital contact ban; fortnightly visits supervised by youth care; Currently daily telephone calls, weekly video calls (15 min) and weekly visits (1 to 2 hours)
1) 9,5 years	Visit: 2.5 months	72 km	Telephone contact hardly possible, no video calls, monthly visit (1 hour)
1) 5 years 2) 3 years	Visit: 3 months	72 km	Telephone contact hardly possible, no video calls, monthly visit (1 hour)
1) 5 years 2) 4 years	Telephone: 1 week Visit: 2 months	30 km	Limited telephone calls; weekly video calls and fortnightly visits
1) 4 years 2) 3 years	Visit: 2 months	94 km	Weekly telephone or video call (15 to 20 min); monthly visit (1 hour)

The large differences in contact arrangements between mothers and children (see table 1) also confirm the lack of an unambiguous, coherent and developmentally well-founded return policy. Some juvenile judges and care providers encourage close contact between mothers and children, others are more reluctant and argue in favor of limiting contact. The latter approach neglects the attachment between parents and children as one of the most important psychological pillars in the development of young children.

With regard to the attachment development of the children, we notice a disturbing pattern. The missing of their mothers appears to be increasing and is also increasingly translating into psychological stress, more behavioral problems and a growing rejection of their mothers and of society. When entering the foster families, most children responded exemplary and interested. The foster families described them as calm, obedient and helpful. They were impressed by their mutual togetherness and care for each other. The teachers also pointed out their enthusiasm, inquisitiveness and need for confirmation and recognition: "They do everything I offer and do not want to disappoint anyone." They described the children as obedient, polite and obliging as well as happy children. Missing the mothers more and more became an important theme in the everyday life of the children. Foster families and teachers were increasingly confronted with comments and questions about the deaths and absences of the fathers and the stay of the mothers in prison. Some teachers noticed that children were remarkably apathetic, absent or sad after visiting their mothers in prison. A teacher testified that one of the eight-year-old children asked her why her mother didn't pick her up from school, as they do with the other kids. She felt different and couldn't understand this. The mothers were also confronted with their children's growing feeling of missing them: "I don't want to leave. I want to stay with you (in prison)"; "Why can't I stay here?" (girl, 8 years old); "I want you to be with me on my 9th birthday, otherwise I'll ask grandma to have my bags and then I'll come and live here" (boy, 8 years old); "I want to go back to the camp. There I have many friends and we can always be together" (boy, 5 years). Over the months, this absence of the mothers translated into frustration, anger and rejection of their mothers but also of society: "Why did you (mom) choose to be in prison? (...) Who caused it then? (...) The police? The police are stupid." (boy, 6 years old). Statements such as "The police are stupid" or "Judges are bad people" testify to the growing frustration and anger among the children, who cannot comprehend why their mothers remain in prison: "Mom, you're not a crook, are you? Then why are you in jail?" (boy, 8 years old).

The schools are becoming more concerned about the children's "inner turmoil, impulsiveness, irritability, emotionality and agitation". The teachers point out problems in various children with regard to attention, concentration, task orientation and attitude to work in the classroom. On the other hand, the children want to do well to very well. They remain sensitive to involvement and recognition. Initially, we interpreted the problems cited by the teachers as symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and/or the years of absence of education, which, unlike their peers in Belgium, did not allow the children to develop a learning attitude and skills. However, the reunification of children and mothers after the end of the prison term indicated the impact of the separation and detachment of mothers and children. The teacher of a five-year-old boy, who was the first to be reunited and living with his released mother, stated: "I have another child in class." A few weeks earlier, the teacher

called for a crisis meeting to discuss the boy's behavioral problems. "This meeting was no longer necessary", says the teacher, "He has become calmer, quieter, more relaxed and more sociable. He accepts authority and rules and takes more time to do things." We found the same in the second mother who was released after her prison term. Within a month, the children who were staying in a youth institution were assigned to her, because of the increasing psychological problems of her eldest, a five-year-old son. She noticed a big difference in the behavior of her children who she knew as "calm, obedient, polite and grateful." The children had frequent fits of anger and crying, throwing objects, hitting and kicking their mother and refusing to do what she asked them to do. Their mother interpreted their behavior as an expression of an emotionally difficult moment in time. She acknowledged and articulated their emotions and tried to capture and correct them without being judgmental or dismissive, but setting clear boundaries. Step by step, she noticed a change in the children's behavior, which was also noticed by the teachers in the school. These first examples of mother-child reunion show that we must be careful in interpreting children's behavior in terms of post-traumatic stress and severe deprivation. Such all too hasty interpretations risk not only unnecessarily stigmatizing the children and unnecessarily apportioning the blame on the mothers, but they also risk ignoring the pernicious consequences of the current return and integration policy of the government.

3. The uprooting

The return of the children was accompanied by the expectation among emergency services and families that the negative life events of the recent years would dominate their reintegration process. They were concerned that the children would be severely traumatized and would find it difficult to adjust to the rhythm of life in Belgium. Both the families and the services involved were amazed at the speed of which the returned children integrated into an environment unfamiliar to them. A number of foster families said that the camps were apparently no longer part of the children's living environment. They saw that the children's attention was strongly focused on the world around them, as they were drawn to a variety of new stimuli that they had lacked in the camps. The amazement and curiosity with which they explored their new living environment gave the adults the idea that Syria was completely closed off.

However, in their transition process we notice that the returned children and teenagers start talking about the camps with a handful of people: mothers, persons who visited the camps, aid workers and other returnees when they get the chance to meet them. The need to perpetuate this part of their life story takes shape in the memories and stories they share. For example, the mothers notice that their children regularly tell something about life in the

camps. They are amazed that they bring back fun memories in a very vivid way. For example, one of the mothers said that during a prison visit, her child asked her if she remembered that she had filled a plastic bathtub with water during Eid el Fitr and that the children had to dip their faces into the water to fish out the sweets. Another mother was surprised that on every visit her children asked her about the life-size doll she had made for them at the camp. For her this was a reason to make a drawing of the doll to compensate for their missing. Also, during a family day that we had organized for the children and their (foster) families, we noted the warming feeling to see them again. Over the years of hardship, unbreakable bonds developed between the children that helped them survive and endure danger. These relationships are of immeasurable value and should not be underestimated in the further psychological development of the children.

In most (foster) families, life in Syria and the detention camps is rarely being discussed. Families with young children report that they sometimes tell about life in the camps. In a number of host families, however, there is no room for conversation about Syria, because the children are implicitly and explicitly given the message that they must leave this chapter of their lives behind them. In any case, it remains difficult for returned children and teenagers to talk about this; they feel that "others can't understand this anyway, because they've never been there."

before going to sleep. Like this woman in particular, all the other mothers created a home for their children with the few resources they had. Without exception, every mother tried to equip her tent with all possible amenities that could enrich the lives of her children and their precious childhood.

Growing up in detention camps undermines the possibility of decent existence due to a lack of security, hygiene, health, medication, nutrition, water and quality education. Despite this, most children were forced to spend their first years in a detention camp that had become their home over the years. They are connected to this place that has become part of their identity. This applies even more to young people for whom identity development is crucial. By establishing social relationships such as friendships, caring for others and supporting family, they give meaning to their own lives and that of others. One of the youths said: "Every day I helped take care of the girl next door. Her parents had died, so she lived with another woman who did not treat her well. She was so small and had to wash all the clothes, in wintertime it was terrible because the water was freezing cold. I thought that was so sad that I tried to take care of her as much as possible. In time she practically lived with me in my tent, she ate with me and slept next to me. We had such a close relationship and I became like a mom to her. It hurts me so much that I don't see her now, I miss her very much."

Coming back to Belgium is a major change, which instigated a search for new meaning and purpose. First of all, there is the search for a place of one's own, for acceptance and the feeling of belonging. In the case of young children, this is expressed through the way in which they seek contact with others. They are very curious, enjoy going to school, having hobbies, making new friends and are happy to be invited to classmates' birthday parties. Although the children tend to easily adapt to the new structure of the (foster) families, a lack of the former world they grew up in and where they came from is growing. They long for their old, familiar environment where they built friendships and had their mothers close by. Returning also meant saying goodbye to a known environment and a part of their identity. They left their trusted family environment and ended up in a world unknown to them. They are, in a sense, uprooted and given the important task of rerooting. To be able to connect in a beneficial way with this new world, it is important that their past is recognized and that the children are given the space to situate it in their life story.

We found that the children continue to take on certain tasks and responsibilities in their search for new meaning. For example, the little brothers and sisters are taken care of, even if this is no longer expected of them. At school as well, teachers notice that the children visit each other, as shown in an example where one of the children had left the classroom to go to the toilet. As soon as the little brother noticed his absence, he went into a slight panic that

passed immediately after being reassured by the teacher. The children are very fond of each other and continue to visit each other. For example, various (foster) families explained how the children visit each other at night to continue sleeping in one bed.

Mothers play an important and meaningful role in the transition process from the moment of uprooting towards being able to feel at home again in a new trusted environment. The separation of mothers and children upon arrival at the airport has a very negative impact on this process, which risks hindering the children's ability to feel at home again. For several children, the loss of their mother is so great and painful that they would prefer to return to the detention camps, as expressed in the following drawing of the detention camp:

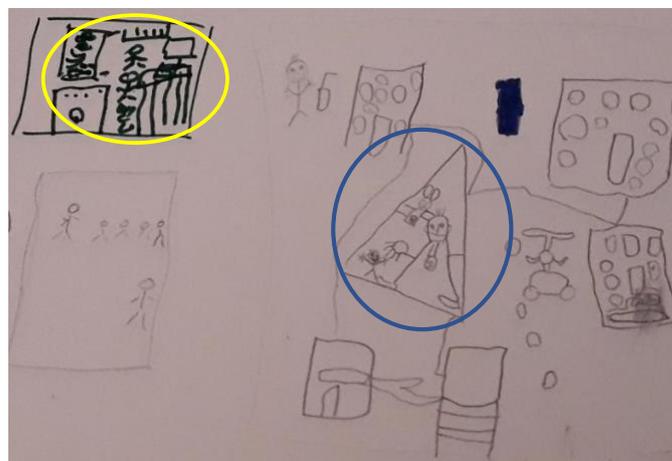


Figure 3. Child's detention camp drawing (boy, 5 years)

When asked what the boy would most want or have, he drew exactly the same (yellow circle) as in the tent in the detention camp (blue circle), himself together with mother and the cat. He built a sleeping tent for a new teddy bear he got.



Figure 4. Tent for teddy bear

The transition process is all the more difficult for children placed in youth institutions. The safety and security offered by the (foster) families cannot be guaranteed inside the institutions. There were regular discussions between the mothers and the institutions about a lack of hygiene and care: unkempt hair, unwashed hands, uncut nails, unwashed clothes and untreated wounds. For three of the eight children placed in youth institutions, there are indications and findings of sexually inappropriate behavior. Complaints were lodged with the police and the public prosecutor in two cases. This came with no response. The confrontation with this transgressive behavior psychologically destabilized one of the mothers, partly because she did not have the opportunity to take care of her children at that time. Not only with regard to safety, it is important that the children can reach out to family, but also because they can stay with familiar and trusted people, who are best suited to cope with their detachment and uprooting and their transition process to a new, reliable home.

The returned teenagers go through this transition process more consciously. They reflect more on their identity and their place in this world. In Syria and in the Kurdish detention camps they were left to their own devices. They took care of themselves and others by working, cooking, cleaning and raising the younger children. As a result of these experiences, they are further ahead in terms of independence and maturity than their peers, which makes it difficult for some of them to connect. Moreover, they are aware of the social discourse about returnees. This causes some doubts and insecurity to trust others regarding their past for the fear of being misunderstood, excluded or judged. It is also an intense and difficult transition process for them. It is essential that they have the opportunity to discover for themselves what they like to keep from their past and take with them into the world they live in today. A social and relational context that gives space and recognition to their stories is indispensable for integrating Syria into their further identity development, without having to erase their former identity.

4. Conclusion

Recent years have taught us that the current policy regarding the return of Belgian children from the detention camps in Northeast Syria ignores the phenomena of detachment and uprooting that the returning children are confronted with. A policy aimed at tackling these phenomena is fundamental to ensure a successful and effective reception and integration. In recent years we have witnessed the psychological destruction and suffering inflicted on children when both of these phenomena are ignored by a return policy that aims at the separation of parents and children, especially in the case of this particular group of returning children.

It does concern children who were exposed at a very young age to life-threatening and traumatizing situations of bombing, shelling, horrendous acts of cruelty, prisons, isolation cells and long-term detention in very appalling conditions. Even during the years of imprisonment in the Kurdish detention camps, it was the mothers who had to protect their children against exposure to extreme weather conditions, malnutrition, untreated wounds and diseases and again war and bombings. The very close bond that developed between mothers and children should not be underestimated and cannot simply be broken without causing serious and lasting psychological damage. After all, the mothers were the only protection and attachment figures with whom the children lived day in and day out, both in IS territory and in the detention camps.

During our visits to the detention camps in 2018 and 2019, we found that the psychological impact of the many traumatic situations on the children was relatively limited, mainly due to the protection and care of their mothers. The role of mothers and the close relationships between mothers and children are therefore essential at a time of total uprooting and confrontation with a completely new world. It is the mothers and the close relationships they have with their children that can ensure that the transition and integration process of the children after their return will take place in a successful and effective manner, without significant psychological damage in the short and long-term. A sudden and months-long separation without any contact between mothers and children at the time of uprooting can be considered a psychological attack on the emotional well-being and further development of the children. We must absolutely avoid this so as not to reinforce the traumatic stress that has been incurred and not to hinder the social-affective development and social integration of the children into society.

We argue that mothers and children should not be separated upon arrival at the airport, but that they should be cared for together medically and psychologically during the first few days. We recommend giving the children sufficient time to get used to the (foster) families together with their mothers before letting them say goodbye to their mothers. We also advocate immediate and frequent telephone, digital and/or physical contact between children and mothers during the mothers' stay in prison. Finally, we propose to consider other penalties of punitive nature that, in contrast to prison sentences, recognize the close bond between mothers and children as the engine of successful (re)integration into society.