

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## INDONESIA BATTLES DUAL THREAT OF JIHADISM AND SEPARATISM

*Jacob Zenn*

Last month, four farmers in Poso, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia were decapitated by militants affiliated with Mujahidin Indonesia Timor (MIT) ([Benar News](#), May 11). MIT attacks in Poso have become increasingly rare, with the previous one occurring in November 2020. In the November attack, MIT targeted Christians near Poso, burning two villagers and decapitating two others ([jakar-tapost.com](#), November 29, 2020). The Indonesian military claimed the attack was, however, unrelated to the victims being Christian. Likewise, in the most recent May attack, the villagers were not believed to have been attacked because of their religious backgrounds. Rather, MIT simply wanted to demonstrate its presence and instill fear in Poso communities, if not also make the Indonesian security forces appear to be incompetent. The brutality of beheadings has nevertheless been an MIT hallmark, with the group having conducted other beheadings in Poso in 2019 and in previous years ([asianews.it](#), February 1, 2019).

Despite the relative infrequency of MIT attacks—especially in comparison to a period of high activity by the group following its 2016 pledge to Islamic State (IS)—villagers have begun organizing, in order to call for greater military action against the terrorist group ([Terrorism Monitor](#), April 4, 2014). In a statement to the Indonesian government, the villagers claimed MIT was reduced to less than a dozen fighters, but was still able to conduct two lethal attacks within a six-month period. At the same time, they called on other villagers to report any suspicious movements to the authorities ([Benar News](#), May 19). The Daily Workers Assembly of the Indonesian Communion of Churches likewise claimed the MIT attacks “insulted” the capabilities of the Indonesian security forces and called on the government to increase its counter-terrorism operations against MIT to prevent any future loss of life ([en.tempo.co](#), May 13).

Indonesian security forces, meanwhile, are increasingly focused on the country's easternmost province of Papua and not on jihadism in Sulawesi. Papuan sectarian militancy is on the rise and Indonesia has recorded 26 attacks by the Papuan militants this year alone. Indonesian

security forces have responded to the militants' high-profile attacks, including the assassination of Indonesia's highest ranking intelligence official, by sending an additional 4,000 troops to Papua ([tribunnews.com](http://tribunnews.com), May 10).

Indonesian security trends are currently experiencing a sea change. Insecurity from jihadism has in the past affected multiples parts of the country, but is now mostly confined to Poso. Threats stemming from separatist movements have historically been most prominent in Aceh, but is now predominant in Papua. The country has largely overcome the al-Qaeda-affiliated militant group Jemaah Islamiyah and its offshoots, including MIT ([jakar-tapost.com](http://jakar-tapost.com), April 30). However, Papuan separatism represents an ongoing, and increasing, challenge. It remains to be seen whether it will divert resources from the Indonesian security forces, mitigating their response to the latest May 11 MIT attack.

*Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor*

## **JIHADISTS IN BURKINA FASO TARGET TOWN FOR GOLD MINING REVENUE**

*Jacob Zenn*

Lost among the news of numerous jihadist and other terrorist attacks globally was the June 4 "Solhan Massacre" in Burkina Faso. The attack was described as complex, including militants attacking Burkinabe soldiers, cutting off roads with improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and then destroying the village of Solhan. 132 civilians were killed ([rfi.fr](http://rfi.fr), June 7). Civilians reported that the militants came in a convoy of 30 motorbikes and first targeted informal gold mine workers before entering Solhan, where they burned the market, homes, and the hospital and killed people en masse along the way ([aljazeera.com](http://aljazeera.com), June 10).

Although Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) is the most lethal militant group in the area and has the capabilities to conduct the massacre, it has not claimed responsibility for the attack. Nevertheless, ISGS operates in Burkina Faso, including the area of the attack, as evidenced by the group's previous assaults on northern Burkina Faso and a failed attack on June 11 in Arbinda, which is near Solhan ([Agence France-Presse](http://Agence France-Presse), June 11). ISGS may not have claimed the attack to avoid bad publicity, but evidently harbored the desire for revenge against at least the Burkinabe army, civilians who oppose the group, and informal gold miners, who do not cooperate with or pay taxes to ISGS.

The possibility of ISGS attacking informal gold miners also reflects the growing exploitation of gold mining by jihadists in the Sahel, including al-Qaeda-affiliated Group of Supporters of Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin—JNIM). Hamadou Kouffa, JNIM's leader, for example, has attempted to extend JNIM's reach from Mali toward Senegal's border and infiltrate the gold mining areas there as a source of revenue for their movement ([dakaractu.com](http://dakaractu.com), February 6). Solhan is also known for being a rich artisanal gold mining area ([France24.com](http://France24.com), June 6).

Al-Qaeda often publicly depicts itself as a better alternative to the more ruthless Islamic State (IS). Demonstrating this, in contrast to ISGS, JNIM denounced the Solhan Massacre, denied its involvement, and offered con-

dolences to the victims ([Twitter.com/@SimNasr](https://twitter.com/SimNasr), June 8). This does not necessarily mean JNIM was not responsible; it may only have sought to distance itself publicly from the reputation-harming attack and was motivated by potential revenue from gold mining. Nevertheless, Burkina sources remain convinced a local ISGS commander, Sadou Cissé (a.k.a. Abou Ibrahim), is behind the Solhan Massacre. He has also been seen in unofficial ISGS videos brutalizing and beheading captives, which resembles the description of what happened in Solhan. Also, typical of the fratricidal rifts between al-Qaeda and IS, Cissé is believed to have joined JNIM's now defunct Burkina Faso-based sub-affiliate, Ansaroul Islam, before then defecting to ISGS ([levenementbf.info](http://levenementbf.info), June 12).

More than two weeks after the Solhan Massacre and with no claim made, it is unlikely ISGS or JNIM will acknowledge any responsibility for the attack. Nevertheless, the attack's brutality and connection to gold mining and the inability of the army to prevent it reflects the downward spiral of security in the Sahel. This insecurity may only be further exacerbated by the region's most powerful external military, France, which has already announced that it will draw down its troop presence in the Sahel ([France24.com](https://france24.com), June 10).

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## Pakistan's TTP Mounts Comeback Under New Leadership of Wali Mehsud

*Syed Fazl-e-Haider*

On May 5, four Pakistani soldiers were killed and six injured on the Pakistani-Afghan border in the Baluchistan region when militants opened fire from Afghan territory, where Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) still enjoys safe haven ([Dawn](https://dawn.com), May 5) The TTP, led by Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, claimed responsibility for the attack ([Dawn](https://dawn.com), May 10). Despite this operation, the TTP is struggling to revive itself and stage a comeback in its former strongholds in Pakistan's northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province after seven years of drastic decline in attacks and virtual dormancy from 2014 to 2021.

In the first two months of this year, the TTP claimed at least 32 attacks in Pakistan. On March 7, two policemen in Islamabad and Rawalpindi were killed in separate attacks. The killings represented a wake-up call for the Pakistani authorities that TTP could still operate in the country's major cities ([Samaa TV](https://samaa.tv), 17 March).

### Is the TTP Returning?

Before the May 5 attack, a TTP suicide bomber on April 21 drove an explosive-laden vehicle and detonated it in the parking lot of the Serena Hotel in Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan province ([Terrorism Monitor](https://terrorism-monitor.com), May 7). The attack killed five and injured 13 others, and demonstrated the TTP's ability to launch devastating attacks ([Express Tribune](https://express-tribune.com), April 21). The TTP has emerged as a stronger group under its current chief Wali Mehsud, who succeeded Mullah Fazlullah in 2018 when he was killed in a U.S. drone attack ([Dawn](https://dawn.com), June 15, 2018).

Several counter-terrorism operations launched under Pakistani security forces' Operation Zarb-e-Azb since 2014 have dismantled TTP networks across Pakistan and restricted the organization to some parts of Baluchistan and North Waziristan. By targeting a high security and high-profile hotel in Quetta, the TTP, however, appears

to have received aid from local facilitators and sympathizers ([Dawn](#), April 23).

Before the hotel attack, in February, TTP gunmen attacked and killed four women who worked for a local non-governmental organization while they were traveling to Mir Ali from Peshawar in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. One day later, the local TTP commander involved in the attack was killed by security forces ([The News](#), February 24). In addition, in March, eight TTP militants, including three commanders, were killed when Pakistani security forces conducted operations on TTP hideouts in North Waziristan's tribal areas ([Dawn](#), March 6).

### **The TTP's New Strategy**

From 2007 to 2014, the TTP indiscriminately killed civilians in attacks across Pakistan ([Terrorism Monitor](#), May 7). Under its new strategy, however, the TTP is attempting to garner support from different separatist, political and religious groups and parties in Pakistan. For example the organization recently announced its support for Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), the right-wing politico-religious party that recently staged sit-ins and violent protests across Pakistan when its head, Saad Hussein Rizvi, was detained by the police on April 12 (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), June 4).

The TLP protesters demanded the expulsion of the French ambassador over the publication of blasphemous caricatures in the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* last year. The Pakistani government in April banned TLP under anti-terrorism laws for its involvement in terrorism and for its chaotic, violent countrywide protests. TTP spokesman Mohammad Khurasani stated the group's support for the nationwide protests in a letter where he also criticized government and security agencies, and called for an armed struggle against the Pakistani government ([Pakistan Today](#), April 14).

Similarly, in March the TTP threatened those who organized the Aurat March (Women's March) to mark International Women's Day in the country as part of its strategy to gain the support of religious groups and right-wing political parties. It further accused the orga-

nizers of the Aurat March of spreading obscenity and vulgarity in the country ([Express Tribune](#), March 13).

### **TTP's New Priorities Under Wali Mehsud**

The Chinese ambassador to Pakistan could have been the target of the bombing in Quetta, as he was staying at the Serena hotel, though he was not present at the time of the explosion. Chinese nationals, assets and projects in Pakistan seem to be a new priority on the TTP's hit list ([Dawn](#), April 21).

In the past two years, Wali Mehsud worked on strengthening the TTP by bringing the group's disgruntled factions together and interconnecting its network with other Islamist and ethnic-based organizations engaged in militancy against the Pakistani state. His policy of reconciliation has also attracted some commanders of the Sheheryar Mehsud group and a faction of the Punjabi Taliban, who have also pledged allegiance to Wali Mehsud ([Samaa TV](#), August 17, 2020). Sheheryar Mehsud was a commander in the TTP when Hakimullah Mehsud was the TTP leader, but he left the group when Mullah Fazlullah became its leader. Sheheryar was killed in a remote-controlled bomb attack in Afghanistan in 2020 ([SAMAA TV](#) February 13, 2020).

Further, Wali Mehsud developed contacts with Baluch separatist groups in southwestern Baluchistan and Sindhi nationalist groups involved in attacks on Pakistani security forces and military installations ([Dawn](#), December 5, 2020). Sindhi separatists carried out 18 attacks in Sindh, killing 20 people and injuring 66 others in 2020. A Sindhi separatist group, Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA), claimed responsibility for attacks on two Chinese nationals in Karachi in December 2020, though the attackers missed the Chinese targets. The same group was also involved in attacks in August 2020 on paramilitary officials during a pro-Kashmir rally in Karachi ([The News](#), January 4).

### **Conclusion**

With the Quetta suicide bombing, the TTP has conveyed a message to the Pakistani security establishment that the group has begun a comeback with an updated

strategy. The TTP's statements in favor of TLP's anti-France violent protests on April 12 and against the Aurat March also reflects its strategy of appealing to religious radicals, such as Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), in Pakistan. The TTP's new strategy may not succeed in attracting common civilians, however, or even right-wing political parties and Islamist religious groups working in the national mainstream. No such group or party can afford to anger the general population, especially the security establishment. Nevertheless, the TTP's resurgence as a united and reorganized group with Wali Mehsud as its emir poses a revitalized threat to Pakistan's internal security. To counter the TTP's strategy, religious scholars must come forward and play a front-line role in combating extremism in Pakistan.

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## Somaliland Elections Disrupt al-Shabaab's Regional Expansion

*Michael Horton*

On May 31, the independent, but unrecognized, Republic of Somaliland held parliamentary and local district elections. These internationally observed elections, which saw a high turnout of 1.1 million registered voters in Somaliland, were peaceful and transparent ([Africa News](#), May 31). [1] The election stood in marked contrast to the violence and corruption that continue to plague, Somalia, where al-Shabaab continues to gain ground ([Africa News](#), May 26).

Somaliland's own parliamentary elections—last held in 2005—were delayed due to drought and disagreements over procedural questions. However, the country has elected three presidents since 2003 and held multiple municipal elections. The May 31 vote marks the further maturation of Somaliland's democracy and the institutions that undergird it. The recent elections, which featured biometric ID for all voters, saw the defeat of Somaliland's ruling party, Kulmiye, in favor of a coalition of the country's two major opposition parties ([The Standard](#), May 18; [Somaliland Sun](#), June 12). Just as with previous presidential elections, this shift in power has been accompanied by a smooth transition within relevant governing bodies.

A combination of broad public participation in democratic elections and transparency are Somaliland's best tools for building and safeguarding its institutions and its citizens ([East African Business Week](#), April 20). In turn, it is this same public support that helps Somaliland defend itself against the serious threat posed by al-Shabaab.

### **Predictability and Citizen-Sourced Intelligence**

Al-Shabaab is steadily gaining ground in Somalia and in parts of the semi-autonomous region of Puntland, Somaliland's southern neighbor. In Somalia, al-Shabaab's ability to penetrate and attack even the most hardened targets points to the group's ever-increasing capabilities

and territorial range ([Garoweonline](#), June 15). In the past three months, al-Shabaab has increased the tempo of its operations across a wide swath of Somalia, most notably in Lower Shabelle and along Somalia's border with Kenya ([Garoweonline](#), June 13; [The Star](#), May 20). However, al-Shabaab's network of informants and operatives extends across Somalia, Puntland, Somaliland, and Kenya. It is al-Shabaab's intelligence wing, the Amniyat, which makes it such a formidable enemy.

The sophistication of the Amniyat has increased markedly in the last five years. Despite periodic martial and political setbacks to the larger al-Shabaab organization, the Amniyat has enhanced its capabilities and its human network. The leadership of al-Shabaab recognizes that the Amniyat and the intelligence it generates is fundamental to the group's long-term goal of cementing its influence in—and control of—large parts of Somalia. Consequently, the Amniyat is staffed with the most capable recruits and its budget is prioritized. Al-Shabaab's ability to target hardened military and government facilities with suicide bombers and armed operatives would not exist if it were not for the Amniyat. [2]

The Amniyat is also tasked with assessing and penetrating vulnerable communities and exacerbating clan and inter-clan rivalries. Stopping al-Shabaab-directed influence operations is critical for preventing the organization from establishing new footholds. To this end, the government of Somaliland relies on community-driven intelligence. Clan elders, local officials, and concerned citizens report suspicious activities and new arrivals to either local police or, in some cases, directly to Somaliland's National Intelligence Service (NIS). The willingness of locals to cooperate with the government stems from the predictability of the government's response and, ultimately, trust in the government.

Ironically, in Somalia, al-Shabaab also relies on predictability and trust to build influence and sustain its control of territory. In comparison with the government of Somalia, al-Shabaab's officials and form of government—even as harsh as it is—are often reliable and more predictable. For example, checkpoints run by al-Shabaab follow standardized protocols with respect to the 'taxes' they collect from merchants and herdsmen ([The Standard](#), November 22, 2020) [3]. If an al-Shabaab

fighter harasses and steals money from travelers, the punishment is often death. At government- or militia-run checkpoints, demands for money and permission to pass are arbitrary and often predatory. Areas controlled by al-Shabaab have little crime and are generally peaceful. This is not to deny the brutality of the organization. However, al-Shabaab often does a better job governing and providing security than the Somali government and allied militias and, as a result, secures the support of many locals. [4]

The government of Somaliland and its military, police, and intelligence service understand that they must out-govern al-Shabaab and ensure that they are viewed as being more reliable and more predictable than those of the terrorist group. It is this predictability and trust that enables Somaliland's understaffed and under-resourced police and military to effectively combat al-Shabaab and other militant groups. In contrast with Somalia, which has received tens of billions of dollars in aid over the last three decades, Somaliland receives little aid and no military assistance. In most of its territory, the government of Somaliland has, despite its limited resources, denied al-Shabaab a foothold.

## Future Outlook

Somaliland's recent nationwide elections passed with no reports of violence. This is despite the fact that al-Shabaab must have viewed such elections and mass gatherings of people as prime targets. Any attacks on the elections would have embarrassed the government and undermined trust in the authorities' ability to protect their citizens. The fact that no attacks took place, even in problematic areas near the Puntland border, is further evidence of the effectiveness of Somaliland's approach to combatting terror. Both al-Shabaab and Islamic State in Somalia are active in Puntland ([Garoweonline](#), June 16; [Somali Dispatch](#), July 18, 2020). In the case of al-Shabaab, it has repeatedly sent operatives into Somaliland from Puntland ([Horseed Media](#), February 9; [Horseed Media](#), November 17, 2019).

The Horn of Africa more broadly is not known for its stable or democratic governments. Somaliland is a success story in a part of the world where there are few. The most recent elections yet again demonstrate the country's determination to chart its own path. However, the

international community should not take such success and stability for granted. Somaliland faces numerous challenges that will only become more acute with time. More than 70 percent of Somaliland's population of 4 million is under the age of 30. Youth unemployment and a chronic lack of foreign investment threaten to upend the impressive progress the country has made. Al-Shabaab and similar militant groups, if they endure, will be ready to seize on any vulnerabilities.

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## Notes

[1] See reports on the elections at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/somalia/99709/statement-international-partners\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/somalia/99709/statement-international-partners_en); <https://rusi.org/commentary/somaliland-power-democracy>

[2] Author interview with regional security expert, June 2021.

[3] See: <https://hiraalinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A-Losing-Game.pdf>

[4] Author interview with multiple regional analysts, May-June 2021.

# How Nordic Countries are Handling the Question of Repatriating Islamic State Women

*Herbert Maack*

As the self-styled Islamic State (IS) "caliphate" collapsed in March 2019, the international community was faced with the problem of more than 70,000 IS family members stranded in Syria. The Kurdish Peshmerga gathered these family members into camps in northeastern Syria. Currently, these camps still house around 60,000 people, of which 30,000 are Syrians, 20,000 are Iraqis and around 10,000 are of other nationalities, including approximately 1,000 from Europe ([Egmont Institute](#), October 2020).

To the disappointment of Kurdish authorities, most European countries have been reluctant to repatriate their nationals from these camps due to security fears. This article examines how the Nordic countries of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland have been tackling the issue and highlights recent changes in their respective policies, specifically toward IS-linked women and their children.

## Denmark

Among the Nordic countries, Denmark has taken a notably dualistic approach in dealing with its approximately 160 citizens who travelled to Syria and Iraq. Returning IS fighters benefited from the so-called "Aarhus model" of reintegration and de-radicalization instead of custodial sentences. However, the country also in 2019 passed a law to strip citizenship from its dual nationals fighting for IS ([The Local](#), October 24, 2019).

On the question of IS women and children stranded in the Kurdish-run camps, the government of Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen initially refused to consider repatriation. However, on May 18, foreign minister Jeppe Kofold made a surprise announcement that the government reviewed its negative stance on repatriating its citizens held in the Kurdish camps and that Denmark would now seek the repatriation of three Danish IS

women and 19 children. The announcement has been seen as a significant step down from the government's previous stance ([The Local](#), May 19).

The reason for the policy change was a new assessment from the Danish Security Intelligence Service (Politiets Efterretningstjeneste, or PET) that children in the al-Hol and al-Roj camps were under a greater threat of radicalization than in Denmark ([PET yearbook](#), March 2021). It was, however, also assessed that significant pressure from parties on the left, which prop up the minority Social Democratic government, influenced the policy decision ([The Local](#), May 19).

Notably, among the children that the government seeks to repatriate, 14 belong to three females, while the remaining five belong to mothers who will not be repatriated. It, therefore, seems that Denmark is opting for a selective repatriation policy.

## Norway

Two weeks before Denmark changed its policy stance, a Norwegian IS woman was sentenced by a court in Oslo to three years and six months in jail for terrorism offences ([nrk.no](#), May 4). The woman and her two children, including a five-year old boy and three-year old girl, were repatriated by the Norwegian government from Syria in January 2020 ([nrk.no](#), January 14, 2020). The decision to repatriate the woman and her children was done for humanitarian reasons, as one of the children was believed to be seriously ill. The decision, however, threatened to bring down the Conservative government as the government's coalition partner, Progress Party, staunchly opposed the decision and in the end left the government in protest ([nrk.no](#), January 20, 2020).

The 30-year-old woman was born in Pakistan and arrived as a child to Norway. She later joined a local Salafist group calling itself "The Ummah of the Prophet," where she met her husband-to-be, the Norwegian-Chilean Bastian Vasquez. He travelled to Syria in 2012 and the woman traveled a year later, marrying Vasquez in Syria. The marriage was short-lived, as Vasquez is believed to have died in April 2015 while building bombs for IS. The woman then remarried two times, including first to an Egyptian IS fighter, who served as a sharia judge and died fighting in 2017, and then to another Egyptian IS

fighter. After IS' "caliphate" collapsed, the woman and her two children from her first two marriages ended up in the Kurdish-run al-Hol camp. In January 2020, the woman and her two children were assisted by Norwegian authorities to return to Norway, where she was arrested for suspected terrorism offences, including membership in IS ([nrk.no](#), May 4).

Altogether, around 140 individuals are believed to have travelled from Norway to join IS in Syria and Iraq. Norway has successfully prosecuted some of the IS returnees. The current number of IS-affiliated women from Norway and their children who remain in Syrian camps is unclear. In April, however, it was reported that one Norwegian-Russian woman with her two children had escaped from Syria to Turkey ([Aftenposten](#), March 27).

In May, another well-known Norwegian IS woman, Aisha Shazadi Kausar, pleaded publicly for Norwegian authorities to help her and her son to return to Norway ([Aftenposten](#), May 18). The request led to a renewed debate on the Norwegian repatriation policy, with Progress Party leader, Sylvi Listhaug, stating "enough is enough" ([Aftenposten](#), May 18). It remains to be seen how Norway will react to Kausar's plea.

## Sweden

The only Nordic country that has thus far not actively repatriated any of its citizens from the Kurdish-run camps is Sweden. According to Sweden's intelligence service, SÄPO, around 300 Swedes or Swedish residents, a quarter of whom are women, joined IS in Syria and Iraq, including most in 2013 and 2014 ([SÄPO](#), June 27, 2017). Among these, around half have returned to Sweden on their own.

Sweden did not initially have existing legislation to prosecute people for membership in a terrorist organization, so there have been only a few trials in Sweden of IS returnees. However, in March 2021, a 31-year-old Swedish woman, who travelled to Syria via Turkey in mid-2014, was convicted of "arbitrary conduct with a child" for putting her then two-year-old son's life at risk. The woman had been arrested by Kurdish forces in early 2018 and following lengthy detentions in Kurdish camps managed to flee to Turkey in early 2020. After being deported to Sweden in November 2020, the woman



was sentenced to three years in prison ([The Local](#), March 9). The woman was possibly one of a group of four IS-linked women and nine children that managed to escape from al-Hol camp in Syria to Turkey and return to Sweden in November 2020. The group also included a 48-year-old woman who left Sweden for Syria in 2011 and her two children. Three of the women left from the Stockholm area ([SVT](#), November 1, 2020).

The Swedish government's position has been to seek the repatriation of children held in the camps and simultaneously support the establishment of an international tribunal to investigate and bring to trial IS-linked women who have committed crimes in Syria. While progress in establishing an international tribunal has been slow, the repatriation of children has been blocked by their mothers and Kurdish authorities' unwillingness to separate the children from their mothers ([The Local](#), April 12, 2019; [The Local](#), May 16, 2019).

In late May, the Swedish Green Party called on the government to repatriate the 20 Swedish IS-linked women and around 30 children still in Syria back to Sweden. It argued that the current policy was not working and everything should be done to get the children to safety ([SverigesRadio](#), May 5). It remains to be seen whether the government heeds this call.

## Finland

Among the Nordic countries, Finland was the first to start actively repatriating its citizens from the Kurdish-run camps, even though the Finnish security intelligence Service (SUPO) publicly warned that the repatriated Finnish IS-linked women would likely increase the terrorism threat in Finland ([Iltasanomat](#), December 17, 2019).

The question of active repatriation of IS women was hotly debated in 2019 by the Finnish parliament. It caused a serious controversy a year later after the current foreign minister Pekka Haavisto of the Green Party was found guilty of sidelining a senior civil servant, who had insisted on a governmental decision on repatriation in contrast to treating the issue as a mere consular affair ([yle.fi](#), December 9, 2020).

The repatriation of Finns started with two young orphans in December 2019 ([yle.fi](#), December 21, 2019). A year later, in December 2020, the government repatriat-

ed a group of two IS women and their six children ([yle.fi](#), December 20, 2020). These two women included "Sanna," who was a Finnish IS fighter's wife and was interviewed by CNN in March 2019 in the Syrian desert. Before her departure from Finland, Sanna, a convert to Islam whose real name was not made public, belonged to a wider network of radicalized Salafists from the capital area of Helsinki. Sanna left Finland in 2015 and travelled with her children to live in the IS "caliphate" with her husband, who had left Finland already a year earlier, but later died in Syria ([Iltalehti](#), December 22, 2020). Besides these repatriations, in spring 2020, three Finnish IS women and nine of their children escaped from al-Hol Camp to Turkey, from which they returned to Finland, with assistance from Finnish authorities ([yle.fi](#), May 31, 2020).

The Finnish government has been defending its policy of active repatriation with children's rights overriding any security concerns associated with their parents. In public statements, politicians from the ruling coalition government have assured the public that the Finnish security authorities would investigate the IS-linked women for possible terrorism or other criminal offenses. To date, however, these preliminary investigations have not led to any formal criminal investigations ([Helsingin Sanomat](#), May 4).

Instead, efforts are ongoing to tighten Finland's counter-terrorism laws, as Finland's track record for bringing justice to those suspected of terrorism offenses has been weak. Out of its IS returnees or repatriated IS family members, no one has been convicted for terrorism offenses. A recent report by the Finnish Police concluded that "Finland is one of the few countries amongst EU member states which has not secured any sentences related to terrorism financing or the [foreign terrorist fighter] phenomena." The report further noted that while Finland's terrorism legislation did not differ greatly from other EU member states, including its Nordic neighbors, several other factors, including a higher threshold for launching criminal investigations, had contributed to this situation ([Finnish Police](#), April 26).

In order to address these failings, the Finnish government suggested in late May modifications to the counter-terrorism laws, including criminalization of "par-

participation in the activities of a terrorist group” ([Finnish Government \(press release\)](#), May 20). These modifications will be most likely approved by Parliament this upcoming fall. However, they will not address the current challenges of Finnish IS returnees and repatriated IS women.

## **Conclusions**

While relatively similar culturally, the question of IS women and their children has revealed interesting policy differences between the Nordic countries. Sweden, Norway and Denmark have been reluctant to actively seek the repatriation of its citizens from the Kurdish-run camps. However, Finland sought early on to bring its IS-linked women and their children back home. While this eagerness might be somewhat surprising because Finland has failed for a decade to bring any of its IS suspects to justice, this discrepancy can be explained by the current Finnish government’s emphasis on human and, in the repatriation debate more specifically, children’s rights. In contrast, in acknowledging the difficulties of bringing to justice its IS-linked women, Sweden has opted to wait and hope for trials to take place in the Middle East region. Meanwhile in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, the debate on active repatriation has been dominated by national security considerations. In Denmark’s case, these considerations somewhat surprisingly seem to lead to the same end result as Finland’s more value-based considerations.

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