Opinion

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This baby is going to die at the camp

What does citizenship mean when thousands of American, French and British children have been abandoned to their fates in the desert?

AZADEH MOAVENI

A collection point for humanitarian aid at the refugee camp in northeast Syria AFP

NO ONE THOUGHT baby Ibrahim was going to make it.The 18-month-old boy, Belgian by birth, was malnourished, dehydrated, and vomiting every half an hour from a stomach bug. In Al Hol, the refugee camp in northeast Syria where he was staying, the heat regularly reached a relentless 100 degrees by midmorning, there was scant medical care, and fresh water, when it arrived, usually teemed with bacteria. Video of Ibrahim, listless and throwing up, had made its way from this desolate desert patch of Syria to his aunts in Belgium, who had shared it with doctors there. "I'm going to be honest, this baby is going to die," one said. Another thought it would only be a matter of hours. A Belgian mission to rescue and repatriate orphan children arrived in the camp in June and made Ibrahim their top priority. But Ibrahim did not appear on the camp officials' prisoner list. No one had heard of him. What had happened to the baby on verge of death?

The camp where the footage was taken, Al Hol, holds 73,000, mostly women and children formerly associated with ISIS, living together under squalid tents, lacking access to basic sanitation, clean water or food supplies. As of July, at least 240 children had died either in the camp or en route. The week I visited early this summer, a 4-year-old boy drowned after tumbling into a fecal pit. A few weeks before that, a 7-year-old burned to death in a tent. All his family back home received was a photograph of his charred body. The still-healthy ones run feral within the camp's confines.

Al Hol, originally built in the early 1990s to house Iraqis fleeing the first Gulf war, is called many things these days, among them "the camp of death," "a test from God," "a mini-ISIS caliphate," and "Guantánamo in the desert." Most of its inhabitants arrived early this year, escaping the fighting around Baghouz, ISIS' last stronghold; during the most intense period, around 10,000 women and children arrived on a single day. These included the Islamic State's most devoted adherents — those who were willing to eat weeds and sleep under trees until the group lost its final sliver of territory.

The foreign-born children in the camp number nearly 8,000. They were either taken by their parents to Syria or born there of the serial mandatory matches between fighters and *muhajirat*, or migrant women, that became the Islamic state's chief recruiting lure and its most cruel imposition on women. Today these children are lost — sometimes literally. They are currently growing up among women who would see them as the next generation of jihadists in waiting. Children of some nations, particularly Russia, Turkey and some Central Asian republics, have gone home more quickly, but Western children have not fared as well. Some have been abandoned by the countries where they are ostensibly citizens. Others can't be tracked down, even by countries that would take them in. Their prospects of returning to the West soon look bleak, but what everyone believes, quietly, is that many will make it back eventually.

I visited Al Hol in late June to interview women in the camp, hoping to gain a measure of those detained, their commitment to jihadism, and what risks they might pose to their home countries, as well to other women and children living alongside them. The denouement of the ISIS caliphate was always going to be messy. But no one quite imagined the web of entanglements that converge today at Al Hol. The foreign women and children at the camp exist in a legal limbo, held in territory that is controlled not by a state, but by the Syrian Kurdish militia that fought alongside the American coalition against ISIS and is now seeking to build an autonomous statelet. They are there because the majority of the 54 governments they hail from refuse to take them back.

Among them are British, American, French, German and Canadian children. The vast majority are very small, under 8 years old. Two American orphans from Florida reportedly passed through the camp earlier in the year; their mother had abducted them and taken them to Syria. Before dying herself, she entrusted them to a fellow hard-core ISIS woman from Britain. Their father has heard the woman then concealed the children's identities and smuggled them out of the camp, taking them to Idlib, a province controlled by rebel groups dominated by jihadists. Hiding children and changing their names is easy in Al Hol; finding out the fates of those who've disappeared is difficult.

Determining the precise number of children in the camp, along with their paternity and nationality, is also difficult. The camp prisoner lists are incomplete and do not align with governments' lists of their citizens; there are people in the camp who are not on any list, and people on lists who do not appear in the camp at all. Many women lack passports, which were burned or confiscated upon arrival in ISIS territory. Some are claiming paternity of children whose parents have died, to maximise their own chances of repatriation.

This summer, the idea that Al Hol is not just a humanitarian blight, but also a flashpoint for ISIS resurgence, has been gaining ground. An August report by the department of defense warned that ISIS is likely to seek to recruit there, and that residents of the camp are potentially susceptible to its "messaging, coercion and enticement."

Some of this signalling may emanate from a push in Washington, repeated by President Trump now twice, to get European governments to repatriate their ISIS fighters, as well as women and children. Today, the place feels very much a continuation of the ISIS caliphate. Every woman living in the foreigner annex wears a full-length black *abaya,* the robes that the militants required in their territory; some still wear black gloves and *niqabs* or even full face veils, obscuring the eyes. What many residents of the camp told me is that everything changed with the mass arrivals of women from Baghouz as they are called in Arabic, transformed life in the camp for its existing inhabitants, who had rejected and fled ISIS months or even years earlier.

Almost immediately upon arrival, they began demanding that women obey all ISIS rules of comportment. They whipped women they saw smoking. When women gathered to hear music played by camp officials, they castigated them, promising that hellfire awaited those who listened to *haram* pop. "They run *hisba* patrols in the camp," one official said, referring to the all-female morality police brigades that roamed ISIS cities. "We only control the cordons."

Although the fate of adult women in the camps remains highly uncertain, caught up in the web of European governments' fraught domestic politics and security fears, many acknowledge that orphan children will eventually be brought home. A number of courts across Europe, essentially overriding their government's calculations, have ordered that children be repatriated. Many countries have argued that doing so is difficult to impossible. Meanwhile, the children simply wait, watching women give birth in tents to babies who often die within days, learning to live with the shrapnel embedded in their bodies, learning nothing more of life than the ISIS caliphate and this camp prison that mimics it so very well.

—NYT

OUT OF MY MIND

MEGHNAD DESAI

Kashmir: What now?

I WAS 13 at the time. In our poky *sarkari* flat in Bombay, my father was having a furious, noisy argument with my two maternal uncles. The neighbours were worried. They thought it was a property quarrel which would end up in violence.

Alas, we did not have property to quarrel over. The dispute was about Kashmir. Jawaharlal Nehru had just sacked Sheikh Abdullah, put him under house arrest without bringing any charges and put Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, Abdullah's deputy, as prime minister of J&K.

Whatever sweet words Nehru may have used in his promise to the people of Kashmir that he would honour their special status ended in that moment in 1953. Soon, the 'prime minister' of J&K became 'chief minister' as in rest of India, and the Sadar-i-Riyasat became the governor appointed from New Delhi.

Sheikh Abdullah was never tried but kept under house arrest. Abdullah was just as arbitrarily released and then Indira Gandhi gifted him and his heirs and successors the proprietorship of J&K. The more the powers were taken away from the J&K Assembly, the more fervent was the cry from the Congress that J&K as a Muslim-majority autonomous province (and not the Muslims elsewhere in India) was a proof of India's secularism.

After 1989, when the Taliban and related Islamist terror organisations poured in from across the border, J&K was ethnically cleansed of Pandits as New Delhi watched. After that, the Indian Army became a permanent feature of the land. As did the separatist movement.

The last 30 years have been fed by several delusions. India pretended when it suited it that J&K was sovereign and MPs needed special permission to visit it. For no other state were Internet and mobile telephone connections shut when the Prime Minister visited, except in J&K. Kashmir was and was not a part of India; it was and was not autonomous. It was the only state where between 40,000 and 50,000 people, local and infiltrators, have been killed in the last 30 years.

On 5/6 August, there came legal clarity. The steady de facto erosion of political autonomy for J&K has been ended. The Line of Control is now an international border between India and Pakistan. The partition of India is at long last complete.

Now what?

First, the urgent restoration of normalcy, such as it was, before August. Kashmir may no longer be a bilateral issue but it is a global concern. Every day of delay makes the move look more sinister both in Kashmir and around the world. Relax the curfew and face the riots. There is no point in waiting for the day when the curfew can be relaxed without angry reactions. The anger in Kashmir Valley has a long history. To expect it to die due to a constitutional change would be a delusion. It would require concrete policy changes in economic and social sectors to heal the wounds of the past 65 years.

The Prime Minister has promised a bright future. Integration of the region into India should prove the key to bringing the standard and quality of living in J&K rapidly up to the level in rest of India in terms of income as well as human development, especially for women.

Security personnel divert traffic during restrictions in Srinagar. Normal life remains affected since August 5 due to restrictions and shutdown after Centre abrogated Article 370 PTI

Major payday

Rory McIlroy laughs all the way to the bank with a $15-million bonus

Rory McIlroy encashed winner's cheques at three events in 2019

OVER THE TOP

Meraj Shah

IT MATTERS LITTLE that he likes to play down the money he won at the end of the regular PGA Tour season by lifting the FedEx Cup at the Tour Championship last month. Not only was Rory McIlroy's utter domination of the final round of golf's playoffs underlined by a stunning dismantling of the game's most intimidating Goliath—Brooks Koepka—it was reaffirmation of a stellar year for the Ulsterman whose slight stature belies his oversized significance in the legion of players amongst whom he ranks.

Naysayers will be quick to pounce on that proclamation: hold your horses. It's true that the Irishman hasn't won a major title in five years; and yes, he did slump to an entirely-forgettable opening round at the Open Championship on his home course to crash out of the field. But, in your columnist's opinion, those who insist, on the basis of that rationale, that McIlroy doesn't deserve the player-of-the-year award on the PGA Tour, don't have a leg to stand on.

It's below the belt, but I can't resist it: consider that Jordan Spieth, made less money that the couple of million dollars which Harry Diamond, McIlroy's friend and caddy lapped up in 2019. That's assuming Diamond makes ten percent of his player's earnings, which is the norm. McIlroy encashed winner's cheques at three events in 2019; and while none was a major championship, The Player's Championship is very nearly one, and the Tour Championship won him the FedEx Cup for the second time in his career. Not that he didn't figure in the mix in lesser tournaments either: notching up 14 top-ten finishes in his 19 starts. McIlroy also managed, within the space of a season, to banish demons which might have persisted, had he not put them to rest. That opening round at Portrush was followed by a stellar six-under that very nearly got him into the weekend and the drubbing by Brooks Koepka at the WGC St. Jude Classic was returned with interest at the Tour Championship.

At the end of the day, Koepka's otherworldly tenacity at the Major Championships: he won the PGA Championship, finished tied-second, second and tied-fourth in the others, is the only factor that might leapfrog him above McIlRoy in the race for player-of-the-year honours. McIlroy hasn't been reticent about his views on that perspective. "If the narrative becomes that the majors are the only important thing in golf, then that's dangerous because are fans not going to care for the other 48 weeks of the year?" he said after winning the Tour Championship. For those who may not know there are two other contenders for the title. First up was Matt Kuchar, who won twice in 2019. Even though Kuchar looked ready to contend at a major, his best finish at one was tied—eighth at the PGA Championship.

Bringing up the rear, not surprisingly, was Xander Schaffele. Just the fact that his name rolls off people's tongues as easily as it does is the most indicative of everything Schauffele has achieved in 2019. With two victories early in January, Schauffele kept his momentum throughout the year notching up six top-ten finishes and 14 top-25's in his 21 starts. And let's not forget that second place finish at the Masters Tournament. It's even more commendable given that this was only Schauffele's third full season on the PGA Tour.

The PGA of America already awarded its year-end honour to Koepka for the second year in a row: hardly surprising given that Koepka won the PGA Championship. It's apples and oranges between McIlroy and him: the leader in scoring average and consistent Top-10 finishes, or performances in Major Championships? I can only think of 2011, when Luke Donald won even though he never won a major and added just one regular tour event on the tourney to his tally. How about David Duval, who, in the 1988 season, won four times, had the lowest scoring average, and made more money than any other player? Duval's brilliance was obscured by Mark O' Meara because he won, not one, but two Majors at age 41.

Is it time to re-examine the role of Major Championships like McIlroy has suggested? Not just the weightage and points accorded to the events, but re-assessing the scheduling in order to spread the events out more evenly through the year.

The results for the player-of-the-year will be out by the time you read this column again. McIlroy paid Koepka the ultimate compliment as they wound up their final round at the Tour Championship. The Irishman admitted that his play had gone up to another level just to be able to battle with the American. "We had a good chat heading up the 18th. I just said to him that he's had a great season. He's won another Major, he's won three times. I just wanted to tell him he's playing so good. He's the top-ranked player in the world," McIlRoy recounted in a recent interview.

What will their peers think of their performances, and which way will they vote? McIlroy for one, feels the award might go Koepka's way, but at least he has one consolation. "...I know it's going to sting for a bit, because he most likely will win the Player of the Year, but he didn't win the FedExCup..."

A golfer, Meraj Shah also writes about the game

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