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**RAN in the WBs
Study Visit**

Management of Returnee Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their Family Members

Key outcomes

The process of managing the return and rehabilitation of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their family members returning from (formerly) Daesh-affiliated territories in Syria and Iraq concerns a variety of different actors. It is clear that setting up structures and processes to facilitate multi-professional exchange and multi-stakeholder cooperation with regard to specific cases is crucial to allow for concerted action when it comes to managing individual cases, particularly when children are involved. This means that stakeholders, including security actors, law enforcement, social and youth services, (mental) health services, prison and probation staff, civil society organisations and providers of deradicalisation programmes as well as representatives from education and employment support, with oftentimes divergent perspectives and different levels of information, must work together in a trustful cooperation framework. This paper captures the main insights from a study visit to Berlin, where expert participants from the Western Balkans (WBs) entered into exchange with their Berlin counterparts and with each other. During the meeting, participants discussed the prerequisites for the successful management of FTFs and their family members in a multi-agency setting and drew lessons based on comparative analyses of the Berlin approach and the different WB experiences.

Some overarching conclusions and lessons learned are:

- **Most WB countries have already established functioning cooperation models and significant experience within these settings.** However, the integration of civil society actors into these models remains scarce.

- **Familiarity between all institutional points of contacts in a cooperation model is key** to enable effective cooperation. However, to date, staff and responsibilities tend to change often, creating difficulties and additional need for lengthy trust-building processes.

- Apart from the management of FTFs returning from Syria and Iraq, there is a **growing concern about the departure, return and low level of prosecution of returnees from Ukraine** with a violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) background. A transfer of experiences from the work with Islamist extremist returnees to the right-wing extremist context is necessary.

Highlights of the discussion and key considerations

Experiences in the management of returned FTFs and their family members shared from Germany and the WBs show that a certain degree of coordination between the different actors involved is always required. As a result of the almost decade-long experiences with returnees both in the EU and the WBs, emphasising the necessity of cooperation between highly varied actor groups in some shape or form has become commonplace and the question posed today is no longer "If?" but "How?" To that effect, the speakers and participants focused on the actual implementation of structures for information exchange and for taking concerted action in a multi-agency setting. Particular emphasis was placed on trust-building between all actors involved. Further topics of discussion were the adequate choice of prison regimes for the target group (e.g. dedicated wings for returnees or dispersion among the general population), the consideration of gender specificities, the handling of cases where children are involved and the rehabilitation process, including the importance of preparing receiving communities for the return of FTFs.

Setting up basic structures for coordination of the rehabilitation and reintegration process

- **Strategic networking** is the necessary first step to identify and bring together all stakeholders necessary to work on individual cases. This is a process that takes significant time and resources, which need to be considered when setting up a return mechanism.

- **A high level of turnover of responsible personnel at cooperating institutions and organisations is a central problem for many practitioners.** In many contexts, staff members change frequently, which always necessitates new processes of trust-building, thereby slowing down the actual cooperation work. Cooperations that work with one specified point of contact over a longer period of time have a more realistic chance of developing effective cooperation mechanisms. When doing so, the decision-making ability of the person as a representative of their organisation/institution needs to be considered. Points of contact should stay in place over a relatively long period of time to ensure familiarity and low-threshold, quick exchange between all points of contact.

- **Frequent challenges** when setting up multi-agency cooperation include:
    o diverging interests and perspectives of actors, in particular between security and non-security stakeholders as well as between state and civil society actors;
    o lack of role understanding and task division;
    o data privacy and obstacles to the sharing of sensitive information concerning individuals between different actors; and
    o lack of trust, particularly between security agencies and (non-governmental) social workers.

- To facilitate a joint working process, **long-term trust-building processes between all actors** involved are necessary to enable effective exchange of information and perspectives (within the boundaries of data protection regulations and laws). Solution strategies developed in practice include:

    o opportunities for personal exchange and connection in small-format meetings;

    o mutual trust-building is reportedly best possible on the basis of actual (mock) case work, for example in the shape of table-top exercises;

    o establishing a clear overview of points of contact and direct links between cooperation partners by exchanging contact data;

    o increasing the understanding of each other's roles and the attached benefits of each professional field involved, for example by:
        ▪ transparently addressing stereotypes and biases;
        ▪ establishing clear political and practical frameworks, including the boundaries of everyone's mandates;

- ▪ fostering understanding of each other's perspective by allowing transparent insights into decision-making processes; and
  - o feedback and evaluation rounds on the cooperative level, not just within each respective organisation/institution, including supervision.

- **Formats for regular exchange facilitate good cooperation.** Regularly scheduled exchanges on the overarching cooperation and case progress promise effective and complementary planning of measures on all sides.

  - o Additionally, practitioners also highlight the need for some degree of flexibility to discuss individual cases on an ad hoc needs basis.

- Experts and practitioners in many contexts are still struggling to **determine whether imprisoned FTFs should be confined together**, for example, in designated terrorist wings, or if they should be integrated within the larger prison population. Both approaches hold risks and benefits regarding recruitment and radicalisation of other prisoners, monitoring of potentially harmful activities, radicalisation and risk assessment.

- The establishment of a **hotline or red button contact service** at a coordinating authority was discussed as a way of facilitating access to an established network of professional skills and experience. This way, authorities and practitioners with less experience in the field can reach out to experienced experts for support.

- **Joint preparation:** conducting joint preparatory trainings and exercises prior to the arrival of returnees has helped to facilitate smooth processes upon arrival.

Addressing the needs of returned children

- A particular challenge raised was dealing with **children of FTFs born in Syria/Iraq without a birth certificate** from the country of their parents' origin, that is, the country they were repatriated to. In many instances, the delivery of basic social and educational services is dependent on a citizen's status. It is noteworthy that the attainment of a birth certificate can depend on the cooperativeness/willingness of the individual official in charge (e.g. one particular judge). This sometimes requires creative solutions on the part of responsible case managers. Creating clear rules and guidelines for this process would be desirable.

  - o In most instances, citizenship is eventually confirmed through **DNA testing** of a parent or grandparent, sometimes even prior to repatriation.

- Another challenge noted concerned the **stigmatisation of children** in their new environment:

  - o In order to meet the individual needs of returned children, the Berlin returnee coordination office cooperates closely with social and youth welfare services in the city state's different districts, including mental health professionals. Their main focus lies on the swift integration of the children into day care centres and schools.

  - o The question of whether or not to **disclose information about the background of a child to the school or day care** can pose a dilemma: in some instances it might be helpful for teachers and caregivers to be aware of possible trauma responses, while the overall aim is to limit any risk of stigmatisation of the child. A solution brought up by practitioners was to only inform the school principal of information deemed relevant about a child.

  - o **Rural/less densely populated areas provide less opportunity for anonymity for returned FTFs** and their children. Coordinators and case managers, together with all directly affected persons, should carefully consider potential advantages and disadvantages of relocation in such an instance.

- Unfortunately, repatriation and reintegration of both adults and children is still often slowed down/further complicated due to **information leaks to media** and news outlets.

Supporting the deradicalisation and rehabilitation process

- Due to the individuality of each case, **needs-oriented and long-term approaches** are required regarding deradicalisation and distancing work, including gender specificity and reflectiveness.

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- o However, it is important to consider the **high demand on practitioners in this space, who are often available 24/7** to the people they work with, which significantly affects their own personal lives and mental health. To acknowledge this commitment could translate to the establishment of supervision and increased allocation of resources towards the professionals themselves.

- It is important to **consider the psychological and social state of FTFs <u>before</u> they departed to Syria/Iraq**. In many instances, challenges including family conflicts, delinquency, substance use, etc. were present already before departure, which can be exacerbated by trauma if returnees are simply returned to their pre-departure contexts.

- Practitioners need to be aware that the time spent in Syria and Iraq was often characterised by the **development of internal defence mechanisms and psychological coping efforts required in the conflict area** in order to deal/cope with the situation (including mechanisms legitimising returnees' own (violent) actions, fostering the idea of not having had another choice to relieve feelings of responsibility and of having caused harm).

  - o **Rejection of one's own actions and decision-making capabilities** may be a result of these coping mechanisms and can lead to the idealisation of the rehabilitation counsellor.

  - o **Denial of contribution to suffering** is a coping mechanism based on the danger of a faltering self-image. Acceptance might lead to experiencing feelings of shame, remorse and/or guilt, which must be addressed to be processed.

- When returnees are not convicted (and imprisoned), it can be difficult to engage them in **rehabilitation and disengagement efforts on a voluntary basis**. The provision of social services might be a helpful approach to establish contact. For many among the target group, contact with social services might be preferred over engaging with security services.

- Practitioners reported that upon return, some **female FTFs created a perpetuating sense of victimisation** around their situation: in this narrative, they were first cheated of the good life promised by Daesh, and then left alone in the camps by their own country.

- For persons with **strong religious needs**, the involvement of persons with good knowledge of religion, or even an imam or representative of a positive religious community, may facilitate positive engagement in the overarching rehabilitation process. In some countries, staff with good religious knowledge are automatically included/available in an approach, while in others religious actors are only brought in upon the sustained request of counselees.

Recommendations

General recommendations regarding multi-stakeholder collaboration to rehabilitate FTFs and their family members

- **Each participating organisation/institution should designate a particular (team of) point(s) of contact** to ensure familiarity and continuity among all multi-stakeholder partners.

- **All multi-stakeholder collaborations should agree on clear rules and frameworks for their work** to create security for participating actors (based on the necessary data protection rules and regulation, among others).

- **Ideally, partners should conduct joint trainings and table-top exercises based on real cases before starting their work.** If collaboration mechanisms have already started, external observers and/or evaluators focusing on the process of the collaboration itself, rather than on the individual actors, is recommended.

Recommendations regarding the Western Balkans

- **Continuous regional and inter-institutional exchange between professionals and practitioners in the region should be fostered.**

- Tied to the first point, **continuous exchange about current extremist phenomena across the region is necessary**. While dealing with Islamist extremism and FTFs remains a challenge, the threat of RWE is growing across some of the countries in the region.

  - o In light of the war in Ukraine, **the applicability of laws created around Islamist FTFs should be checked and adapted to deal with potentially returning RWE FTFs**.

  - o **Additionally, lessons learned and mechanisms developed in the context of dealing with Islamist extremism should be transferred and adapted to dealing with VRWE**, an area where practical work in the WBs remains scarce.

- **WB countries should think about establishing nation-wide coordination mechanisms for support in dealing with radicalisation issues, including FTFs.**

- While many WB countries already have coordination mechanisms, the integration of civil society partners into these approaches is often still lacking. **WB countries should continue their efforts to foster civil society engagement in rehabilitation and reintegration work: this field should not remain state (and security) led.**

- **WB countries should provide state-led funding opportunities for civil society initiatives and NGOs in the field of P/CVE and rehabilitation.** To date, the term 'NGO' is too often still tied to undesired and problematic foreign funding of dubious, often religious or political actors.

Relevant practices

1. [Interactive tabletop exercises](), as organised by the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina in March 2022 in Sarajevo, serve as an example of how to bring together a wide range of cross-sectoral, inter-governmental and civil society representatives with the aim of jointly examining the challenges posed by violent extremism with the goal of providing necessary care to citizens.

2. The [Returnee Coordination Berlin]() is tasked with the development of a strategy on how to reintegrate returnees and creation of a multi-professional and interdisciplinary network in which responsibilities are defined, case-related information is shared, and individual measures are discussed and taken.

3. [TRIAS Berlin]() works at the intersection of extremism prevention and healthcare. The project consists of two pillars: involving psychological psychotherapists in the work with clients and their families, and building capacity on the communal level between tertiary prevention and medical and health professions in Berlin.

4. [PREVENT Counselling Centre Berlin]() offers comprehensive measures of specific prevention, intervention and deradicalisation in the area of religiously based extremism, including prevention workshops at schools, further training for pedagogical staff, counselling for parents and relatives, and tailored deradicalisation services.

5. [The Advice Centre on Radicalisation]() of the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees offers a first point of contact for individuals seeking advice when they are concerned that someone they know may be becoming radicalised towards Islamism and provides contacts with various advice facilities and networks on the ground.

Follow-up

WB participants voiced a strong need for further international and regional exchange to support their work and the continuous development of working processes in their states. This can be easily facilitated by RAN in the WBs through further workshops in the region. Regarding topics, a further exploration of P/CVE and specifically secondary and tertiary prevention work in the context of (violent) RWE appears to be necessary.

Further reading

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