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CONCLUSION PAPER
RAN LOCAL – Local communications when FTFs and/or their family members are returning
25-26 May 2020
Online meeting

Local Communications for Returning FTFs

Summary

When foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and/or their families return from Syria or Iraq, this can cause commotion, fear and questions within communities and draw maximum media attention. Dealing with this commotion and a possible rise of polarisation, informing all stakeholders and facilitating reintegration into society is a challenge for local authorities. This paper specifically focuses on the communications challenge that local authorities face in the context of such returnees. Challenges include privacy and data protection, a lack of information or misinformation, dealing with fear and possible stigmatisation. Key points in communicating with schools, the receiving community and the media are highlighted, as well as key tips for dealing with polarisation at the local level. The paper is written for local (preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE)) coordinators and communications experts who are or will be dealing with returning FTFs and who wish to improve their communication strategy in this context.

Introduction

When FTFs or their family members are returning to the city or municipality they departed from, or to another city, this can lead to a lot of media attention, political attention and pressure in the local communities they return to. National and local authorities face many challenges upon the return of FTFs, from prosecution to reintegration. One of these challenges concerns the communications surrounding this person and the children who often accompany them. Local authorities need to balance security and privacy issues, address fear and anger that might exist but also communicate the nuance and avoid polarisation at the local level. Different stakeholders involved will have different information needs: the message to the media will be differently formulated than the message to the school where children are placed. For example, the children's teachers may receive some additional information (and possibly training). Some of the most mentioned challenges and lessons learned concerning local communication strategies for returning FTFs are discussed in this paper.

Context

Returning FTFs: A controversial topic

As put forward in the RAN returnee manual ([1]), having a communications strategy in place before the actual return of the FTFs and/or their families is essential for a number of reasons.

First of all, returning FTFs is a **controversial topic**. Any communications around returnees are likely to draw maximum public attention, which is often intensified in media outlets. Returnees are expected to generate a lot of media attention, as they pose a potential threat to the safety of a community. Combined with a perception of that threat by the general public, the general public's predictable concerns on rehabilitating a person who has returned from "fighting" alongside terrorists means that they are subject to a lot of public and media attention.

It is also a **divisive topic**. Extremist and terrorist groups are deliberately deploying tactics and messaging designed to polarise and divide communities. For example, right-wing extremist groups can use a returning Islamist extremist fighter as a destabilising actor in the community to promote their own ideology.

Immediate public response to the issue is likely to be emotional or based on **mistaken assumptions**. In the short term, **fear and anger** will characterise some people's immediate responses to the issue and will need to be addressed. It will take time for facts and figures to rationalise the discourse around the topic. In addition to that, there is no single profile of a returnee. There are differences in motivations for leaving, and for returning. **Communicating the nuance** is crucial but challenging — communications should therefore be tailored to the people concerned, both the returnee and the local communities to which they are returning.

In the short term, returnees pose a **public communications dilemma** for government and partners. In the long term, authorities and local communities need to work together to resocialise or integrate returnees into society.

One should also realise that returnees are a **cross-cutting issue**. The returnee phenomenon is likely to provoke a debate or controversy around a range of other priorities, such as radicalisation in prisons, community cohesion, deradicalisation and national prevention strategies. Therefore, it is advisable to ensure that the communications strategy used is in line with the general, overarching P/CVE strategy and the narrative employed there.

Special attention should be paid to the difference between several target audiences of the communication: what is communicated with involved stakeholders will be a different message than what is shared with the media, for example. These decisions are not easily made and are person- and context-specific, as practitioners have noticed.

([1]) RAN CoE, RAN Manual. Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families. Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017. See pages 83-85.

Challenges

How can we deal with communications challenges?

As shown in the image below, the most mentioned challenges by participants of the meeting related to communicating about returning FTFs and their families are:

1. Privacy and data protection
2. Stigmatisation
3. Fear
4. Lack of information and misinformation

Privacy and data protection

Privacy and data protection represent one of the biggest challenges related to communications around returning FTFs and children. It is perceived as difficult that not all information can be shared with everyone. **Police** usually have the most information but cannot share all of it with the **social stakeholders** who are also involved in the case. **GDPR regulations** further complicate the sharing of information with the stakeholders involved in the multi-agency network around the returnees. **Building relationships** with the stakeholders involved will increase trust, a beneficial factor when it comes to sharing sensitive information. When it comes to sharing information with the general public or media, it is advisable to **establish a point of contact** within the organisations involved who can communicate externally and who know what they can and cannot share with whom. **For children** specifically, **privacy** is even more important as **stigmatisation** can follow if it becomes widely known that they have returned from former Daesh territory. In most countries, (young) children are perceived as victims and their privacy should therefore be protected as much as possible. When it comes to **communicating with their new schools**, a possible solution could be to only inform the school principal and the child's teacher about their background and the possible risks and safety measures that need to be taken. Another point of attention was to **protect the identities of the family members in the home country** where these children might be placed.

Stigmatisation

Stigmatisation is a challenge because the **subjective perception from the receiving community** of the FTF or family member returning (and the family members receiving them) can become an **obstacle for reintegration** in the long term. To deal with stigmatisation and to prevent it, it is important to focus on the context. Look at both the **individual's context** (what were the motivations for leaving and how do these relate to possible reintegration?) and the **broader context** (rule of law, identified risks of reintegration — learn from earlier returnees and other cases in which stigmatisation was a risk). As a governmental institution, a key lesson is to **communicate clearly about your goal and the reason for reintegrating the returning people**. This will also help in reducing fear that might exist in the receiving community, which can lead to stigmatisation.

Fear

Fear can exist in different forms and on different levels. The **general public** can fear the return of former FTFs to society, especially if they are aware of people returning to their home country but do not know what the multi-agency approach in general is for these returnees. Fear can also exist in the **receiving community**, if they know someone is returning to or being placed in their neighbourhood. The **first-line practitioners** who will be working with the returnees might also fear that they could make a wrong decision — with all possible consequences. And, last but not least, the **people in question who are returning to their home country** can have fear: for example, that they cannot remain "anonymous" and will always carry a stigma.

Some **possible solutions** to these different levels of fear are:
- differentiate between children and adults in your communication strategy;
- be transparent about your general approach at an early stage: this will reduce fear in the general public;
- for adult returnees specifically, it can be useful to work on building resilience.

It is important to keep in mind that fear is an emotion that should be addressed in order to take it away. A rational approach to an emotional problem can lead to talking past one another.

Misinformation and lack of information

Misinformation and/or a lack of information is perceived as one of the biggest challenges when communicating regarding returning FTFs. Providing incorrect information **might fuel polarisation**, as is the case with a **lack of information, as this can lead to an information gap** that is often based on perceptions like prejudices. In order to prevent damage as a result of misinformation and/or a lack of information, good coordination between the partners/institutions that are dealing with returning FTFs is of great importance. Ensure that **all partners are aware of all aspects of their roles and responsibilities** before they start working on the case. At the same time, a focus on **knowledge building** can help to overcome this challenge. If professionals working with returning FTFs are being **trained in knowledge** (right information about the situation in Syria/Iraq in general and specific information about the subject of their cases) **and skills** to do their job in the best way possible, the chance that misinformation is being spread becomes less likely. A one-time workshop is not enough, as knowledge building takes time and repetition. Finally, it is important to be aware that not only content but also style of communication (tone, media) can influence the possibility of fuelling stigmatisation.

Key Outcomes

Different audiences, different communications

A communication strategy can target several audiences, have several goals (depending on the audience), and include different messages, messengers and media. Although it is key for local authorities and stakeholders communicating about returnees that the messages and the messengers are **credible, consistent, compelling and connected** to each other, this does not mean that they have to be the same individuals across the board. It is logical to have multiple credible voices for different threads of information and messages, as different audiences respond to different messages and messengers.

During the RAN LOCAL meeting, a few important target audiences of communication efforts were highlighted. Below, the key lessons are outlined for each of these audiences.

In general, the following are recommended:
- **Work creatively** on communication strategies in partnership with others: in the local multi-agency cooperation team, include community and charity partners and the support of agencies (communications, design, media, etc.).
- **Clear, concise campaigns** are needed to put forward the facts, but **wider campaigns** will also be needed that address the emotions that this issue is likely to raise, including (extreme right) hate speech or Islamophobia.
- The **national returnee point of contact** should be informed about communication plans and can provide additional information. Sometimes, a national plan of action is in place regarding returning FTFs, including advice on communications.

> ### More on communications in P/CVE
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> More information and inspiration on how to use (strategic) communications in P/CVE can be found in the RAN Communications & Narratives (C&N) Working Group papers.
>
> The C&N Working Group has developed a model for designing counter- and alternative narrative campaigns, the GAMMMA+ model, which might be relevant when designing a communications strategy for returning FTFs.

Schools

Communication with schools (teachers, children and parents) should be done for the purpose of reintegrating children of returning FTFs in the best way possible. The following key lessons were mentioned by practitioners:

o **The (local) authority can work on an action plan in advance with the school that will tutor the returning children**. This plan should include different scenarios with fitting approaches. This way, the school can take immediate action if they signal any problems with the children. The action plan could differ from school to school and from child to child, but it is important that the school, the (local) authority and other partners stay in touch to monitor the situation.
o **The privacy of the children is very important**. They have their full life in front of them and stigmatisation can influence this in a negative way. Therefore, take their privacy very seriously. Distinguish between information that is "nice to know" and information that is "necessary to know".
o **Determine who should receive background information about the returning children**. It is a good idea to inform someone on every level of the organisation: the school principal because of their responsibilities, and the teacher of the class the children are in, because they spend a lot of time with the children and are best suited to provide information about their development. Don't inform the parents of classmates or the full team of teachers if this is not necessary (for example, if they are not aware of the background of "the new classmate"). However, it is important that someone is aware of the background of these children, since they might require specific care (children might suffer from trauma) and need to be closely monitored to ensure their reintegration process develops in the right direction.
o **Include an expert on children's mental health issues**. Many of the returning children are suffering from trauma or other mental health problems that should be treated as soon as possible in order to achieve the best results.

The receiving community

Communication with inhabitants of the receiving community should be carried out for the purpose of reintegrating returning FTFs and/or their families in the best way possible, while providing space for the possible worries and feelings of fear of the residents. Some key lessons are:

o **Be aware of the polarising nature of the case:** right-wing extremists can literally be awaiting the return of FTFs and their families, once the message has been spread. Therefore, it is important to have the right measures prepared. For example, arrange a messenger who is close to the people who are worried or against the return of FTFs to talk to them and inform them (to the extent possible due to GDPR regulations) about the approach the authority has taken to reintegrate the returning FTFs. This often includes

prosecution: the idea that "returning FTFs are being 'punished' for their choices and actions" might decrease tensions.

o **If the receiving community is not aware of the background of the new resident(s), it can be the best choice not to communicate this, since communications might have the opposite effect:** they could provoke fear, stigmatisation and breakdown of trust among the receiving community, and negatively impact the privacy and reintegration process of returning FTFs. Only communicate when it is needed and when it is contributing to goals.

o **Communicate with the people who are willing and able to support the reintegration of the returning FTFs.** The receiving community could also play a positive role. For example, family members might provide a new place of belonging and a social environment. They could also ring the alarm bell when the development of the returning FTFs is going in the wrong direction.

o **The case manager of the returning FTF and/or their family should be involved from the beginning and should stay involved for the long term to follow the whole process of reintegration.** This person should be trained with knowledge and skills to work with this specific and relatively new audience: traumatised people, who hold/held a specific view/ideology that is not generally accepted by society.

Media pressure

As mentioned, returning FTFs and children can lead to a lot of (unwanted) media attention. To prevent local or national political tensions that could harm reintegration and increase social polarisation, some key lessons for communicating with media are:

o **Be clear about what you can and cannot communicate, including each partner's roles and responsibilities.** Who can share what? Establish contact points for media in organisations involved. Even though you cannot share personal information, you might be able to share what your general approach is for men and women returnees and their children. Sharing as much as you can — being as transparent as possible — will result in receiving the trust from the public.

o **Establish a common language for communicating with the media.** With the different actors and preferably also the returnee(s) involved, decide upon what information can and cannot be shared (and by whom) and what the message is that contains this information. Having a common message for media from the involved stakeholders will ensure that this message is shared broadly, instead of different messages that might fuel tensions. Media plays an important role in possible polarisation/heated debate. **Reframe and be very precise on the measures** that are being taken and the reasoning behind them. Be clear about the steps that have been taken to ensure safety of community, returnee(s) and all others involved.

o **Create a partnership with the media at an early stage, but at least before the arrival of the returnee(s).** Inform relevant media about what is going on and some of the considerations and risks that come with media attention. Don't forget about local or "community" media — always think about which media are relevant for your target audience. Be aware that some returnees actively look for media attention themselves, which can even lead to a journalist having a better information position than the municipality as journalists are sometimes in direct contact with the returnee(s) themselves.

Local polarisation

Communicating with groups of people who are vulnerable to polarisation and/or radicalisation should be done for the purpose of preventing social polarisation and the rise of (right-wing) extremism. Key lessons are:

o **Different types of returnees (men, women, children) will conduct themselves differently and are perceived differently.** Some who seek media attention will risk stigmatisation upon return, whereas children are often perceived as victims and therefore "better received" than men returnees (who are likely to have joined combat).

- o **Don't forget that the receiving local community where the FTFs came from are likely to be afraid to be associated with the FTFs and afraid of being stigmatised themselves.** Inform them to the extent possible and address their concerns. This also relates to the challenge of taking away or not creating fear.
- o **Ensure that your communications are socially precise:** they need to work for and in those environments that need the information (environment of the retuning children's schools, social services, the grandparents/parents, etc.).
- o **Involve the right people within the local communities to send out the message.** Support them by explaining the phenomena to the receiving community when needed. Foster inclusiveness and support for the receiving local community.

Key lessons

1. Develop a communication strategy in case FTFs and their families return to your city/municipality. Ideally, this is in place before the arrival of returning FTFs, so communications can start right away to support reintegration and prevent polarisation.

2. Determine which stakeholders should have what information about the returning FTFs and discuss this with all relevant stakeholders, preferably before the arrival of the returning FTFs. Ensure all stakeholders involved know whom to contact with any questions.

3. Take privacy legislations into account when drafting the communications strategy that defines how to communicate about returning FTFs.

4. Be clear about the roles and responsibilities for handling the media — ensure that stakeholders know what they can and cannot share. Decide who will be the "lead-communicator", but allow every stakeholder to keep their own role related to the tasks and responsibilities they have.

5. Include actors (e.g. family members, former peers, informal key persons within the receiving community) from the social environment of the returning FTF, as they can be very valuable informal partners in the reintegration process.

6. Devise specific communications approaches for different target groups, such as the general public, schools and the receiving community. There will be an appropriate message, messenger and medium for each.

Relevant practices

beRATen e.V. — AG KoSti-kommunale Strukturen in der Islamismusprävention — working group on local structures for the prevention of Islamism / AG KoSti approach in Lower Saxony, Germany

Within the local working group for the prevention of Islamism (AG KoSti) In Lower Saxony, Germany, a counsellor from beRATen is supporting local authorities with the process of returning FTFs and their families. The counsellor helps facilitate the communication between different institutions such as the police, the government office for youth affairs and welfare services. Due to possible role conflicts and differences between the institutional missions, it is perceived as helpful to have an external advisor for the interorganisational communications. The beRATen counsellors make all the partners aware of their responsibilities in dealing with the returning FTFs and guide the different actors involved.

Further reading

1. Perešin, A., & Pisoiu, D., High-Level Conference on child returnees and released prisoners, Ex Post Paper. Luxembourg: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2018.

2. RAN CoE, RAN Manual. Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families. Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017.

3. Ritzmann, A., & Meines, M., RAN guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns (GAMMMA+), Issue Paper. RAN Centre of Excellence, 2017.

4. Ritzmann, A., Wouterse, L., & Verdegaal, M., Effective Narratives: Updating the GAMMMA+ model, Ex Post Paper. Brussels, Belgium: RAN Centre of Excellence, 2019.

5. Ruf, M., & Jansen, A., Study Visit: Returned Women and Children – Studying an Ongoing Experience on the Ground, Ex Post Paper. Pristina, Kosovo: RAN Centre of Excellence, 2019.