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## CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN event – Virtual Study Visit to Central Asia*

*25-26 May 2021, Online*

# RAN STUDY VISIT TO CENTRAL ASIA

## Key outcomes

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The RAN virtual study visit to Central Asia took place on 25-26 May 2021 and brought together 30 European and Central Asian practitioners from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The goal of the workshop was to share knowledge and exchange challenges and inspiring practices in the field of repatriation, disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration (RDRR) of violent Islamist extremist offenders, returning foreign terrorist fighters (RFTFs) and their families. The Central Asian presenters and participants represented a wide variety of professional backgrounds, including civil society organisations (CSOs), international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and academics.

During the study visit, a particular focus was given to understand the importance of political will and support in order for practitioners to do what is needed, legal issues in relation to prosecution and documentation, the role of the family, and the preparation of the receiving communities. The meeting also explored the role of international organisations and how they can support and coordinate the work of RDRR for both practitioners and policymakers.

The highlights of the discussions and recommendations are listed in this conclusion paper, with amongst others:

- The importance of the political choices, will, and support in relation to shaping the public opinion, reducing stigmatisation and creating the legal and practical conditions for reintegration.
- Addressing legal issues on documentation early on. If the returnee cannot obtain legal documents, it could hinder the efficiency of reintegration efforts.
- The importance of family in RDRR. The key component of Central Asia's reintegration approach is to give psychosocial empowerment to the receiving families' who are the cornerstones of the RDRR process. The receiving families are the source of financial, social and emotional support and they provide accommodation to the returning families.
- Preparing the receiving (religious) communities was a key element of the RDRR process in the region. Psychologists and social workers are central parts of the preparation by providing psychoeducation, psychosocial support, and instrumental help.

*The paper will start by covering the highlights from the presentations and discussions, followed by recommendations building on the Central Asian experiences that are relevant for European practitioners. Lastly, the paper will share promising practices and further readings.*

## Highlights of the discussion

During the workshop, practices implemented by Central Asian countries that have made considerable efforts to reintegrate large numbers of returning FTFs and their families were explored. The returning male FTFs are prosecuted by legal authorities and serve a prison sentence. Most female returnees went to the warzone to follow their husbands and they do not face legal charges. Certain NGOs are specialised in providing services for them and for their children. Research (Ashraf & Aslanova, 2021) indicates that most RFTFs and their family members may have mental health issues relating to the trauma of the FTF experience. It is key to provide clinical assessment and treatment also because it can present a future criminal or terrorist threat.

### 1. Political choices, will and support

The government is key in RDRR for creating the legal and practical framework for reintegration. In the different Central Asian countries, the governments made different choices in the RDRR of their citizens.

- In Kazakhstan, the government took an active role and repatriated several hundreds of primarily women and children, and a small number of male FTFs, in what is called the 'Zhusan' operation. As part of the approach, the government set up several rehabilitation centres where an NGO was responsible to carry out the work of the rehabilitation and reintegration interventions.
- In Uzbekistan, the government portray individuals and families who travelled to Syria and Iraq to join terrorist groups as victims of manipulation and hence decided to provide repatriation to a number of citizens. The name of the operation was "Kindness".
- The government in Kyrgyzstan made it possible to deprive adult citizens of their citizenship for terrorism-related crimes and the conclusion was made that it poses risks to bring back "skilled criminals" in the country. However, plans of repatriating citizens were still carried out on a small scale but the interventions are not significantly developed.

In countries where the government gave public support to the cause of reintegration, it positively influenced the public's attitude and probably helped reducing stigmatisation.

### 2. Legal issues and status

Practitioners emphasized that if the legal status of the returnees is not clear, the functional reintegration process can be hindered. The administrative aspects of the reintegration, such as providing legal documents for the returnees is important in order for them to be able to get access to services (e.g., bank account, postal services, accommodation, employment). Practitioners also expressed that it is important for citizens in the receiving countries to see that the legal process and justice take place, and that the RFTFs are sentenced to prison. Once in prison, the work with disengagement, rehabilitation, and preparations for reintegration starts. The prosecution process can be lengthy which also affects the returning children of RFTFs as they are separated from their parents for that time.

### 3. The importance of family in RDRR and the preparation of receiving communities

The family has been a major component in RDRR in Central Asian approaches. In certain cases parents and grandparents have been the engines of repatriation by starting an organisation to look for and bring back their children and their families. They are an important source of support in the reintegration process as returnees who do not have to face prosecution are usually placed immediately at their parents' home. At the same time, receiving families can also be victims (of what happened, and of stigmatisation) so they also need support. Additionally, in

many cases, receiving families also have to care for traumatised returnee children (who sometimes lost one or both parents), so they have to be prepared and supported throughout the entire process. It is also important to investigate if the family is indeed a positive source of support in the reintegration process. In certain cases the family played a role in the radicalisation of the FTF.

A great emphasis is also put on the preparation of the receiving (religious) communities. Psychologists and social workers are central parts of the preparation by providing psychoeducation, psychosocial support, and instrumental help.

#### 4. The role of the international community

Several international organisations are operating in Central Asia with a specific focus on security and terrorism-related issues. The EU, the US, and several UN organisations provide support and assistance to initiatives dedicated to RDRR in the region. During the meeting challenges that were reported by practitioners, and where the international organisations can assist are:

- *healthy prison environments*; the international organisations can assist with prison audits and recommendations on how to improve, as well as capacity-building efforts.
- *trained prison staff*; the international organisations can assist by reviewing training curriculum and providing improved technical support.
- *risk and needs assessments*; the international organisations can assist with the development and implementation of risk and needs assessment tools and procedures.
- *individual classification system in prison*; the international organisations can assist with the development and implementation of individual classification procedures in prisons.

#### 5. The role of theology in rehabilitation

The role of theology is addressed differently in various Central Asian contexts. It is considered an important part of the rehabilitation as some of the participants were recruited through ideological propaganda. Some of the programs in the region, therefore, offer services by specially trained theologues who educate participants about recruitment strategies, help strengthen critical thinking and discuss religious issues and reinterpretations of religious texts. Practitioners in the region emphasized that special training is necessary for imams and theologues to work in this field. All interventions include the element of strengthening critical thinking.

Importantly, most approaches emphasize that discussing ideology and religion comes later in the rehabilitation process. Firstly, basic needs (e.g., physical health) are taken care of and mental health support is provided. Mental health support plays a central role in DRR to deal with, among others, traumatic experiences and PTSD.

#### 6. Culturally informed and trauma-informed approaches

Professionals emphasized that it is important to provide trauma- and culturally informed care when working with returnees. In addition, age (with special attention to children or teenagers) and gender need to be considered when developing intervention approaches. Application of culturally informed and trauma-informed approaches is also important in the assessment and interventions for children who have been exposed to war zones, poverty, and possibly witnessed or were subject to violence. Signs of deprivation can appear as cognitive impairments in assessment, it is therefore important that psychologists and other professionals know and understand the

environments where the children had been. Therefore training staff in culturally and trauma-informed practices is essential in the RDRR process.

## Recommendations

- Offer **individualised and multidisciplinary interventions** that are tailored to the needs of the returning FTFs and their family members to reach sustainable positive outcomes. This approach includes addressing the specific needs of the individuals and ensuring resources and interventions to fulfil the needs and address the risks at the same time.
- Explore and stimulate **cooperation between psychologists and theologians** in the interventions to provide both psychological support and theological guidance as part of a multi-disciplinary approach.
- **Involve the local (religious) communities** and extended family members (grandparents, uncles, and aunts etc.) into the community reintegration process.
- **Prepare the receiving communities** by informing them about the process of radicalisation and the process of disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration. By addressing the complex, but necessary steps that are often needed in an RDRR process, the receiving communities can gain an understanding of their role and active participation and inclusion (as opposed to stigmatisation and alienation) are promoted.
- Address the **legal status** of the RFTFs and their families early on so that the RDRR work can be predictable and efficient. Reintegration efforts are hindered if the returnee cannot get access to services (e.g., bank account, postal services, accommodation, employment).
- Provide **work opportunities** for returning family members. It increases feelings of hope, purpose, and competence and it ensures a self-sustainable lifestyle.
- Train staff and **apply trauma-informed and culturally informed practices** when working with individuals who have returned from war zones.

## Relevant practices

1. **Amanat** (means parental responsibility forever), **Parenting initiative**. This initiative supports the grandparents in supporting their grandchildren in their rehabilitation and reintegration (e.g., by providing psychoeducation about traumatic experiences).
2. **Akniet** is a Kazakh NGO. Their approach is built on psychological support, theological guidance, and social reintegration. The NGO heads several centres around Kazakhstan that hosts the women and children who were brought back from Syria and Iraq in the 'Zhusan' initiative and provides inmate interventions and support for sentenced terrorists.

## Further reading

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1. Ashraf, A., Aslanova, I. (2021) [Why we went to fight and why we returned: Radicalisation and Deradicalisation – Learning from Foreign Terrorist Fighters](#).
  2. Bryans, S. (2016) [Assessing the Risks and Needs of VEP and FTF](#). Criminal Justice Handbook Series. UNODC.
  3. Bryans, S., Atabay, T. (2016) [Management of High-Risk Prisoners](#). Criminal Justice Handbook Series. UNODC.
  4. Bryans, S. (2015) [Handbook on Dynamic Security and Prison Intelligence](#). Criminal Justice Handbook Series. UNODC
  5. Helf, G. (2019) [Central Asia Leads the Way on Islamic State Returnees](#). The Olive Branch. USIP.
  6. Moser, A. (2020) [UNODC Handbook on Prisoner Classification](#). Criminal Justice Handbook Series. UNODC.
  7. The UNODC programme on [`Supporting the management of violent extremist prisoners \(VEP\) and the prevention of radicalisation to violence in prison`](#) provides guidance and further resources on the management of VEP and the prevention of violence in prisons.
  8. Zhirukhina, E. (2019) [Foreign Fighters from Central Asia: Between Renunciation and Repatriation](#). ISPI.
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