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CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN in the Western Balkans National Small-Scale Meeting
17-18 October 2022, Sarajevo, Bosnia & Herzegovina*

Supporting families left behind

Key outcomes

Drawing on the first-hand experiences gained in the rehabilitation of particularly women and children returning from formerly Daesh-controlled areas in Syria and Iraq, the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has adopted a new national counter terror strategy (2021-2026). This strategy aims to promote a concerted approach to preparing the families and receiving communities of women and children that are likely to be repatriated at some point in the future¹. It is envisioned that reintegration, rehabilitation, and resocialisation programmes and activities will contain short-term, medium-term, and long-term measures in the fields of security, health and social protection, access to education, measures for economic support and employment, legal aid, as well as other necessary measures in both custodial and non-custodial settings. Programmes will also include the families of returnees as beneficiaries, in order to prepare them for the eventual return of their family members.²

In order to exchange knowledge and experiences, strengthen competences and develop an understanding of what is required to address the needs and risks associated with future repatriations, a two-day expert workshop brought together social workers, psychologists, and local administrators from BiH, Kosovo*, Serbia, and Finland who engage in P/CVE work related to supporting returnees and their families. The main insights derived from the meeting are listed below.

- Families of persons who left for Syria and Iraq often lack support needed to deal with the confusion and stress related to the departure and absence of their relative. They require support from social workers on the local level in order to build their capacities to engage with the returnees and their children.
- In order to support families left behind, practitioners have to tailor-make approaches for each family. The support required is contingent on several issues, such as whether the family member who left for Syria or Iraq is still alive or not or whether children are involved. In cases where family members have died, grief support is needed.
- Civil society actors can act as a bridge between families and institutions, in order to build trust and work together towards the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees.

¹ Furthermore, BiH adopted a repatriation plan and programme for reintegration, rehabilitation, and re-socialisation of returning nationals of Bosnia and Herzegovina from the conflict areas in Syria and Iraq. These provide detailed steps for every institution involved in rehabilitation and reintegration, detailing the procedures for a safe, humane, and controlled return of BiH nationals from Syria and Iraq.

² Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for the Prevention and Fight Against Terrorism (2021-2026)

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

- EU countries can learn from Western Balkan practitioners when it comes to work with female and child returnees, especially their rehabilitation and reintegration into local communities.

Highlights of the discussion

The main highlights of the discussion held in Sarajevo are set out in overarching themes and then briefly described below.

The role of families in rehabilitation efforts

- No criminal justice trials against women returning from Syria or Iraq have been held in BiH. Solutions related to their rehabilitation and reintegration into society, therefore, have to be found outside the custodial system, in civil society.
- Generally, the approach followed by BiH in the reception of returnees is characterised by a shift away from the term *deradicalisation* to the currently used term *psychosocial rehabilitation*. Because of the war that broke out in BiH in 1992, practitioners are highly skilled when it comes to working with trauma-informed approaches. These skills are utilised when working with the families left behind.
- The BiH approach is in some ways comparable to the holistic approach applied in Finland. There, practitioners try to identify the underlying needs, values, grievances, and pain of a client while trying to avoid focusing too much on their extremist past. The preference is to not speak about deradicalisation but about inclusion, so the perspective is future-oriented and positive.
- In BiH, returning women are generally still perceived exclusively as victims, while they might, in fact, have held crucial roles within Daesh, related to everything from logistical support to moral policing, either actively or passively supporting the atrocities committed. In contrast, in Kosovo, where returning women are also not prosecuted, the women are subject to surveillance for having travelled to Syria or Iraq in accordance with the penal code.
- Families play a specific role in the regional societal structure and rehabilitation context of BiH, as well as in other WB countries. In BiH, female returnees and their children are placed in their families of origin after their return. This practice has several advantages but also disadvantages. One of the primary advantages is that families can convince returnees to participate in rehabilitation programmes and thus support the work of the practitioners. One of the disadvantages is that the practitioners thus have to work with multiple clients, i.e., the entire family.
- Both the returnees and their families have particular psychosocial and economic needs. For first-line practitioners, working with these target groups requires awareness and understanding of the psychological condition created by the experiences of the women and their children during their time in Syria or Iraq.
- During the first contact between returnees and their family members, the assistance of first-line practitioners is highly desirable.
- The process of rehabilitation will likely have a greater chance of succeeding when families and returnees manage to jointly discuss the following issues.
 - Why the returnee left in the first place. This could be related to a variety of factors, including differing attitudes towards religion within their immediate surroundings, falling in love, domestic or alcohol abuse, mental disease, etc.
 - What the returning family member might have experienced, including returning with possibly unwanted children from forced marriages and likely rape.
- In order to be able to hold such difficult conversations, families must be empowered to understand religious needs and trauma. For practitioners, this requires observing family relations and dynamics as well as emotions.

- A holistic assessment of the family situation is also in the best interest of returning children. This might include establishing contact with both sets grandparents and thus the family of the child's father.
- Reactions to a family members' return can vary. Families might have experienced stigmatisation since the departure of their family member to Syria or Iraq. They are likely to have experienced trauma and shame themselves.
- While families should be considered a resource in rehabilitation, in rare cases, families can also constitute a factor in the departed family members' radicalisation process, sharing and encouraging violent ideology.
- Opportunities that allow for financial independence and self-sustenance are crucial factors when it comes to the success of rehabilitation efforts. However, the economic situation in BiH holds challenges for returnees in this regard. Efforts by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) show that the involvement of local communities can socially and economically strengthen both the returnee and their local community, which increases the chances for sustainable disengagement. For this purpose, the IOM promotes local dialogue to inspire discussion about the community's needs.
- It was highlighted that difficulties have been noticed for both families and returnees when it comes to taking responsibility for their actions. Particularly in cases where there is no prosecution, there are few incentives available to hold returnees accountable and make them reflect on their actions.
- Social workers who were initially afraid to work with returnees due to fear-mongering media reporting and overall societal rejection reportedly developed empathy through direct contact. They highlighted the need to address personal biases and stigmatisation.

Working with families in the context of prison-release

- In BiH, thus far, 33 male returnees have been sentenced to terms of imprisonment of between 2 and 3 years. Currently, 8 violent extremist and terrorist offenders (VETOs) are in custody in BiH.
- Reintegration is currently a pressing topic, as there is no probation service, no obligation to report anywhere or participate in any sort of programme after release. More continuity of care is needed.
- Families could play a key role in the process of rehabilitation. While not currently present in the prison context at all, the following ideas could increase their involvement.
 - Bring a case manager from a social welfare centre into the prison before release, who is in contact with both the VETO and the family.
 - Additional visiting rights for family members and the opportunity to temporarily leave prison as a privilege and/or benefit of good conduct.
 - Preparing the families to use this time spent together to influence the VETO positively and actively become involved in their rehabilitation.

Recommendations

- Regardless of the situation of any given returnee, contact should be established with all families who have had a member depart, in order to assess their situation and identify their needs. For this, individualised approaches are required.
- Families should be actively involved in the preparation of returnees for release from detention by including them in the rehabilitation programme before release. As a precondition, families require support by ensuring their finances are adequate to receive the returning family member.

- Social workers engaging with the families, as well as with the returnees, should be carefully chosen and trained. It has proven helpful to exchange experiences with colleagues who have already worked with the target group, in order to overcome initial reluctance to working with them.
- When working with female returnees, it has proven successful to awaken memories of who they were before they left and to try and re-establish social contacts beyond the family, for example by finding an ally for rehabilitation in someone they were close to before leaving. Self-help groups for women can be another option that should be seriously considered.
- The security of children that may return together with VETOs should be prepared carefully through the active involvement of, for example, grandparents or family members as part of the legal guardianship that should be effectuated the moment the parents re-enter the country.

Relevant practices

In Kosovo, where the municipal level is responsible for the reintegration of female returnees outside the custodial system, the Centre for Social Work in Pristina Municipality includes NGOs in aiding and supporting sustainable reintegration, offering professional training for employment; financing the establishment of businesses; providing access to language courses and supplementary education; helping with the (re)construction and renovation of housing; and social assistance.

The Social Welfare Centre Sarajevo implements an approach to their work with female returnees that attempts to shift the strategy from deradicalisation towards inclusion. This entails their economic empowerment, children regularly attending school and participating in extracurricular activities, and cooperation with the Islamic community to increase acceptance between returnees and the local community.

The IOM in BiH provides a variety of support for return management, including a reintegration fund for the community, as well as supervision and training for practitioners engaging with returnees, including with children.

Follow up

Possible follow-up activities in the Western Balkans, building on this meeting, could include trainings for multi-disciplinary casework, both in civil society as well as custodial settings.

Further reading

1. RAN (2022) [Manual for Responses to returning foreign terrorist fighters and their families](#)
2. Bytyqi, K., Hasanović, M. & Perešin, A. (2021). Female Returnees from Syria to the Western Balkans: Between Regret and 'Caliphate Nostalgia'. PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM Volume 15, Issue 5
3. RAN (2021) [Gender-sensitive responses to returnees from foreign terrorist organisations: insights for practitioners](#)