



Responses to returning foreign terrorist fighters and their families

2nd Edition, 2022

Product of the Radicalisation Awareness Network
Authored by:
Daniela PISOIU and Thomas RENARD

RAN MANUAL

**Responses to returning foreign
terrorist fighters and their families,
2nd Edition, 2022**

Acronyms

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| CVE | Countering violent extremism |
| ERG22+ | Extreme Risk Guidelines 22 – Risk assessment tool of the UK government |
| ESCN | European Strategic Communications Network |
| FTF | Foreign terrorist fighter |
| HCR-20 | Risk assessment tool (Historical, Clinical, Risk Management) |
| HTS | Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham |
| IR46 | Risk assessment tool of the Dutch police |
| NGO | Non-governmental organisation |
| P/CVE | Preventing and countering violent extremism |
| PTSD | Post-traumatic stress disorder |
| RAN | Radicalisation Awareness Network |
| RAN CoE | Radicalisation Awareness Network Centre of Excellence |
| RAN C&N | RAN Communications and Narratives (Working Group) |
| RAN FC&S | RAN Families, Communities and Social Care (Working Group) |
| RAN H&SC | Former RAN Health and Social Care (Working Group) |
| RAN HEALTH | RAN Mental Health (Working Group) |
| RAN LOCAL | RAN Local Authorities (Working Group) |
| RAN POL | RAN Police and Law Enforcement (Working Group) |
| RAN P&P | Former RAN Prison and Probation (Working Group) |
| RAN PRISONS | RAN Prisons (Working Group) |
| RAN REHAB | RAN Rehabilitation (Working Group) |
| RAN VoT | RAN Victims/Survivors of Terrorism (Working Group) |
| RAN Y&E | RAN Youth and Education (Working Group) |
| TRAP-18 | Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (Risk assessment tool) |
| VEO | Violent extremist offender |
| VERA-2 | Violent Extremism Risk Assessment (Risk assessment tool) |

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Practitioners' Recommendations for Member States

This list of practitioners' recommendations takes stock of practitioner experience and reflects the measures practitioners feel could facilitate their counterparts' work. It is intended to give national authorities extra insight into practitioners' needs and ideas as they review existing approaches and strategies in light of challenges related to returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their families.

Practitioners' recommendations on risk assessment and multi-agency cooperation

1. To tailor assessments to the specifics of returnees, consider using RAN CoE Returnee 45, a tool for investigating the motivation, commitment and risks posed by returnees, to:
 - a) check whether risk assessments currently used can benefit from this Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) tool; or
 - b) adapt the RAN tool, which includes 45 indicators, to local circumstances if there is no structured risk assessment tool in place.
2. As Daesh and possibly other terrorist organisations produce personnel files on the skill sets of recruits, such as so-called ISIS registration files, consider feeding information on these files into the design of responses to individual returnees.
3. As a first step in tailoring responses to individual returnees, it might be beneficial to consider three generations, although a strict differentiation is not appropriate:
 - a) the first generation of returnees was predominantly men, and comprised those who had been motivated to leave for humanitarian reasons and/or fighting the Assad regime – with some notable exceptions – more prone to disillusionment, arguably less violent and relatively free to leave the terrorist-held territory;
 - b) the second generation of returnees was more battle-hardened and ideologically committed, had to evade pervasive surveillance by Daesh to escape and may have come back with violent motives: to harm EU citizens;
 - c) FTFs detained in north-east Syria could constitute a third generation, with specific profiles and traumas.
4. As (local) police officers are often involved in an early phase, consider specific action points for police officers dealing with returnees, including:
 - a) participating in multi-agency case management and opening case files on anyone who has left, rather than wait until they return;
 - b) being aware of child protection procedures and how to deal with child abuse;
 - c) testing the protocols for sharing information with partners in returnee scenarios;
 - d) establishing a police specialist who can be consulted by other first-line practitioners;
 - e) cooperating with family workers when engaging with families, especially during home visits, and doing so as soon as someone leaves as that facilitates partnering when they return;
 - f) liaising with war crimes units and prosecutors.

5. Consider the creation of a designated point of contact or task force at the national level, or if appropriate, a returnee coordinator, to ensure coherence of policies and measures across government agencies and to facilitate cooperation and information exchange amongst national services and with the local multi-agency coordinators.
6. Review and — where appropriate — adapt the programmes, methods and interventions currently in place to reintegrate radicalised individuals, rather than developing new methods for returnees only; tailoring interventions that have proven to be effective in comparable settings will have swift added value compared to completely new programmes.

Practitioners' recommendations on prosecution and imprisonment

7. Invest in the resocialisation of convicted returnees while they are still in detention to decrease the risk of recidivism to violent extremism.
8. Preferably, rehabilitation and reintegration plans should be initiated while individuals are still in prison. Transition management and communication between prison and other actors, in particular police, probation and exit workers, are key.
9. Tailored decisions and measures are needed on placement and rehabilitation, taking into account the different profiles of returnees and the results of the risks and needs assessments.
10. Include a gender dimension in the implementation of the various prison regimes.
11. Consider setting up an information sharing structure for returnee cases that enables prison and probation services to obtain sufficient background information on the circumstances in which the returnee has lived and the potential safety and security risks this may pose for the prison population and staff, as well as the wider community, should the returnee be released on probation. This information can also serve the implementation of improved rehabilitation programmes.
12. Review religious support services in prison and probation, as many returnees wish to live religiously. This should be harnessed in a positive way for rehabilitation, and it calls for sufficient capacity and resources in terms of capable, trained and trustworthy chaplains, religious materials and courses.
13. Facilitate the development of training modules for staff working (directly) with returnees to support judicial, prison and probation services addressing:
 - a) information about the situations to which returnees have been exposed;
 - b) information about specialised risk assessments, how to interpret these and how they translate into everyday practice;
 - c) trauma awareness and how to balance the need to obtain information with the need to keep the returnee offender emotionally and mentally stable;
 - d) information about the legal frameworks and information sharing structures applicable to returnees.

Practitioners' recommendations on the resocialisation of returnees in society

14. Inform local authorities and involve them in preparing for the return of FTFs to a local setting. Also, when communities have large numbers of FTFs, consider relocating

returnees, either within or even across municipalities and regions, as clustering returnees within (small) communities hinders their rehabilitation.

15. Consider complementing criminal justice policies with resocialisation efforts for returnees for whom prosecution is not an option (e.g. due to a lack of evidence on criminal activities or of criminal liability).
16. If including all relevant actors in a comprehensive effort to resocialise and reintegrate returnees as recommended, local and regional authorities seem best placed to coordinate this multi-agency approach.
17. Involve mental health practitioners in both swift screening following return and any treatment needed. It should be acknowledged that returnees might not only be perpetrators of violence but also victims, including through rape, beatings and torture. In addition to post-traumatic stress disorder, a sense of betrayal and disillusionment should be expected.
18. Identify whether children accompanied returning adults or – if the children stayed in the EU – whether they will be affected by the return of one or even both of their parents.
19. Be aware that many returnees – even if not engaged in criminal behaviour – may still strongly support ideologies opposing apostates, other religions, so-called infidels, women’s rights and even EU societies as such. Most have been subject to severe indoctrination. Consider dialogue, mentoring and other techniques for returnees with such strong beliefs.
20. Consider whether the reintegration of returnees should include assistance for practical issues such as education, employment and housing, as this might foster rehabilitation.
21. Assess whether families of FTFs could be partners in the reintegration of relatives, ideally before they return. Provided that families do not themselves support extremist ideologies, they are very valuable in integration efforts.
22. Taking into account the fact that the families and direct social network of returnees will also be strongly affected by events, structures such as peer groups, psychological support, and ideological or theological support for these families should be considered. This support has the objective of developing a resilient family environment to prevent future involvement with extremism and terrorist groups.
23. Establish a local team of experts from different fields (youth care, education, social and mental healthcare, etc.) or a mobile national team to support local communities in dealing with rehabilitation and resocialisation of returnees.

Practitioners’ recommendations on child returnees

Taking into account the necessity of both immediate care and support as well as a long-term approach to ensuring rehabilitation and reintegration of child returnees in EU societies:

24. Consider giving practitioners legal guidance on dealing with child returnees. Particularly when there are concerns that the child has been involved in criminal activities abroad, specific attention should be paid to the victim–perpetrator dilemma, the sharing of information on child returnee cases, the application of juvenile and adult legislation in these cases, and the use of alternative sentencing through rehabilitative/restorative programmes.

25. Prioritise normalisation and reintegration back into society, including by establishing healthy routines as soon as possible.
26. Consider conducting an overview of the expertise in place for the rehabilitation of child returnees. This should include at least expertise on: children from conflict/war zones, radicalisation and extremism, trauma treatment, legal matters related to children, child protection services, and child development.
27. Include psychological and psychiatric assessments as soon as possible, given the high probability that children were submitted to traumatic experiences.
28. To help develop a coherent and effective response to child returnees, a specialised risk and needs assessment tool for child returnees could be considered; the tool could be applicable to a wider target group of children who are radicalised or vulnerable to radicalisation. Any assessment tool developed must take into account a child's stages of development. Adapting an assessment tool that was originally designed for adults is therefore unlikely to be appropriate.
29. Examine how existing multi-agency structures could deal with child returnees. Organisations with expertise on supporting vulnerable children could be included to provide in-depth guidance. Schools have an important role in the reintegration of children.
30. Ensure sufficient training for practitioners dealing with child returnees. These modules can be part of existing awareness or expertise training on preventing and countering radicalisation. At least two levels of training are available:
 - a) Basic awareness training for practitioners in (direct) contact with child returnees (e.g. schoolteachers, social workers, members of leisure organisations). This basic training could cover, as a minimum requirement:
 - i) information about the situation in Syria/Iraq to which these children have been exposed;
 - ii) basic trauma awareness and response exercises when a child returnee shows particular behaviour;
 - iii) information on how to report signs of concern and where to request additional support.
 - b) sely involved in cases of child returnees (e.g. child protection services, family support professionals, local police officers, psychologists). This in-depth training could include lessons on foster care and reintegration into schools.

Practitioners' recommendations on cross-cutting issues (gender and communication)

31. Consider complementing reintegration responses for male returnees — taking into account criminal background, low impulse control and propensity for violence — with specialised responses for female returnees. Many women were recruited to fulfil duties different to those assigned to men (e.g. wife or mother), but they may have been engaged in different forms of violence (e.g. enforcing behaviour according to the strict rules of the terrorist group in the so-called Khansaa Brigade). Such tailoring increases the effectiveness of risk assessments and of reintegration.
32. Acknowledge that the reintegration of mothers who have succeeded in returning with small children is heavily dependent upon their fear of losing their children due to

child protection measures. Therefore, consider cooperation with reintegration to be a precondition for custody.

- 33.** To counter the terrorist narrative that returnees will receive exceptionally bad treatment in EU countries, including imprisonment without a fair trial, excessive interrogation and the prospect of never being accepted (again) in society, consider highlighting the rule of law, healthcare and education, which will all apply to them. Since most returnees contact their family before returning, family members are well placed to communicate this. Consider informing family support professionals about current legal and rehabilitative practices and consequences for returnees so they can provide families with the correct information.
- 34.** Expect distrust, hostility, stigmatisation and isolation to complicate the reintegration of returnees, and consider addressing these challenges by communicating about response strategies.
- 35.** Expect (social) media reports to impact upon societies' openness to the reintegration of returnees. Therefore, look into preparing a (local) communication strategy, ideally ahead of the arrival of returnees within the local community.
- 36.** When communicating with returnees, their families and the receiving societies, follow a strategy that is realistic and transparent on the consequences and situations the returnee will face when coming back, including prosecution, monitoring, imprisonment and child protection interventions.

Returning FTFs

Foreign
terrorist
fighters



FTFs in numbers

42 000+ Foreign terrorist fighters from 120+ countries joined terrorist organisations between 2011 and 2021, of which +/- 5 000 came from Europe. Most departures occurred in the period 2013-2015, and decreased significantly after 2016. About 1 600 adult FTFs have returned to Europe with +/- 200 children.

Who are the returnees?

Different nationalities, ethnicities, ages and genders
All have some level of trauma and emotional / psychological issues



Men

Higher risk of combat experience and skills

Often involved in and exposed to war atrocities

Variety of roles within the terrorist-held territories

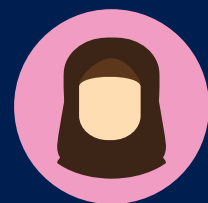


Women

Family role and mother to future soldiers

Driven by sense of empowerment and their role in building the 'caliphate'

Involved in recruitment and indoctrination of children and others



Children

Intense ideological indoctrination through education and socialisation

Recruited for combat and other violent activities from age 9

Severely traumatised

Why are they coming back?



Disillusioned / remorseful



Still driven by ideology, want better living conditions (opportunistic)



Sent to carry out an attack (or feel they can do more for the cause in Europe than in Syria/Iraq)



Captured and returned unwillingly

Key actions to consider

Overall approach



A tailored approach for each returnee



Establish coordination mechanisms across government agencies



Immediate risk assessment



Multi-agency case management



(Local) Communication strategy



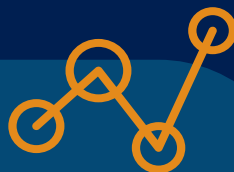
Intervention action plan

Scenarios



Prosecution

- Prioritise resocialisation & reintegration during prison / probation
- Train specialised staff
- Tailor prison placement & transfer options



Non-prosecution / resocialisation

- Build relationship & support returnee's family if possible
- Information and / or training for everyone in contact with returnees
- Holistic approach to mentoring, (mental health) treatment & practical support



Children

- Focus on normalisation and resocialisation as soon as possible
- Develop an overview of expertise focused on child trauma & indoctrination
- Train first-line practitioners working with returnee children

Adults

Introduction to this Manual

European citizens who travelled to Syria, Iraq and other conflict zones where terrorist groups have taken control have been coming back since 2012. Since the defeat of the so-called caliphate in early 2019, a large number of Daesh fighters have been captured by Kurdish forces and detained in north-east Syria, including many women and children. This situation has triggered serious dilemmas amongst policymakers and public opinion regarding the management of these captured foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and family members, not least with regard to the necessity and opportunity for repatriating them, in light of the risk they could pose upon return. Since 2019, only a limited number of European FTFs and family members have managed to return, and some to be repatriated. However, the fate of the remaining FTFs in the area remains uncertain. It is unclear, for instance, whether they should or could be prosecuted locally, and how long they could be detained safely in the region. Potentially, more FTFs and family members could still come back in the future, hence justifying continuous attention to the issue. Furthermore, a significant number of returnees are still in prisons across Europe and will be released in the coming years. One way or another, the issue of FTFs and the management of returnees will remain a policy priority for the foreseeable future.

This manual outlines responses to FTFs and their families, returning or planning to return to their home countries within the EU, from terrorist conflict zones such as Syria and Iraq.⁽¹⁾ When the term “returnees” is used in this manual, it refers to FTFs and their families (women and children).

The first edition of this manual had been commissioned by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, in order to support Member States in their preparations to manage the return of FTFs from Syria and Iraq. Five years later, the time has come for an update of the original manual. Firstly, because the situation in Syria and Iraq has changed considerably, with the fall of the so-called caliphate and the detention of hundreds of European FTFs and their families in the region. As a result, it is important to continue preparing for the possible return of some of these individuals, and particularly the children. Secondly, because Member States have further consolidated their responses to returnees over the past few years and therefore more good practices could be identified and highlighted in this revised edition of the RAN Returnee Manual.

This manual highlights responses from the perspectives of practitioners, academics and policymakers as listed in the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) database and is to be considered as part of the broader set of responses to returning FTFs (including measures with a security focus such as criminal justice or administrative measures). It sets out general approaches to be adapted to the relevant specific situation in individual Member States while taking into account that competences and structures within national, regional and local governments differ.

When dealing with returning FTFs and their families, safeguarding security is a prerequisite. The different proposed interventions therefore include a clear security aspect (e.g. as part of multi-agency teams). Risk assessments are the appropriate tool to appraise security risks and develop the most appropriate mitigating measures. Furthermore, close cooperation between grassroots practitioners and the relevant public actors, including law enforcement, should ensure that security risks are communicated through the appropriate channels.

Managing returnees is complex and high on the agenda for many governments and local authorities. While the legislative framework and policy options may vary per Member State,

⁽¹⁾ Many of the responses in this manual can also apply when dealing with other former foreign (terrorist) fighters.

there are common challenges, and common ways to deal with them effectively. These will be shared in this manual.

During the RAN High-Level Conference (HLC) on 9 November 2016, the challenges related to FTF returnees were addressed by the then-Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship Dimitris Avramopoulos and then-Commissioner for the Security Union Sir Julian King. They underlined the need for European practitioners, policymakers and researchers to design and share suitable responses to this challenge. The new Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU, presented by the European Commission in December 2020, highlighted that returnees remain a key challenge that requires enhanced response.

RAN has held numerous meetings with first-line practitioners on the topic of FTF returnees. During RAN Working Groups' meetings, the subject has been discussed from multiple perspectives and areas of expertise: police, local authorities, education, prison and probation, youth, family and communities, exit, and health and social care. Challenges and responses have also been discussed from different EU Member State perspectives within the Network of National Prevent Policy Makers⁽²⁾ and the RAN Steering Committee.⁽³⁾ The European Strategic Communications Network (ESCN)⁽⁴⁾ has provided input and shared expertise on strategic communication and communication strategies. First-line practitioners from the most affected EU Member States have shared details of their returnee cases and lessons learned from them; these cases are used to give context to the tips and guidelines within this manual. Finally, multiple national, European and international sources were used and referenced in the preparation of the first edition of this manual. For this update of the manual, a questionnaire was circulated amongst practitioners, academics and policymakers from across Europe, registered in the RAN database. This document is a culmination of these efforts and findings.

Further reading:

The High-Level Commission Expert Group on Radicalisation (HLCEG-R), set up to advise the European Commission on counterterrorism issues, highlighted the challenges of managing returnees in its [final report](#).

The 2020 [Counter-Terrorism Agenda](#) of the European Commission, which is a core component of the Security Union Strategy and an action plan for counterterrorism, also highlighted the issue of returnees and the need to foster best practices amongst Member States.

Manual for practitioners, and practitioners' recommendations for policymakers

This manual is intended primarily for first-line practitioners such as social workers, health professionals, teachers, and police and prison officers who need to deal with returnees one on one and at the local level. It sets out guiding principles, some step-by-step descriptions, methods and interventions that can be used to respond to returnees. Practitioners reading this manual can also refer to:

⁽²⁾ The Network of National Prevent Policy Makers is a network of national policymakers specialised in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism in the 27 EU Member States. The network is facilitated by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME).

⁽³⁾ The RAN Steering Committee comprises the co-chairs of the RAN Working Groups and DG HOME.

⁽⁴⁾ The European Strategic Communications Network (ESCN) is a network of 26 countries that collaborate to share analysis, good practice and ideas on the use of strategic communications in countering violent extremism.

- **Case studies:** Practitioners from EU countries have shared concrete experiences and lessons learned from dealing with returnees. RAN has used this information to create case studies that illustrate the statements contained in the manual and provide specific insight into the (often more nuanced and complex) reality when dealing with returnees on a daily basis.
- **Practice in action:** examples of concrete practices being used throughout the EU are highlighted, accompanied by references to more information about these practices. Many are also part of the RAN Collection of Practices that serves to inspire practitioners in their daily work.
- **Further reading:** Extensive research, reporting and analysis have been carried out on the topics and issues addressed in this manual, both within the RAN Practitioners and by other international and national organisations. References to this additional material are integrated in the text for practitioners who are looking for more in-depth, detailed information on specific issues.

This manual is intended to give national authorities extra insight into practitioners' needs and ideas as they review existing approaches and strategies in light of challenges related to FTFs. A list of recommendations for Member States is included at the beginning of the manual.

Structure of the manual

The manual comprises eight chapters, preceded by the Checklist of Recommendations for Member States.

Practitioners' Recommendations for Member States

- Chapter 1 Introduction to this Manual
- Chapter 2 FTF Returnees: Facts, Figures and Profiles
- Chapter 3 Investigation and Risk Assessment
- Chapter 4 Multi-agency Agreement on Intervention
- Chapter 5 Prosecution Route
- Chapter 6 Non-prosecution Route / Resocialisation
- Chapter 7 Child Returnees
- Chapter 8 Cross-cutting Issues

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the scope of the FTF issue across different EU Member States, brief insights into what motivates foreign fighters to leave and the context in which FTFs are returning.

Chapters 3 to 6 describe the different scenarios when dealing with a returning FTF. For the sake of clarity, a logical order has been used. In reality, some steps will occur simultaneously.

When a returnee arrives, national and/or local government will either be expecting them due to information received via the police or security and intelligence agencies, other governments or diplomatic information routes, or will be informed shortly after the FTF returns via local authorities, practitioners in the field, family members or the FTF themselves. Intelligence assessments and police investigations are prerequisites to determining potential risk and whether prosecution should take place (**Chapter 3**).

Parallel to this, coordination at a national and local level is needed to support the multi-agency intervention plan for the returnee's reintegration within society (either immediately or after serving a sentence), thus minimising the potential risk the returnee may pose. A local multi-agency team from the returnee's hometown should also be informed and start preparing its response (**Chapter 4**).

The returnee may be prosecuted, imprisoned and released (on probation) or receive a community sentence (on probation) (**Chapter 5**). Alternatively, they will not be prosecuted, and resocialisation should start immediately (**Chapter 6**).

When children are involved, they require special attention. In most cases, they will join their returnee parents but will be in need of specific care (**Chapter 7**).

Finally, in **Chapter 8**, brief information and tips are provided on the cross-cutting issues of gender and communications around FTF returnees.

The structure of this manual is best visualised as follows (see below):



Member States' checklist of recommendations

Chapter 1

Introduction to the Manual

Chapter 2

FTF Returnees: Facts, Figures and Profiles

Chapter 3

Investigation and Risk Assessment
- Risk assessment tools

Chapter 4

Multi-agency Agreement on Intervention
- Information sharing protocols
- Cooperation models and stakeholder involvement
- Development of action plans

Chapter 5

Prosecution Route
- Safety and security measures
- Deradicalisation
- Reintegration/resocialisation (connection with families)
- Trauma intervention
- Psychological support
- Mentoring

Chapter 6

Non-prosecution Route / Resocialisation
- Deradicalisation
- Reintegration/resocialisation
- Family support
- Trauma intervention
- Psychological support
- Mentoring
- Practical issues (housing, education)
- Counselling

Chapter 7

Child Returnees

- Legal matters - Child protection - Role of schools - Placement and living conditions
- Trauma informed practice - Family support

Chapter 8

Cross-cutting Issues

Gender, strategic communication and narratives

FTF Returnees: Facts, Figures and Profiles

This chapter provides an insight into the challenge of dealing with returning FTFs, as well as why so many people left Europe to join terrorist groups in the first place. It looks at the many different profiles that make up Europe's FTFs, as well as the different motives for returning and the challenges these create.

Foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs)

FTFs are not a new phenomenon. Many conflict zones have attracted foreigners in the past, such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Pakistan, etc.⁽⁵⁾ The risk associated with returnees has also been known for many years. In several terrorist atrocities, such as the 2005 London bombings, the perpetrators had received terrorist training abroad. What is unique and unprecedented about the current foreign fighter contingents in Syria and Iraq is the sheer volume of foreign fighters. Many of these European citizens who travelled to Syria, Iraq and other conflict zones where terrorist groups rule have already returned, whereas others remain in the area and could return at a later stage.

Following the military defeats of Daesh leading to the fall of the caliphate in early 2019, a massive exodus of FTFs was feared. However, no major wave of returns has occurred since 2017. Many FTFs were either killed or captured by local forces. The vast majority of those who have returned had already come back in the period 2013-2015, with only a few returnees having travelled back, been repatriated or been expelled since 2017.

Facts and figures

More than 42 000 FTFs have travelled to join Daesh from over 120 countries (between 2011 and 2020). **More than 5 000 FTFs have departed from Europe.** Many of these left from Belgium, France, Germany and the United Kingdom (UK), but significant numbers also left from Austria, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden. As of late 2020, around 1 600 adults have returned, together with around 200 to 300 children.⁽⁶⁾ A number of repatriation operations have occurred in 2021.⁽⁷⁾ The **average percentage of FTFs returning to Europe is around 30 %**, but the figure is higher for Denmark, Sweden and the UK. Nearly half of all FTFs from these countries have returned.⁽⁸⁾

The mobilisation of FTFs seems to have peaked in 2015, and **flows stemmed significantly in 2016** in terms of travel to Syria. The continuing conflict enveloping Iraq, Syria and other conflict zones, combined with the collapse of Daesh, led to a serious and growing concern over a massive exodus of fighters and a large influx of FTF returnees around 2017. This did not occur, however, as many FTFs were either killed (usually assessed at about 30 % of the total contingent), detained by Kurdish forces or still at large (fighting or hiding). As of late 2020, about **385-460 European adults and 610-680 children were detained in north-east**

⁽⁵⁾ Byman, Road warriors: Foreign fighters in the armies of jihad.

⁽⁶⁾ Cook & Vale, From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate; Renard & Coolsaet, Children in the Levant: Insights from Belgium on the dilemmas of repatriation and the challenges of reintegration; figures updated by the author (Thomas Renard).

⁽⁷⁾ 152 children from EU countries were repatriated between September 2021 and September 2022, after the finalisation of this report by the authors. This likely brings the number of returning children to the EU to a range of about 400-450.

⁽⁸⁾ Cook & Vale, From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate.

Syria, facing an uncertain fate as most European governments refused to repatriate them, preferring to see them detained and prosecuted in the region.⁽⁹⁾

In spite of this general reluctance to repatriate individuals deemed potentially dangerous, some EU Member States have nonetheless started to repatriate a number of children and women since 2019 (see Section 2.2.5). More repatriations could still occur in the future, although it is a difficult trend to predict, notably as a result of court decisions. Furthermore, occasional arrests of European FTFs reported in Turkey and Europe in 2020-2021 suggest that some FTFs still manage to circulate and possibly return to Europe undetected.

Most FTFs will be prosecuted and imprisoned upon return, but others will not: **large variations in the rate of prosecution** of returnees have been reported across Europe (from 10 % or less in the UK and Sweden to 65 % or more in France and Belgium). Some will return to their old neighbourhoods, but others will relocate (some to escape the vigilance of authorities, others just to move on to something else). Most will experience trauma from inflicting or witnessing violence. Some returnees will be disillusioned and even remorseful; others will continue to have (violent) extremist views and may become influential radicalisers, or even terrorist sleepers.

Although some returnees may have the explicit intention of planning and executing attacks, studies suggest that only a **small minority of foreign fighters return home to commit violent attacks** – this seems to be true historically as well as in the case of the Syrian wave.⁽¹⁰⁾ Another study showed that when FTFs return to commit an attack, they act very rapidly after their return, usually within the first months. In contrast, the risk of a returnee turning violent decreases significantly over time.⁽¹¹⁾ However, the influence of returnees can still be found in radicalisation or recruitment activities upon return, making some of these individuals key “entrepreneurs”⁽¹²⁾ of future jihadi waves, or possibly “career foreign fighters”.⁽¹³⁾ Many can also remain in the “**grey zone**” of legality, complicating the assessment of their real level of engagement or influence. The terrorist attacks in Brussels in May 2014 (Jewish Museum) and March 2016 (airport and metro station), as well as the multiple attacks in Paris in November 2015, were all atrocities perpetrated to some degree by FTF returnees. In the Paris attacks, at least seven of the perpetrators were European FTFs returning from Syria, while three of the Brussels attackers were European FTF returnees. While many FTF returnees will not become operational terrorists, mere contact with “jihadi” terrorist groups such as Daesh and/or Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) translates into significant national security risks.

⁽⁹⁾ Renard & Coolsaet, From bad to worse: The fate of European foreign fighters and families detained in Syria, one year after the Turkish offensive. In light of the repatriations that took place in 2021 and 2022, the estimated number of European children still detained in the Syrian camps in September 2022 is more likely between 415-485, and the number of adults between 310-390. (based on figures compiled by the author Thomas Renard).

⁽¹⁰⁾ Vidino et al., Fear thy neighbor: Radicalization and jihadist attacks in the West; Hegghammer & Nesser, Assessing the Islamic State’s commitment to attacking the West.

⁽¹¹⁾ Malet & Hayes, Foreign Fighter Returnees: An Indefinite Threat?

⁽¹²⁾ Nesser, Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History.

⁽¹³⁾ Daymon et al., Career Foreign Fighters: Expertise Transmission Across Insurgencies.

Attacks and plots in Europe involving European returnees from Syria and Iraq (2012-2021)

Attacks

4 attacks involving
12 European returnees



Jewish Museum shooting
(Brussels, 2014)



Paris November attacks
(Paris, 2015)



Thalys attack
(France, 2015)



Brussels March attacks
(Brussels, 2016)

Plots

At least 17 failed or foiled plots involving 22 European returnees
(plots in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Spain and the UK)

Plots or attacks in prison

Although highly exceptional, one attack and one alleged plot
were committed by two returnees detained in France, both in 2019

Others

Two categories of interest could be added
(even though not strictly counting as returnees):



attacks or plots committed by individuals who reached Turkey
(and eventually made contact with Daesh), but not Syria (and
therefore did not receive specific training or experience);



attacks or plots committed by
individuals who failed to travel to Syria
(so-called "frustrated travellers").

Sources: Petter Nesser, 'Introducing the Jihadi Plots in Europe Dataset (JPED)' (forthcoming, 2021); Soren Seelow, '2013-2018, la radiographie du terrorisme « made in France »', *Le Monde*, 29 March 2018; Email exchange with Raffaello Pantucci (June 2021); Thomas Renard's own data collection.

It needs to be highlighted that the number of returnees involved in terror plots in Europe is only a small fraction of the entire FTF contingent (at least 36 individuals out of 1 600 returnees, thus 2.3 %). Beyond that particularly dangerous minority, and the broader group that could remain involved in terrorist-related activities without themselves necessarily engaging in violent acts, some studies suggest that **many returnees could disengage upon return**, or in fact that they had returned because they had already started disengaging. A classified note from the Belgian counterterrorism fusion centre Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) indicates that 84 % of the male returnees from Syria in Belgium (37/44) and 95 % of women returnees (19/20) were in a process of disengagement in 2019, excluding returnees still in prison (whose rate of disengagement was around 50 %). Whether these trends will hold over the longer term or whether they will equally apply to the FTFs who fought with Daesh until 2019 (or later) remains unclear. Some academic studies suggest that recidivism rates are generally low amongst terrorist convicts, compared with ordinary criminals (and thus career foreign fighters or returnees-turned-plotters are the exception more than the rule).⁽¹⁴⁾ While not focused on returnees, such studies suggest nonetheless that a majority of returnees could likely be rehabilitated and reintegrated into society although, again, hindsight is lacking with regard to the latest wave of FTFs and returnees.

Recruitment, motivations and living conditions

There is no one-size-fits-all profile for FTF returnees. Their stories, experiences, traumas and skill sets differ substantially. Any effective approach to dealing with returnees must take this into account. In this chapter, the manual provides insight into Daesh recruitment tactics, the situation on the ground in Syria and Iraq, and the different roles played by various types of FTFs, including women and children.

Recruitment and travel

Many foreign fighters were recruited through kinship and friendship, resulting in significant hubs for radicalisation, mobilisation and departures to Syria. The role of key networks, preachers and recruiters was highlighted in many trials of FTFs, such as that of Sharia4Belgium.⁽¹⁵⁾ Islamist propaganda and online recruiters also played a role.

Travel routes used to join Daesh or other terrorist groups often involved flights to cities in Turkey, and then travel to the Turkish-Syrian border. There, recruits were helped across the border by Daesh facilitators; they were interviewed or interrogated, filling in recruitment forms to cross-verify who had facilitated the journey and providing other verifiable personal details. These forms included 23 data fields.⁽¹⁶⁾ Foreign fighter testimonies reveal that **recruits were then separated according to Daesh-identified specific skill sets** that determined whether the recruit would, after training camp, take up frontline duties or more specialised roles. When filling out this Daesh personnel file, male recruits were also asked who recommended them or could vouch for them, and what role they wanted to play. Specifically, they were asked to “select from three options: fighter, suicide bomber, and suicide fighter (*inghimāsi*)”. This recruitment form is a valuable tool for verifying information provided by FTF returnees during interviews.

Recruitment manuals such as *Hijrah to the Islamic State* (2015) provided practical advice for preparation, equipment and travel, as well as guidance on concealment upon arrival

⁽¹⁴⁾ Silke & Morrison, Re-offending by released terrorist prisoners: Separating hype from reality; Renard, Overblown: Exploring the Gap Between the Fear of Terrorist Recidivism and the Evidence.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Van Ostaeyen, The History and Influence of the Belgian ISIS Contingent.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Dodwell et al., Then and now: Comparing the flow of foreign fighters to AQI and the Islamic State.

in Turkey and en route to various safe houses along the border. It also contained sections devoted to women travelling to Syria. Women recruits were advised that they can travel without a *mahram* (male guardian) to disguise their purpose. When travelling together with their husband, women were taken to a separate house called a *madhāfah*⁽¹⁷⁾ until their men had finished at the training camp. If women were unaccompanied, they were brought to a dormitory (*maqar*) until a suitable husband could be found.⁽¹⁸⁾

Starting in the autumn of 2015, rates of travel reduced, before stopping almost entirely in 2017. The slowdown in travel was due to a depletion in recruits, disillusionment amongst returning fighters, military and territorial losses by Daesh, and targeted security measures against foreign fighters making it difficult for them to travel.

Motivations for travelling (hijrah)

There are multiple reasons for individuals joining violent extremist groups such as Daesh and HTS. This means **there is no single psychological profile for FTFs**. They also cover multiple nationalities, ethnicities, ages and both genders. There is not one factor but many vectors that combine to form infinite combinations of causation. A kaleidoscope of push and pull factors driven by social media, group dynamics and radicalisers influences the process of radicalisation.⁽¹⁹⁾ There is still a dearth of consolidated, evidence-based information on the background and radicalisation process of those FTFs who left for Syria and Iraq, as well as on associated returnee issues. Often, the information resides with security services and police.

Further reading:

[RAN Issue Paper 'The Root Causes of Violent Extremism'](#): There is no single cause or pathway into radicalisation and violent extremism. Instead, there is a wide array of factors at the macro, meso and micro levels of analysis. This RAN Issue Paper provides a summary of the "root causes" of violent extremism.

One way to understand why individuals are motivated and recruited to join these groups is to look at the **central themes of Daesh propaganda** and the way it is constructed. Some studies have shown that Daesh propaganda addressed a myriad of issues, in which war and violence were only part of many possible themes. It also included issues such as ideology, utopia, victimhood and belonging, which all could strike different chords with potential recruits.⁽²⁰⁾ FTFs may therefore have been driven by very different aspects of this propaganda. Notably, utopia (the depiction of a place where true believers could live in a sharia-style society) might explain the large number of families and the unprecedented number of children who travelled to the area. Daesh propaganda peaked around 2015, and then decreased both in quantity and quality. It also focused much more on military activities after 2015, reflecting the group's loss of territory and military retreat, and migrated increasingly to less accessible media platforms (such as encrypted social media), resulting in a lesser outreach.⁽²¹⁾

⁽¹⁷⁾ The word *madhāfah* applies to any visiting house or guest house. Since the jihad in Afghanistan, it is used for the safe houses where foreign terrorists are accommodated before joining jihadist training camps.

⁽¹⁸⁾ De Bont et al., *Life at ISIS: The roles of Western men, women and children*.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network, *The Root Causes of Violent Extremism*. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/pages/page/root-causes-violent-extremism-04-january-2016_en

⁽²⁰⁾ Ingram, *Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda*; Winter, *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate*; Zelin, *Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output*; Kaati, *Det digitala kalifatet: En studie av Islamiska statens propaganda*.

⁽²¹⁾ Milton, *Down, but Not Out: An Updated Examination of the Islamic State's Visual Propaganda*; Bindner & Gluck, *Trends in Islamic State's Online Propaganda: Shorter Longevity, Wider Dissemination of Content*.

Recruitment strategies are conducted both online and offline. Online messages are simple, powerful and binary, offering Muslims stark choices between abandoning their secular and conflicted life in the West to perform *hijrah* to the so-called caliphate, or remaining oppressed and subjugated by tyrants in the West. In the heyday of the caliphate, the jihad in Iraq and Syria was advertised as an enjoyable experience, particularly compared with previous or alternative jihadi theatres – a “five-star jihad”, in their own words.⁽²²⁾ As such, Daesh’s recruitment focuses on grooming techniques that exploit identity confusion and focus on persuasion, emotional manipulation and total obedience.

There are many reasons why recruits are attracted to this destructive ideology and motivated to join. For some it offers **excitement and status**, a once in a lifetime, instant opportunity to go “from zero to hero”, looting **opportunities, wages, housing, and sexual and marital opportunities**, including the option to keep women as slaves; for others it is an opportunity to offer **humanitarian support**.⁽²³⁾ For some it offers an escape from their ordinary, depressing and problem-filled lives. Others seek **belonging, a sense of purpose and a higher calling**. It can offer excitement and action, or strict rules on how to live within a clear moral framework. Daesh has offered an overarching narrative of empowerment that wrapped a range of individual motivations into a collective storyline and a shared perception of injustice and group-based anger. Using grooming techniques, Daesh recruiters identify individual psychological vulnerabilities and needs and skilfully exploit these through online and offline techniques.

Finally, it should be mentioned that many FTFs claim that they travelled to wage jihad in Syria and Iraq, which they describe as a justified **defensive jihad**, but that they would not engage in violent extremism in their homeland, which they allegedly perceive as unjustified or ineffective. Although such claims should be treated with caution – not least as they seek to minimise the charges against them – similar reasonings were expressed before the Syrian mobilisation, and indeed the majority of returnees from the Syrian jihad were allegedly no longer involved in violent activities upon their return, similarly to the majority of returnees from previous jihadi conflicts.⁽²⁴⁾

Further reading:

[RAN Factbook ‘Islamist Extremism’](#): This factbook provides an overview of the fundamental elements of violent Islamist extremism to enable recognition of its symbols, vocabulary, recruitment tactics and narratives used in various settings, including online, in our schools, local communities and prisons. There are multiple manifestations of violent Islamist extremism across the EU. Because of the national and local variations, it is impossible to provide an all-including in-depth study of the phenomenon. Therefore, this factbook focuses specifically on Salafi-jihadism.

Experience in theatre

FTF returnees’ experiences are varied, but extremely challenging to deal with on multiple levels. Once new recruits had crossed over into Daesh territory, they faced numerous security and social controls limiting their behaviour, communication and freedom of movement. Recruits were separated according to gender.

⁽²²⁾ Roussinos, Jihad Selfies: These British Extremists in Syria Love Social Media.

⁽²³⁾ The humanitarian motivation was strong early in the conflict until 2014 when the “caliphate” was declared. While individuals were initially attracted to travel on humanitarian grounds, some later became attracted to a destructive ideology and pathways.

⁽²⁴⁾ Hegghammer, Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting.

Male FTFs went through registration and questioning while they surrendered their ID documents. Inducted Daesh recruits all took **compulsory sharia courses**. The length of the course depended on Daesh's assessment of the individual's loyalty and value to the group, but it could last from 3 weeks to 3 months or longer. These courses took place alongside **military training**, the content of which depended on whether there was a need for new fighters or if the recruit was being trained for a suicide attack. Some FTFs joined an elite unit where they were trained in counter-intelligence and infiltration techniques, notably.⁽²⁵⁾

Daesh also employed **shock tactics**, both on and off the battlefield. A central strategy was the use of extreme brutality, involving mass beheadings, on-the-spot executions and torture. This scared the population into submission and made it possible to control occupied territories. It was not only adults who experienced this but also children, some of whom were recruited into indoctrination and training camps from the age of nine. Young impressionable children were not only exposed to the ravages of war but also to countless acts of unspeakable cruelty, from the mass beheadings to public floggings, amputations and crucifixions. Some children have been deployed in combat roles and as executioners.

Daesh also used children as eyes and ears — as informants — creating a deeply distrustful environment. This destroyed traditional linkages of clan and family loyalty as accusations of sharia infractions were used as a tool in Daesh infighting and against all enemies. The Sharia Courts were administered by the Diwan of Judgement and Grievance and dispensed with religious judgements on all matters. Considerable bureaucracy and meticulous documentation and paperwork provided enhanced control functions. The control of infrastructure, food, water and jobs was used as a tool against locals to force them to join Daesh. The Diwan of Public Security enforced internal security and counter-intelligence work. Travel outside city limits was forbidden without permission and required official authorisation.

When arriving in Syria, unaccompanied **women** were obliged to live in single women dormitories known as *maqar*. Husbands could be selected (for instance, if they had met online before travelling) but were then regularly sent to frontlines or on missions. If he died, the wife was placed in a *shahada's maqar* (for widows). Women who arrived with their husbands were placed in safe houses (*madhāfah*), until completion of their husbands' training.

Women had to conform to a strict dress code in public, wearing a niqab and gloves. The *Diwan Hisbah* (morality police) enforced these strict dress codes and travel rules. If caught straying from the dress code, the *Hisbah* could issue a notice to the husband. The husband then had to appear before a Sharia Court hearing, where punishments for him and his wife were decided, ranging from a fine to public flogging or even death.

Depending on the period of their presence in Daesh territory and on the amount of time spent in the area, the **experience of every FTF was likely very different**. The situation was very different in 2013-2014 compared with 2017-2018, for instance. Some FTFs stayed only very short periods of time with Daesh, and others stayed several years.⁽²⁶⁾ Importantly, however, no clear correlation can be established between the amount of time spent in theatre or the date of return, on the one hand, and the degree of disengagement (or not) of the returnee, on the other, according to the Belgian counterterrorism fusion centre CUTA. Some foreign fighters returned quickly to conduct attacks, whereas others failed to defect and therefore remained longer than desired with Daesh.

Furthermore, not all FTFs have **served in combat** or received advanced military training. Some male fighters were deployed on the frontline, while others carefully avoided it

⁽²⁵⁾ Suc, *Les espions de la terreur*.

⁽²⁶⁾ Gustafsson & Ranstorp, Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: An analysis of open-source intelligence and statistical data.

(selecting their unit accordingly, or claiming to be inapt for combat).⁽²⁷⁾ Some were trained with the specific aim to perpetrate attacks in Europe,⁽²⁸⁾ while others did not consider terrorism in Europe to be justified. Not every male FTF was a fighter either, as the caliphate needed mechanics, engineers, computer specialists, administrators, cooks and nurses as well.⁽²⁹⁾

Since 2018, and particularly since the fall of Baghuz in March 2019, a number of European FTFs and children have been **detained by Kurdish forces in north-east Syria**. Men are detained in makeshift prisons whereas women and children are detained in secured camps for displaced persons — mainly in the camp of al-Hol, which holds over 60 000 women and children, and to a lesser extent in the camp of al-Roj.⁽³⁰⁾ Available figures indicate that there would be about 385-460 European FTFs detained in Syria and more than 25 in Iraq, as of late 2020, in addition to 610-680 children.⁽³¹⁾ Evidence suggests that the sanitary and security situation in Kurdish prisons and camps has significantly deteriorated since 2019. Observers who visited the camps reported the increasing insecurity and growing violence in the camps, from guards and from highly radicalised women seeking to put pressure on or punish women and children who are considered to be betraying Daesh. Life in these camps is characterised by malnutrition, lack of water, lack of minimum comfort and security in the tents, and lack of access to school and doctors, as well as permanent insecurity, alleged torture, and sexual exploitation or abuse.⁽³²⁾ Such a situation creates specific traumas. In addition to death, mothers and children fear being forcefully separated by Kurdish guards who allegedly have taken some children away from their mothers. There is also the fear of imposed separation by European governments willing to repatriate vulnerable children and to leave mothers behind. All these traumas resulting from a long period of detention in the camps need to be addressed carefully upon return. Not all women in these camps behave as victims, however. Some women remain adamant and seek to recreate sharia law in the camps and to raise their children as Daesh's next generation. This is particularly the case in the al-Hol camp. The conditions in makeshift prisons for male fighters are not better, as they "do not meet minimum standards", with many cases of inhumane conditions documented.⁽³³⁾ There are serious concerns that such prisons will only further increase the risk of these individuals, by fostering their hate and grievances as well as by allowing a number of fighters to make use of their time in detention to network and make plans for future operations.

In addition to FTFs detained in Syria and Iraq, an unknown number of European FTFs are still thought to be fighting alongside jihadi groups in various parts of Syria and Iraq, notably in Idlib province. They are considered to be highly committed jihadist fighters. Some of them could still seek to recruit or inspire attacks in Europe. Some of them could also decide to return to Europe in the future, possibly through clandestine routes.

Further reading:

['Life at ISIS: The Roles of Western Men, Women and Children'](#) by Roel de Bont, Daan Weggemans, Ruud Peters and Edwin Bakker: This paper explores the various roles of Western FTFs in Syria.

⁽²⁷⁾ Mironova, From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists: Human Resources of Non State Armed Groups.

⁽²⁸⁾ Suc, *Les espions de la terreur*.

⁽²⁹⁾ De Bont et al., Life at ISIS: The roles of Western men, women and children.

⁽³⁰⁾ Human Rights Watch, Thousands of Foreigners Unlawfully Held in NE Syria.

⁽³¹⁾ Renard & Coolsaet, From bad to worse: The fate of European foreign fighters and families detained in Syria, one year after the Turkish offensive. For updated numbers on 2021-2022 please refer to the footnote section on p. 20.

⁽³²⁾ RSI, Europe's Guantanamo: The indefinite detention of European women and children in North East Syria.

⁽³³⁾ Human Rights Watch, Thousands of Foreigners Unlawfully Held in NE Syria.

Different motives for returning

Not all FTFs want to return. Even some of the detainees in Syria have claimed that they refuse to be repatriated. For those returning nonetheless, we can distinguish between different reasons and motives:



The intention to carry out (or help prepare) an attack;



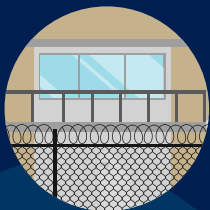
Take a temporary break from the fight, for healthcare reasons (i.e. injuries or childbirth) or to recruit new volunteers;



Disillusionment with the organisation, leaders, ideology, war or complex local politics;



Some returned to Europe as there was simply no more caliphate to fight for;



Some have had enough of the dire living conditions, and lack of profit or other advantages, particularly as the caliphate crumbled and, for those who were captured, inside the Kurdish camps and prisons;



Remorse and trauma with the violence experienced actively or passively (against civilians and/or other jihadi factions, including sometimes former "brothers in arms");



Family pressure and intervention;



Capture and extradition/repatriation back to the EU, whether willing or unwilling to return.

Return to Europe

Many FTFs will never return. At least a third died during the war, and others will try to stay in the region or travel to other jihadi fronts. As mentioned previously, some FTFs detained by the Kurdish forces in Syria have also stated their unwillingness to be repatriated. Nonetheless, roughly a third of the FTFs have already returned to Europe since 2012, and more could still return – willingly or not. Returnees made their way back through several routes:

- some requested consular support, especially if they required new passports or assistance with children born in Syria or Iraq, and others travelled on false ID documents;
- some travelled back directly through Turkey, once considered as the “highway” to Syria, but also backwards to Europe;
- some made it back via detours through other European and non-European destinations;
- some travelled back through clandestine routes, notably using migrants’ routes and smuggling networks, via the Balkans or west and north Africa, notably;
- some were captured by the Turkish or Iraqi authorities, or by the Kurdish forces, and were then expelled or repatriated.

Iraqi and Turkish authorities have detained a number of European FTFs, while expelling others. Kurdish forces have detained European FTFs and children since 2017 mostly, but only a small number of them have been repatriated by their home governments, as of late 2021. Between 2018 and late October 2021, 151 children and 31 adults have been repatriated from Syria by EU Member States and the UK.⁽³⁴⁾ Some women have managed to escape these camps, however, while others were released from the Ain Issa camp following the Turkish offensive in October 2019. Some of these women and children have reached Turkey from where they could be repatriated, whereas others were transferred to other camps or captured by armed groups.⁽³⁵⁾

For all FTFs who remain in custody, notably in Syria, their fate remains uncertain. It is unclear whether they can (and will) be prosecuted locally, for how long they will remain in detention, and whether they would be allowed to return to Europe at the end of their (hypothetical) sentence. A number of them could also see their citizenship revoked, further complicating their ability to return to Europe, but also raising questions about their ability to travel anywhere.

Further reading:

The RAN paper [‘Repatriated foreign terrorist fighters and their families: European experiences & lessons for P/CVE’](#) presents an overview of general approaches towards repatriation in EU countries and the Western Balkans, with concrete examples of practices, returnee coordinators, and various types of multi-agency and national coordination as well as exit programmes and interventions for both adult and child returnees.

No firm correlation can be established between the way of return and the returnee’s intentions. Although we can suspect that FTFs with violent intentions will seek to return undetected, as those involved in the Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016) attacks, other returnees using clandestine routes may simply seek to evade arrest; in contrast, FTFs surrendering voluntarily to authorities could be suspected of hiding their true intentions, although many may genuinely just want to return home, even if that implies facing prison.

It is important to emphasise that travel back to Europe is a **dangerous enterprise** as Daesh tracked and killed defectors, further complicated by the fact that it was difficult for foreigners to hide amongst the local population as they looked physically different. Furthermore, escaping Daesh was expensive as smugglers had to be paid, and thus not feasible for everyone. The whole return journey is often a traumatic experience in itself,

⁽³⁴⁾ Renard & Coolsaet, From bad to worse: The fate of European foreign fighters and families detained in Syria, one year after the Turkish offensive; updated figures compiled by the author (Thomas Renard). 103 children from EU countries and the UK were repatriated between November 2021 and September 2022, alongside 42 women. These repatriations occurred after the finalisation of this report by the authors.

⁽³⁵⁾ UNHRC, 23rd Report of the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic - A decade of arbitrary detention and imprisonment - A/HRC/46/55.

notably for children separated from their mothers (either in the camps, when mothers are left behind, or upon return, when mothers are sent to prison or lose the child's custody).

Finally, upon return, FTFs can go through many **different trajectories** as laid out in this manual: prosecution or not, prison or not, intense interactions with security and social actors or not, resocialisation with friends and family or not, etc. The state of mind of returnees is therefore likely to evolve over time, whatever their initial motivation for return was, as a result of their trajectory back home. Some FTFs returned with specific expectations for status and recognition, for instance, but these expectations were not always met, leading to disillusion and nostalgia for their experience under the caliphate.⁽³⁶⁾ As a matter of fact, it is very likely that many returnees will always miss certain aspects of their life experience in Syria and Iraq (such as companionship, belonging, status, power, excitement), even when distancing from the ideology or violence.

Further reading:

[RAN Study Visit to Kosovo: Returned women and children, December 2019](#)

In April 2019, as one of the first in Europe doing so in large capacity, Kosovo made a political decision and repatriated 110 Kosovan citizens from detention camps in north Syria, most of them women and children. During the study visit, RAN explored the measures that were taken to reintegrate the women and children into Kosovan society. By engaging with stakeholders from government authorities, first-line practitioners and civil society organisations in Kosovo, the visit allowed substantial insights into the ongoing Kosovan experience, characterised by pragmatism and a can-do attitude, and to draw first conclusions relevant for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) practitioners from EU Member States.

The different profiles of FTF returnees

The FTF returnees have different profiles. Those who have travelled to join Daesh or Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) have filled a variety of roles within the organisations, from would-be suicide bombers to fighters and other auxiliary roles.

Different generations

As a first step in tailoring responses to several groups of returnees, it might be beneficial to consider several generations, although a strict differentiation is not appropriate:

- a. The **first generation** of returnees, predominantly men, and motivated to leave for humanitarian reasons and/or to fight the Assad regime, was — with some notable exceptions — more prone to disillusionment, arguably less violent and relatively free to leave the terrorist-held territory.
- b. The **second generation** of returnees includes more battle-hardened and ideologically committed fighters, including some who came back with violent motives; but also many disillusioned FTFs who had to evade pervasive surveillance by Daesh to escape. Within this second generation, dominated by Daesh members, one could further distinguish those who defected during the caliphate era from those who defected as the caliphate was crumbling, as the latter may be suspected of holding more opportunistic motives for return.
- c. FTFs detained by Kurdish forces could constitute a **third generation**, dominated by FTFs who remained with Daesh until the very end. So far, only a limited number

⁽³⁶⁾ Greenwood, When foreign fighters come home: the story of six Danish returnees.

managed to return through evasion or repatriation, but more could still return. Not everyone in those camps stayed with Daesh until the fall of Baghuz in March 2019, and not everyone in Baghuz was equally committed to the group (some just never managed to escape). However, this last generation includes possibly some of the most extremist FTFs, some of whom have not abandoned the caliphate's utopia, and some of whom simply do not want to return to Europe. This third generation is further marked by its experience in the Kurdish camps and prisons, as a result of which they may have developed specific traumas and hold additional grievances against European governments.

There are also **child returnees** to consider. Returning children have experienced war trauma, witnessed executions and punishments, and in some cases been forced to execute people. Young girls, and in some cases young boys, have been exposed to sexual abuse. While over 200 children have already returned since the beginning of the war, children could dominate the third generation of returnees as hundreds are still under Kurdish custody in north-east Syria as of early 2021.

As Daesh has put up many barriers to FTFs leaving (strong surveillance and monitoring of communication, threats of execution), authorities need to **question the intentions of returnees**, and investigate whether they have committed crimes (including overseas) and whether they have ulterior motives for returning, such as planning attacks within Europe.

Further reading:

Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies (CATS) at the Swedish Defence University

This [study](#) examines a set of variables of the foreign fighters from Sweden who joined jihadi terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq between June 2012 and September 2016.

Dutch intelligence service publications about Daesh

This [paper](#) describes life within the so-called caliphate.

This [paper](#) outlines the possible threats posed by returnees to society.

Differences between men, women and children

MALE RETURNEES:

Men in particular may have been involved in war crimes such as murder, rape, slavery or human trafficking, and may have taken part in terrorist or violent extremist atrocities. **All of them have witnessed extreme violence and lived in unsafe and unhealthy conditions.** Some have come back traumatised, disillusioned or disengaged, whereas others remain committed to the group or ideology. It is also important to note that disillusionment with a terrorist group does not necessarily equate to distance from a violent ideology, nor disengagement from the "jihadi" cause, when back in Europe. Disillusionment, disengagement and deradicalisation are different processes that may occur independently, although they are not mutually exclusive.

Further reading:

The [RAN Issue Paper 'Foreign fighter returnees & the reintegration challenge'](#) discusses elements of debate in the deradicalisation vs disengagement approaches.

As discussed above, men joined jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq for a series of **different reasons**. Not every FTF was a fighter, and amongst fighters not all of them were deployed to the frontline. Some volunteered for martyrdom or very dangerous missions, while others carefully avoided danger to fully take advantage of the "five-star jihad". While most men

received a form of military training, the content of this training could vary depending on the preference and skillset of the FTF. Some men received advanced military training, including technical skills (such as bomb-making), but also training in counter-intelligence, notably to hide their intentions and resist interrogation. These profiles should be of particular concern.

The gap between the **male fighters' expectations** before travelling and their experience in Syria and Iraq has a significant impact on their state of mind and intention to return. Similarly, the possible gap between their expectations upon return (in terms of status, recognition, resocialisation, etc.) and their experience back home is of significant importance. Identifying these gaps and addressing them is therefore a crucial aspect for managing returnees.

Finally, a number of European men are **detained in Kurdish prisons** in north-east Syria since early 2019. Very little information is available on their physical and psychological conditions, but it is evident from press and official reports that the sanitary and security conditions in these prisons have significantly worsened, resulting in a number of riots and escape attempts. These prisons, where thousands of male fighters are packed together in collective rooms, could very much act as further incubators for radical ideology, group cohesion, international networking (including amongst Daesh members who had never met under the caliphate, because of belonging to different units), and possibly attack planning. It is still unclear whether this (hypothetical) category of returnees would be more dangerous and difficult to manage than previous generations, although it is a plausible expectation.

FEMALE RETURNEES:

Some analyses of women joining Daesh depict them as victims. ⁽³⁷⁾ This perspective deprives women of their agency and ignores the fact that **Western women who join jihadist groups tend to be very motivated by ideology.**⁽³⁸⁾ For many women, joining Daesh was driven by **utopian ideals**, and it fulfilled a need for **excitement and meaning**. Daesh propaganda focused on projecting an idealised image of life in Syria and Iraq. Other factors behind women leaving Europe for Daesh included teenagers falling in love with the image of marrying a "warrior" or discrimination (perceived or experienced). Many women were striving for the establishment of the so-called caliphate according to prophetic methodology, which is, at its core — in their belief-system — a complete system of governance. Daesh projected a romanticised image of a society free from discrimination in which women were allowed to practice their faith. The Daesh dialectic Salafi-jihadist world view, dividing the world into opposites such as purity and impurity, focused on rejecting *dunya* (the material world), which followers condemn as corrupt and polluting.

Many women believed that joining Daesh would give them a sense of **empowerment**. Some saw this as a revolt that could free them from parental restrictions and traditions, enabling them to find their identity, community and a sense of belonging. In joining, they assumed they would be able to take independent decisions about their lives and future, allowing them to marry outside family control. Daesh projected the family as the core focal point, ensuring stability for FTFs travelling to the front and retaining morale within fighter ranks. The Daesh magazine *Dabiq* portrayed women as childbearers and indispensable to the long-term survival of the so-called Islamic State. The principal responsibility of women was to **raise their children and indoctrinate them** into the core values of the so-called caliphate: sons should sacrifice themselves as martyrs and daughters should replicate their mother's example.

Daesh has developed an intricate bureaucracy of public virtue that was reinforced by the *Hisbah* and the Sharia Courts. This entails a long list of proscribed dress codes and behaviours. For example, all women required a male guardian to leave their homes. Women must be accompanied by a *mahram*, who is a related male guardian such as a brother or father, or other women, when outside or travelling. The all-female *al-Khansaa* unit enforced

⁽³⁷⁾ See, for example, Lakhani & Ahmadi, *Women in Extremist Movements: Not Just Passive Victims*.

⁽³⁸⁾ Europol, *Women in Islamic State propaganda: Roles and incentives*.

public virtue, met out punishments, and staffed roadblocks to search women (ensuring men cannot use the niqab as a disguise). Several Western women have joined this unit.

It is also clear that **women played an active role in disseminating Daesh propaganda** on social media to attract more female recruits. Women in Syria have also made themselves available to others looking for advice on things like how to carry out *hijra*, what to pack, how much money to bring, and so on.

Furthermore, some women have allegedly committed or **participated in serious crimes** in Syria, in their households or possibly in Kurdish camps, such as slavery or human trafficking, and possibly murder. It is important to recognise women's participation in such crimes and ensure that they are prosecuted accordingly. Some women may also have participated in fighting activities between late 2017 and early 2019, when Daesh was under strong military pressure.⁽³⁹⁾ Furthermore, it should also be acknowledged that in some cases women were more extremist than their husbands. Some women may have convinced their husbands or siblings to travel to Syria; and in Syria, some women have allegedly incited their husbands to take up arms or volunteer for martyrdom.

Female returnees often return to their home countries for one or a combination of several reasons: some were disillusioned after their experience of hardship and oppression, or after their husband was killed; others came back for medical treatment, to give birth or for family support. In a few instances, women have been bought free and rescued by their families. Some returned due to family pressure.

Women detained in **Kurdish camps** in north-east Syria present a variety of profiles. Some had defected from Daesh before they were captured by Kurdish forces, others were already distancing themselves from the group but could not escape until the fall of Baghuz, whereas others still remain committed to Daesh. Some of the most radicalised women are seeking to restore a caliphate-like society in the Kurdish camps (in particular al-Hol), exerting strong pressure on women who have allegedly disengaged.

The difficult life conditions in the camps are putting women — and particularly mothers with children — in front of **very difficult choices**, which may create additional layers of trauma, such as deciding to attempt escape (or not), or to accept that their children be repatriated without them (or not). Some women lost their children in the camps, due to the poor sanitary and medical conditions. In addition, the absence of significant repatriation efforts by European governments could further the grievances and possibly radicalisation of some women. The impact of this particular experience on these women's trajectory upon return remains difficult to measure.

Upon return, most women were **originally not arrested or prosecuted**, as they were primarily perceived as victims, and as investigators, prosecutors and judges were partly influenced by gender stereotypes.⁽⁴⁰⁾ This has changed progressively in several countries — although not all — as women came to be perceived as potentially dangerous, not least in the aftermath of female terror plots in Europe.⁽⁴¹⁾ It is important to note that there are female Daesh supporters who will likely continue to exert pressure on female returnees once back home, inside or outside prison.

Further reading:

[‘Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps’](#) by Gina Vale: This paper contributes to the understanding of women's roles across the lifespan of the so-called Islamic State.

⁽³⁹⁾ Vale, Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ UNODC, Handbook on gender dimensions of criminal justice responses to terrorism.

⁽⁴¹⁾ French Senate, *Rapport fait au nom de la commission d'enquête sur l'organisation et les moyens des services de l'État pour faire face à l'évolution de la menace terroriste après la chute de l'État islamique*; Renard & Coolsaet, Returnees: Who are they, why are they (not) coming back and how should we deal with them?

This [Europol report](#) reviews the narrative and propaganda of Daesh towards women.

CHILD RETURNEES:

Children and minors brought to Syria or born into families with an allegiance to the Islamic State represent a serious and special issue. A significant number of children have been taken to Syria and Iraq by one or both parents. Many more were born under the caliphate. Those born in theatre risk statelessness as Daesh birth certificates are invalid. Establishing parenthood to enable children to return to Europe with their parents is important.

Providing exact numbers for the children living in Daesh-held territory in Syria and Iraq is very difficult. Many women became pregnant quickly as contraception was illegal, and because Daesh wanted families to have as many children as possible. According to some studies, there would have been around 1 600 European children who either travelled to the area with their parents or were born in theatre. ⁽⁴²⁾

Children are first and foremost victims of the choices of their parents, of Daesh, and of war more broadly. However, it is important to fully consider what they may have been exposed to, and eventually what some may have done. The **recruitment of children into Daesh began formally at the age of 9** and continued until they were around 15 years old. Boys as young as 9 years old could start receiving weapons training.⁽⁴³⁾ Many of these children were recruited through multiple pathways, ranging from religious indoctrination to financial enticements. This child socialisation goes through at least six stages: "Seduction, Schooling, Selection, Subjugation, Specialization, and Stationing".⁽⁴⁴⁾ These *Ashbal al-Khilafah*, or "cubs of the Caliphate", were often forced to attend camps where they were subjected to intense ideological indoctrination and training in fighting skills (martial arts and self-defence) and how to deal with prisoners.

Some **child recruits were indoctrinated to show absolute loyalty to Daesh** and commitment to martyrdom as the highest cause, during the caliphate. This loyalty was instilled through religious instruction and watching Daesh videos. Once they were socialised into the ranks of Daesh, they performed multiple roles: spies, preachers, recruiters, soldiers, executioners, suicide bombers. Daesh teachers and officials asked children to act as informants, to report any suspicious behaviour by their parents or others that violates religious laws or suggests opposition to Daesh rule. ⁽⁴⁵⁾

Girls were often asked to stay at home with their mothers so that they may be raised to support their future husbands. Religious education was also encouraged. According to the Daesh manifesto 'Women of the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case study', girls can marry at the age of 9 and at the latest at the age of 16 or 17 years old. They should not work. As of early 2021, it was estimated that there were still around 610-680 European children detained in north-east Syria.⁽⁴⁶⁾ In the camps, children suffer from poor sanitary and medical conditions, lack of education and stimulation, as well as violence and sexual abuse. Doctors have noted that children were increasingly displaying important psychological and physical traumas resulting from their prolonged detention.⁽⁴⁷⁾ The more time they spend under these conditions, the more challenging their (re)socialisation into

⁽⁴²⁾ Cook & Vale, From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate; Renard & Coolsaet R, Children in the Levant: Insights from Belgium on the dilemmas of repatriation and the challenges of reintegration.

⁽⁴³⁾ General Intelligence and Security Service, Focus on Returnees.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ Horgan et al., From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into the Islamic State, p. 645.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Almohammad, ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment; Vale, Cubs in the Lions' Den: Indoctrination and Recruitment of Children Within Islamic State Territory.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ For updated numbers on 2021-2022 please refer to the footnote section on p. 20.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ RSI, Europe's Guantanamo: The indefinite detention of European women and children in North East Syria.

European societies will become. In the camps, it is also suspected that some children have been “adopted” by female FTFs after the death of their biological mother, raising them as their own children. These situations will create additional difficulties regarding the assessment of what is in the best interest of the child under these circumstances.

The welfare of the child must be the first priority for the multi-agency response. Children cannot be considered responsible for their acts, and “radicalisation” is not a concept that applies to children. Children are deeply impressionable and malleable. Exposure to extreme levels of violence creates trauma and potentially desensitises children to brutalisation and violence, and could therefore increase their risk of violence or delinquency in teenagerhood. Understanding the extent of indoctrination, the exposure to violence and the living conditions experienced is crucial to assessing and resocialising these children.

Further reading:

[‘Inside the Caliphate’s Classroom: Textbooks, Guidance Literature, and Indoctrination Methods of the Islamic State’](#) by Jacob Olidort: This paper describes how children in the so-called caliphate are schooled.

[‘Europe’s Guantanamo: The indefinite detention of European women and children in North East Syria’](#) by Rights & Security International (RSI): This report details the situation in the camps for women and children, with a focus on Europeans.

Foreign terrorist fighter returnee challenges

FTF returnees are a major security concern precisely because of their battlefield experience, training in the use of weapons and connections to international terrorist networks. **Desensitisation to the use of violence, combined with the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** that often accompanies combat experience, and potential involvement in atrocities such as those that Daesh proudly publicises, further increases the potential threat posed by returnees.

This cocktail of risk factors is magnified through **humiliation, frustration, brutalisation, trauma and loss**. The combined effect of this can be further radicalisation, fighting skills, and a lower threshold for violence and killing as well as a combat mindset. Many FTFs suffer from asocial psychological disorders, which manifest themselves in low impulse control, anger management issues, aggression and violence in social relations. FTFs often return to their previous radical milieus or criminal gangs, having an adverse effect on social dynamics. Unmet expectations upon return, as well as a resistance to the policy responses deployed by European authorities, expressed for instance through feelings of injustice or persecution (which may be validated by the perception of excessive security measures, for example), could further complicate rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.

Challenges for female returnees:

- deep commitment to the “caliphate” ideal and to Daesh;
- peer pressure from Daesh women support groups at home;
- being able to leave the house and actually doing so, as Daesh rules aim to keep women cloistered inside their homes; breaking this rule also means breaking the taboo of gender segregation;
- stigmatisation within the community and/or family;
- dealing with the violence and restrictive movements witnessed/experienced;
- child protection issues;
- dealing with the loss of a child or children and/or husband;
- separation from child(ren) in prison (or in camps).

Challenges for child returnees:

- proving parenthood and nationality (possibly through DNA testing);
- physical and psychological problems;
- major educational delays;
- dealing with severe stress and trauma, the effects of which may manifest themselves through loss of speech, aggression, intense fear and signs of post-traumatic stress disorder;
- combat experience and subjection to violence and punishments as part of everyday life;
- indoctrination (children are taught at a young age that anyone not observing the “correct” and strict Salafi-jihadist interpretation of Islam is a *kafir* (unbeliever) and must be killed);
- dealing with participation in executions;
- dealing with previous involvement in terrorist missions or collecting targeted information in the West and other intelligence useful for Daesh;
- experience of arranged marriages and sexual abuse;
- physical suffering through previous beatings, torture and rape;
- injuries sustained through punishment or fighting;
- detachment from their parents – training camps are designed to do this;
- vulnerability to influence by the attitudes and behaviour of the parents;
- stigmatisation as a “terrorist” at school, in the neighbourhood or in the media;
- broken kinship ties and altered lines of loyalty, particularly amongst children who were seeking affiliation and identity;
- lack of familiarity with EU society and norms;
- dealing with the loss of one or both parents;
- dealing with the incarceration of one or both parents;
- dealing with the separation from siblings;
- building a family narrative regarding the experience of child and parents in Syria/Iraq.

Policy responses to returnees

Travelling to European destinations, returnees might be met at the airport by police or security officials, who either arrest returnees or, at the very least, subject them to questioning to assess risk levels, the returnees’ mood as well as general condition. Children are sometimes separated from their parents, at least temporarily, to undergo medical and psychological tests (see *below*). Some returnees can travel back undetected and either report themselves or are reported by family members, local authorities or practitioners. Some may remain unnoticed. This first meeting can often be used as an entry point for further investigation and interventions. It is also useful to use risk assessment tools (see Chapter 3) in this and subsequent meetings.

In a number of European countries, although not all, returnees are now almost systematically detained and prosecuted upon return, notably in Belgium, France and the Netherlands. Most common charges include participation in a terrorist organisation, generally leading to relatively short prison sentences (about 5 years on average).⁽⁴⁸⁾ More efforts are deployed to prosecute returning FTFs for the more serious crimes that they may have committed, with limited success so far. If not charged with terrorist-related offences, some may still face criminal prosecution for financial fraud or benefit fraud. Significantly, several countries (notably Belgium, France and the Netherlands) have already convicted *in absentia* FTFs who are still in Syria – even when presumed deceased. Some countries have also started to strip some FTFs of their European citizenship, which could limit their ability to return.

Security services and police should provide information, possibly via a designated point of contact (see ‘Multi-agency Agreement on Intervention’), to the relevant local multi-agency

⁽⁴⁸⁾ EPRS, The return of foreign fighters to EU soil: ex-post evaluation; Renard & Coolsaet, Returnees: Who are they, why are they (not) coming back and how should we deal with them?

coordination team assigned to the case. This team will most likely include: local authority coordinator or representative, local police, social work/family support professional, child protection services, and a mental health professional. Based on the case, an education professional, a prison and/or probation representative, non-governmental organisation (NGO) professionals (e.g. exit workers) or community members may be involved. They should have meetings about the returnees in which each individual agency is requested to provide input and views on the returnee concerned, and how they should be approached, and agree on the best form of intervention.

This multi-agency coordination team should provide, to the extent that is possible, a 360-degree view of the individual concerned, their parents, children, friends, history and current circumstances, including individual needs, capacities and grievances. **Based on this, the team should develop a tailored action plan for the returnee concerned** and clear instructions as to which agencies are in the lead to carry out meetings, risk assessments, continuous needs analyses, and dialogue with the returnee, their relatives, friends and relevant stakeholders (see 'Multi-agency Agreement on Intervention').

If returnees are arrested, prosecuted and sentenced to prison (see 'Prosecution Route'), the local multi-agency cooperation team should assess and be able to hold early meetings with the inmate as well as with their parents and spouse to establish a personal relationship and possibly a working relationship. This relationship could involve resocialisation interventions such as mentoring, psychological assistance, parent support and networks, practical assistance in dealing with authorities about housing, employment, release conditions, etc. (see 'Non-prosecution Route / Resocialisation').

If the returnee is not prosecuted, it is important that the local multi-agency coordination team meets to establish procedures for managing the returnee and possible needs. It is important for the team to organise **mentoring and family support**. These interventions can be seen as barometers for the well-being of the returnee. They offer the opportunity to conduct risk assessments of the returnee and assessment of the individual needs as well as family dynamics. At the same time, they offer the opportunity to establish trust and working relationships with the returnee and their family (see 'Non-prosecution Route / Resocialisation').

Another important issue is to assess the well-being of children in these households and to safeguard them from any risks, such as indoctrination or being forced to travel back to terrorist-controlled areas. These difficult assessments need to be carried out by professionals. Extensive consultation with the returnee, plus family and friends, is crucial and necessary (see 'Child Returnees').

Further reading:

['Returnees: Who Are They, Why Are They \(Not\) Coming Back and How Should We Deal with Them? Assessing Policies on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands'](#) by Thomas Renard and Rik Coolhaet (Eds): This study reviews the policy response to returnees in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands.

['The return of foreign fighters to EU soil: Ex-post evaluation'](#) by the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS): This paper reviews the policy response to returnees across Europe.

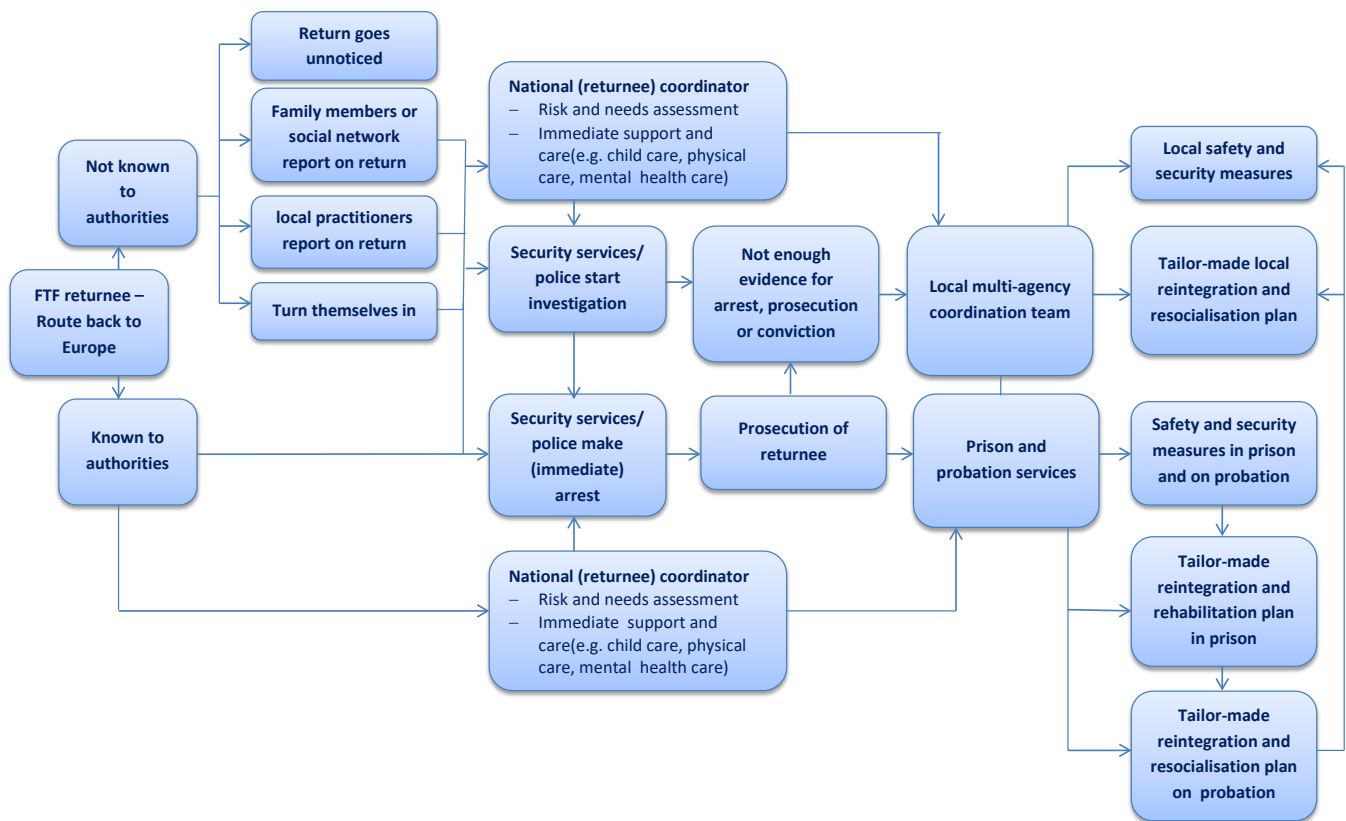


Figure 1: Schematic return to Europe

Investigation and Risk Assessment

This chapter provides a framework for conducting threat and risk assessments of returnees. It is meant to guide the process of developing suitable tools that police and multi-agency cooperation teams can use to assess returnee risks and intervention measures. The chapter also gives an overview of several risk assessment models developed for different purposes. No specific model focusing on FTFs has been developed. Importantly, this manual provides just such a model, the RAN CoE Returnee 45 model.

Actions prior to return

There are **four prerequisite actions** when a returnee comes back to their home country:

1. The returnee must be identified and debriefed for information about their travel, actions and return, and for information about the terrorist organisation they joined.
2. A risk assessment of the threat the returnee poses to society must be made.
3. At national level, a national point of contact or task force should also start preparing – in a multi-agency setting – the interventions needed to minimise the risk when the returnee goes back into society, after prosecution or not (see 'Multi-agency Agreement on Intervention' for details). This person or task force should also set up contacts with the local multi-agency cooperation team.
4. The local multi-agency cooperation team should start preparing a coordinated approach tailored to the returnee's circumstances and the risks they pose when going back to their hometown, after prosecution or not.

The first two actions are addressed in this chapter and the last two in 'Multi-agency Agreement on Intervention'.

After departure for Syria / immediate preparation for return

In cases where individuals have succeeded in joining terrorist groups abroad, it is essential for police to **begin work on their case before they return**.

There are five main reasons to do this:

1. There is a substantial risk that siblings and peers may be targeted for recruitment from abroad. Preventing chain recruitment using the same facilitation and finance networks is a priority concern for police.
2. The earlier intelligence collection starts, the more complete a picture services will have of the FTF's actions and contacts in Syria, which can improve the threat assessment. A number of FTFs published regular updates on their life in Syria and Iraq on social media during the first phase of the conflict, although that mostly stopped or moved to non-public social media at a later stage, making online intelligence collection more complicated.
3. In cases where the families were not aware of the impending departure, they need substantial counselling and support, which can later become useful to build trustworthy relationships with their relatives and others close to the foreign fighter with a view to assisting in the resocialisation and reintegration of returning FTFs. Family members of FTFs still detained in Syria and Iraq can also seek out advice to know what they can do to help their relatives, but also what they should not do (as some have sent money, which can be perceived as terrorism financing in some cases although this was not necessarily the family's intention).
4. Good contacts with the family can also yield useful information about the situation of FTFs in Syria, since FTFs often maintain contact with their families. A trustful

relationship between the families, counselling organisations and local authorities can be rewarding – from both a security and a long-term rehabilitation perspective.

- Establishing contact with the family will also provide valuable insights into the family dynamics and context upon return, which will be valuable in managing the returnee process. Most returnees return to their familiar surroundings. Establishing relationships within these milieus and picking up information about other vulnerable individuals and how a returnee may influence radical milieus will be valuable, but also the development of trust can improve assistance to the family over the longer term, regarding the reintegration of returnees notably. (For more on family support see 'Non-prosecution Route') Here, it is especially necessary to clearly delineate between those actors responsible for security measures and intelligence gathering and those responsible for working on rehabilitation and reintegration. Otherwise, families and returning FTFs may lose trust in civil institutions and organisations aiming to support them due to their perceived interconnection with police and security agencies.

Almost all approaches to returnees in Europe follow the same process. This process has been summarised by the Dutch counterterrorism coordinator (Figure 2). The approach is more or less the same as the one being developed and improved for radicalising individuals who want to travel, or who have been stopped from leaving for the so-called caliphate. **This intelligence-based and investigatory approach becomes the first line of response**, starting with a criminal investigation and assessment of the risk and threat posed by the returnee to the community and society. In cases where there are no prosecutions, the case will be handled by the local multi-agency cooperation team and an individual case approach will be developed. Findings by the RAN Police and Law Enforcement (RAN POL) Working Group have emphasised that no radical new approaches and institutions for handling returnees are needed. Instead, the objective should be to copy successful approaches, to adapt them and to improve them.

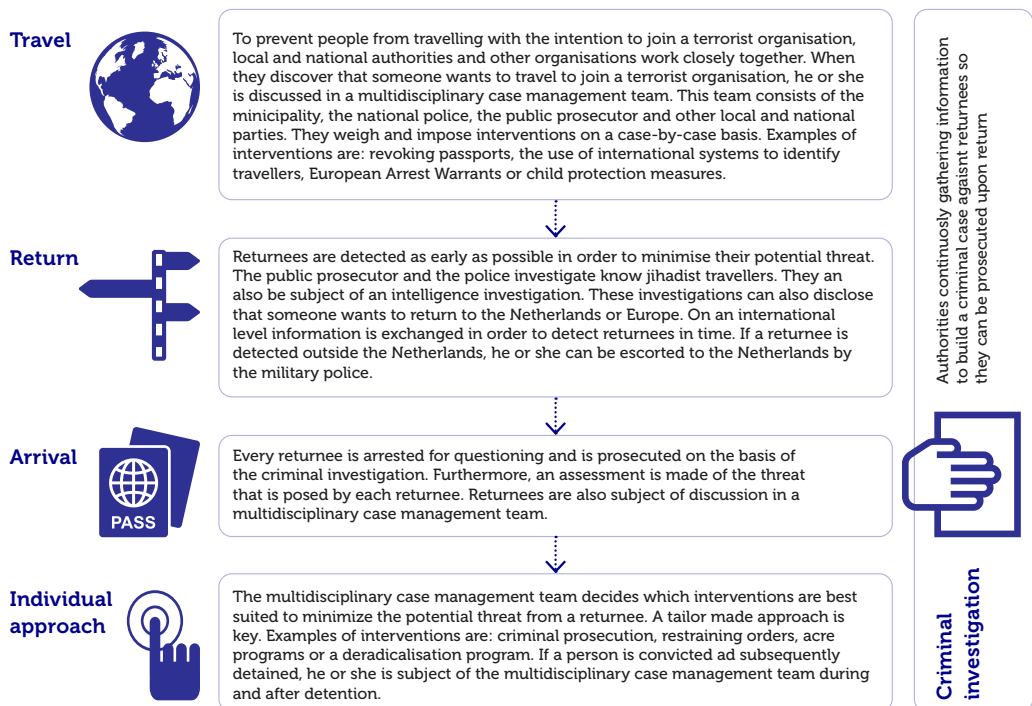


Figure 2: Dutch approach to returnees

Specific action points for police officers dealing with returnees

- Open a case file on anyone who has left for Syria. This should cover both pursuit and investigation angles, as well as prevention and resocialisation options.

- Establish a **case management process** to deal with returnees through available multi-agency structures. Two processes take place simultaneously: 1) pursuit and investigation; and 2) prevention and engagement with the family.
- Establish a case management process to deal with **returnees with children** that relies on the multi-agency cooperation put in place for child protection and child abuse cases. This case management deals with the entire family at risk. Ensure that all measures in a multi-agency process are complementary and do not (unintentionally) counteract each other (e.g. police measures and social work).
- **Test the Information Sharing Protocols (ISPs)** in returnee scenarios. What improvements are needed and what options and resources are available? Consider drawing up a short, tailored handbook for handling returnees that takes into account processes, procedures and resources.
- Consider establishing a **24/7 police resource specialist** on returnees and extremism issues that can be consulted by first-line practitioners.
- **Engage with the FTF** and family as soon as someone leaves for a conflict zone. Specific police officers, such as family contact officers and trusted community police officers, should make themselves available for consultation on police matters. Families are desperate for information on what is going on, how they can get their children back (and what they can or should not do in this regard), and what exactly will happen when their children/spouse return. Home visits, together with family support or social services, can be helpful. It is important that the police officer (or someone else) has the right personality and relation-building skills for this interaction. (See Chapter 6 on family support.)
- In cases where families distrust police and other authorities, **use influencing techniques** to get a foot in the door. Some police use hostage negotiator techniques to build working relations with individuals who strongly dislike or oppose police. Robert B. Cialdini's six key principles of influence⁽⁴⁹⁾ (consistency, reciprocity, liking, social proof, authority and scarcity) form a proven approach to influencing returnees and families.
- In cases where there are returnees with children, **consult specialist mental health professionals** to prepare specialist trauma treatment and proper assessment procedures. The lessons from child soldiers, as well as children exposed to domestic violence or sexual abuse, tell us that in terms of treatment, we need long-term interventions, delivered by specialists – not the police. For the police it is relevant to determine how to engage with young children who might be witnesses, victims or perpetrators. There are valuable lessons to be gained from police experience in child abuse and domestic violence cases. (See Chapter 7 on children.)
- Check returnees' **financial footprint**, including bank accounts, debts and transfers. Financial investigations increase understanding of relationships within networks. Many foreign fighters accumulated debt and transferred funds to take to the terrorist group they joined.

Practice in action:

Example of police using conversation as an intervention: ['A Guide to Police Conversation Intervention: A dialogue promoting responsibility and positive change'](#), National Police Directorate Norway, 2011.

Further reading:

['The role of police officers in dealing with jihadist returnees'](#), RAN POL Ex Post Paper, 2017.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ Cialdini, Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion.

Returnees in transit and arriving home

FTFs trying to return to Europe face innumerable practical obstacles. Travel from Syria into Turkey or Libya and then into Europe is difficult and hazardous. When recruits joined Daesh, for example, they were asked to surrender their passports to the organisation for security reasons. These documents were then either destroyed or used by human traffickers for terrorism purposes or other illegal activities. Since 2017, a number of FTFs have been captured and detained by Kurdish forces. As prisoners, they are unable to return on their own volition and depend on hypothetical repatriation schemes.

Some foreign fighters do succeed in returning to the EU, nonetheless. They do it unnoticed to security services, through clandestine routes notably. Others manage to reach Turkey from where they approach the consulate or embassy to request new passports, and return. Some of these scenarios (notably returns via Turkey) provide intelligence services and the police with early warning opportunities, but not all of them. Furthermore, these different scenarios provide a host of different challenges:

- Verifying returnees' identities.
- Dealing with children born "stateless" and without proof of identity.
- How to practically transfer returnees and families back to their country of birth – should an armed escort or other security arrangements be used?
- Should FTFs in Syria be repatriated, and under what conditions? Should a distinction be made between high-risk FTFs and low-risk ones and if so, how?
- Should children be repatriated without their mothers? What is the legality of such a measure?
- What to do with FTFs who have been stripped of their European citizenship? Which information should be shared with the other country of nationality, at which stage, by which service, and according to which mechanism?
- How and when to interview minors.
- Information sharing between intelligence and police, as well as between police and other government agencies – investigation and prosecution procedures may hamper willingness to share the information that someone is returning.
- Whether and when to inform families, including about a possible repatriation.

Some EU Member States have established **multidisciplinary teams at embassies/consulates** in the foreign countries in which returnees first arrive in transit to process practical issues and begin criminal investigations. Some countries have also sent experts to Syria, to identify and assess FTFs in detention.

The first challenge or task is the **criminal investigation and the threat analysis in terms of national security**. This should also cover elements of physical and psychological needs, as well as other relevant problems. In some EU Member States, FTFs still in Syria have already been convicted *in absentia*, whereas in other countries criminal investigations are open, but without prosecution.

The initial risk assessment might be done by the security and intelligence services and the police, when FTFs are still in Syria and Iraq. The assessment may be incomplete initially, given the limited amount of information available. As chances of return increase, for instance for individuals detained in north-east Syria, it is critical to update the initial risk assessment with all possible means and sources, including possibly on-site interviews. Risk assessment should continue to be regularly updated over time, in a continuous and dynamic manner. This could notably offer a perspective on the personal trajectory of each returnee.

Conducting criminal investigations and risk assessment is a complex undertaking and requires multi-mode investigation tools and risk assessment models. The first task for

intelligence services and the police is to carefully conduct interrogation and interviews with foreign fighters.

Risk assessment tools for violent extremism

Very few existing risk assessment tools specific to violent extremism have been tested or verified for effectiveness. Various governments use violence risk assessment tools for both terrorists and extremist offenders in a prison environment, or as a diagnostic instrument to screen radicalised individuals for risks and needs. They are based on evidence drawn from extensive terrorism literature reviews.

There are **three basic models of risk assessments**:

1. Professional judgment involving risk predictions based solely on the professional's experience and knowledge of the individual being assessed.
2. Actuarial tools based on checklists of risk indicators, using a formula that results in an overall risk prediction (e.g. high, medium or low risk).
3. Structured professional judgement (SPJ), which combines both approaches (professional and actuarial) to guide the process systematically, identifying risks and evaluating the individual in context. In this SPJ model, assessment is based on both the presence and relevance of risk factors for the individual concerned.

These models guide the multi-agency process, create a shared understanding across government agencies and provide usable risk indicators for future violence. However, it is often the case that different administrations (e.g. prison services and police) use different risk assessment tools. This can create specific challenges, notably in terms of trajectory over time, as the results from the various tools cannot be compared. In contrast, the use of a similar risk assessment tool by different administrations participating in the multi-agency approach can facilitate discussions and cooperation between partners. In Belgium, for instance, returnees are evaluated by the counterterrorism fusion centre CUTA through a specific tool (called RooT37), which is also used by the local multi-agency platforms, hence facilitating a shared evaluation over time.

Risk assessments are usually carried out by trained professionals within the police or social services. Not all risk assessment tools require formal training. They are often used as guidance together with other relevant information gathered from interviews with returnees and their families. Several risk assessment tools stand out: **ERG22+**, **IR46**, **VERA-2** and **TRAP-18**. The UK government employs the Extreme Risk Guidelines (ERG22+) in the screening process of individuals referred to the Channel process. Similarly, the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment (VERA-2) is widely used by prison and probation services in several countries. The IR46 is a Dutch risk assessment model used in a multi-agency setting by Haaglanden Regional Safety House (*Veiligheidshuis*). The Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18) is used as an investigative framework and employs 8 proximal warning behaviours and 10 longer-term distal characteristics. (See Annex 1 for an overview of these four risk assessment tools.)

These four tools can offer guidance on conducting risk assessment. Elements of these can also be modified for use as risk assessment tools for FTFs. All risk assessment tools work with lists of indicators for factors such as: (i) beliefs and attitudes; (ii) context and intent; (iii) history and capabilities; (iv) commitment and motivation; and (v) protective circumstances. The indicators are presented below as a guide for professional judgement.

It is important to note that any risk assessment needs to be based on triangulation and judgement from multiple sources. It is also important to assess the gender aspect and to use other professional judgements on the role of minors. Overall, it is evident that risk assessment tools cannot be considered as fully reliable, and therefore have **no predictive**

abilities, not least since returnees will seek to hide their intentions and cheat the evaluation. Risk assessment tools should be one component of a multi-method assessment strategy involving specific tools to be used in multi-agency settings. They should be combined with police interviews and other relevant sources to provide a diagnostic or fuller picture of individuals posing a potential risk. Furthermore, risk assessment tools can be indicators of critical information missing for the evaluation, which can then encourage relevant services to investigate further.

Further reading:

[‘The Practitioner’s Guide to the Galaxy - A Comparison of Risk Assessment Tools for Violent Extremism’](#), by Liesbeth van der Heide, Marieke van der Zwan and Maarten van Leyenhorst: This study compares the methodology and purpose of the main risk assessment tools used in Europe.

[‘Developing, implementing and using risk assessment for violent extremist and terrorist offenders’](#): This RAN Ex Post Paper explains how to develop and implement risk assessment tools.

[‘Risk Assessment in Prison’](#): This RAN paper provides a picture of risk assessment tools used in EU Member States regarding violent extremism both in the prison and security contexts.

[‘The potential of social diagnostics for P/CVE’](#): The field of social diagnostics offers valuable tools and instruments that to date have been largely overlooked in the context of practical P/CVE. Nonetheless, these instruments can complement security-focused risk assessments with a much-needed social perspective on the individual needs and resources of a person.

RAN CoE Returnee 45

Based on experience with the aforementioned risk assessment tools, **RAN has created a risk investigative tool specifically for use with returnees**. The **RAN CoE Returnee 45** is a risk investigative tool to be used in relation to FTF returnees in order to help organise reflection and operational planning for possible interventions, and to reduce the threat of violence. It is a framework for general investigation into the motivation, levels of commitment and other risk factors throughout the FTF process – from leaving to returning.

A major reason for developing the RAN CoE Returnee 45 was that existing risk assessment tools were not specifically aligned to the parameters of FTF returnees, but were focused instead on risk assessment in prisons (VERA) or multi-agency assessments (ERG22+), or geared towards lone actors (TRAP-18). There are some features common to RAN CoE Returnee 45 and the other tools, and a strong evidence base for risk behaviours of extremists, but the new tool also takes into account specific risk behaviours inherent in FTF cases, from them leaving to returning.

The RAN CoE Returnee 45 provides a **template for the multi-agency response** to organise operational data on returnees so that specific focus areas can be identified and isolated when planning interventions. It serves as a checklist, allowing the intervention specialist a quick overview of risk levels so that an identified issue may be further investigated. As for all risk assessment or risk investigation tools, it is important to stress that this is just one tool in the process, and that it needs to be cross-verified across a range of other information sources (such as police interview, etc.). The risk investigation tool is not a predictive tool, but rather a way to flag and organise risk behaviours that need further assessment by relevant professionals.

Each section contains a risk rating system that provides an indication of the specific risk behaviours requiring further attention. The assessor analyses why an individual has scored high, medium or low, and identifies those areas in need of further investigation. The tool serves as a basis for discussion in multi-agency settings, where decisions are taken on specific mitigating actions, as well as any additional action required. It is important to note that these risk behaviours are counterbalanced by protective factors, such as supportive family and other stability factors. The protective factors need to be factored into the overall risk assessment of the returnee.

| RAN COE RETURNEE 45 | | | |
|--|------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| I. Motivation (before / after travel) | Degree of Risk: LOW | Degree of Risk: MODERATE | Degree of Risk: HIGH |
| Psychological factors influenced by pathways: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action-oriented • Family • Brooder • Belonging / acceptance | | | |
| 2. Grievance / Injustice | | | |
| 3. Susceptibility to indoctrination | | | |
| 4. Sudden change in behaviour | | | |
| 5. Adherence to Salafi-jihadi ideology: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of specific terminology (takfir, etc.) • "Them" and "us" thinking • Glorification of martyrdom and violence • Rejects Western values and norms • Demonisation and dehumanisation of enemies • Fixation | | | |
| 6. Social media: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital footprint (avatar, secure communication channels) • Conspiratorial thinking • Consumption and production of extremist propaganda material • Communication with like-minded extremists | | | |
| 7. Stress levels | | | |
| 8. Impulse control | | | |
| 9. Conflict management skills | | | |
| 10. Family norms (accepting / rejecting ideology) | | | |
| 11. Limited sense of belonging to society (on religious grounds) | | | |

| II. SOCIAL CONTEXT (BEFORE / AFTER TRAVEL) | Degree of Risk: LOW | Degree of Risk: MODERATE | Degree of Risk: HIGH |
|--|------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| 12. Contact with radical network / milieu | | | |
| 13. Attraction to subculture (gangs) | | | |
| 14. Criminal past | | | |
| 15. Level of family dysfunctionality | | | |
| 16. Siblings or other family members are FTFs | | | |
| 17. Self-isolation | | | |
| 18. Mental health issues | | | |
| 19. Evasive behaviour | | | |
| III. EXPERIENCE IN CONFLICT / IN THEATRE | Degree of Risk: LOW | Degree of Risk: MODERATE | Degree of Risk: HIGH |
| 20. Registration and security vetting | | | |
| 21. Training camp experience | | | |
| 22. Position inside the group | | | |
| 23. Marital status and family (in theatre) | | | |
| 24. Social media footprint | | | |
| 25. Reflection on experience: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Glorification • Regret • Disillusionment • Aggression • Fear | | | |
| IV. DECISION TO RETURN | Degree of Risk: LOW | Degree of Risk: MODERATE | Degree of Risk: HIGH |
| 26. Disillusionment | | | |
| 27. Health factors | | | |
| 28. Family pressure | | | |
| 29. Social pressure | | | |
| 30. Financial / living conditions | | | |
| 31. Negative experiences | | | |
| 32. Returning alone or in a group | | | |

| V. Arriving Home (see sections on Motivation and Social Context as they are also applicable) | Degree of Risk: LOW | Degree of Risk: MODERATE | Degree of Risk: HIGH |
|---|------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| 33. Capacity for self-reflection about the future | | | |
| 34. Disillusionment | | | |
| 35. Mental health (trauma, unresponsiveness, high stress levels) | | | |
| 36. Destructive support network / radical milieu | | | |
| 37. Connection to society and community | | | |
| 38. Family involvement | | | |
| 39. Lack of housing / employment | | | |
| 40. Peer pressure | | | |
| 41. Level of trust and relationship with authorities | | | |
| 42. Sense of belonging (to non-believers) | | | |
| 43. Paranoia | | | |
| 44. Expression of explicit and implicit threats of violence | | | |
| 45. International contacts (with extremists) | | | |

Multi-agency Agreement on Intervention

This chapter covers prerequisite actions numbers 3 and 4 (see Chapter 3). It provides a framework for conducting multi-agency coordination at the national, regional and local levels.

Experience across Europe shows that **multi-agency structures and working processes are crucial for handling FTF cases**. Early and effective identification of returnees, improved information sharing and joint decision-making are only possible when actions are coordinated. Information about a person having departed to join a terrorist group needs to be shared with the relevant partners at local, regional and national levels. Such information sharing gains in importance as soon as there are signals that the FTF is returning.

When the returnee arrives, intelligence assessments and police investigations are prerequisites to determining appropriate responses in line with the specific circumstances of each case. Responses can include judicial proceedings, administrative measures or resocialisation measures. Parallel to this is the work at national level and within the local multi-agency coordination team. This team focuses on minimising the risks the returnee poses to society by coordinating **holistic structures and working procedures** in order to prepare for reintegration and resocialisation within society when there is not enough evidence to ensure prosecution. Alternatively, the team prepares for the eventual release process.

Coordination at national level

At the outset, it is crucial to make the distinction between coordination at a national level and a local, multi-agency approach. The remit for coordination at national level extends to police and intelligence efforts, risk assessment of the returnee and possible prosecution. Coordination at national level is also needed during detention and to set up rehabilitation efforts. This is crucial to minimising the risk posed by the returnee to society. Rehabilitation efforts include, notably, medical or mental health treatment – if needed – or having children followed by the child protection services.

If a returnee is **released or not prosecuted**, the local/regional multi-agency team should be involved with or take over (depending on the division of responsibilities within the country) the coordination of responses to this returnee and focus on resocialisation and rehabilitation in society.

The key point is to ensure that there is **vertical and horizontal coordination between the national and local/regional levels** from the moment a returnee enters the Member State, and that agencies or authorities do not work at cross purposes. To ensure this, a national point of contact or task force for returnees could be installed. The tasks and the size, extent and remit of such a point of contact or task force depend on the number of FTFs currently in terrorist-claimed territory and the expected number of returnees. If applicable, this point of contact or task force should be part of the national coordinating body for counterterrorism or prevention of radicalisation. They should also cooperate closely with intelligence services, national police, prosecution services, the penitentiary and probation services. Providing overall coordination of effort, the point of contact or task force could offer a single point of contact for (local) government agencies dealing with FTF returnees, and enable them to monitor challenges, measures and results.

The national point of contact or task force is envisaged as performing three crucial coordination tasks:

Task 1: Centralising and circulating relevant information

The overall objective is to **minimise the risks to society posed by returnees** by centralising relevant information into an all-sources assessment, which can facilitate a tailored response to each individual by relevant services, whether in prison or outside. Detention regimes as well as rehabilitation and reintegration schemes can all benefit from a multi-agency approach, based on efficient coordination and info-flux. A particular challenge is the coordination and sharing of information between stakeholders with different cultures, backgrounds and missions, notably between social and security services.

Task 2: Coordinating the national response and point of contact for regional and local levels

The national point of contact or task force acts as the focal point for all relevant services at the national level, to meet and coordinate their tasks, on the basis of shared information. It is in this coordinated context that good practices can be identified, and that strategic and operational responses to returnees can be best designed. In addition, it could also be **the point of contact for regional or local authorities**. The main task would be to assist these authorities in dealing with returnees, and to centralise information from the local level at a higher level. It is important that information and assistance is swift.

Sub-tasks:

- help set up a coordinated information flow from the local/regional to national level and vice versa, involving municipalities dealing with or preparing for the return of FTFs to their community;
- provide assistance and information about dealing with returnees, including on mental health, child protection, education, employment, housing and communication, and providing context on what returnees have experienced;
- put local authorities in contact with other national organisations if needed;
- put local authorities in contact with other local authorities dealing with returnees;
- collect information about local challenges and results;
- Support the set-up of local multi-agency platforms.

Task 3: Facilitate exchange within the EU

Another possible task for the national point of contact or task force is to **liaise with national returnee points of contact/task forces in other EU Member States** to exchange information about returnees and experiences with prosecution and resocialisation. This is particularly relevant given the transnational nature of returnees' networks and the international aspects of investigations and prosecution of returnees. Contact would also facilitate/encourage an exchange of experiences and good practices between national policymakers, local coordinators and first-line practitioners in different countries.

Practice in action:

CUTA in Belgium chairs the National Task Force, a multi-agency platform gathering all relevant counterterrorism and P/CVE actors. There is no specific task force on returnees but a series of multi-agency working groups under the National Task Force that are relevant to the monitoring of and response to returnees in prison (Working Group Prison) or afterwards (Local Task Forces). CUTA also manages a "Common Database", which is fed with information on returnees and FTFs (and other categories, such as hate propagandists) by different services, such as intelligence, police, and prison or probation officers. Consolidated information is then available to stakeholders managing returnees.

Multi-agency process at local or regional level

The basic functioning of the local/regional multi-agency approach, involving structured interventions and coordination between different agencies, as well as guiding principles for the effective management of cases, is extensively discussed in an earlier RAN CoE policy paper, 'Developing a local prevent framework and guiding principles', as well as in the RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices on the multi-agency approach (see 'Further reading' below).

Many local authorities across Europe do not currently have distinct procedures for handling returnees and have instead integrated the returnees issue within ordinary multi-agency structures. Several elements should be taken into account when dealing with returnees through local multi-agency cooperation.

Add returnee elements to existing scenarios

Established structures and collaboration between local authorities, police and other statutory partners (such as education, social services, child protection services, youth services and even offender management services) need to pre-exist for procedures and protocols for handling specific cases to be designed. It is important to establish **clear-cut agreements about respective roles and limitations for all actors** involved. Efficient coordination requires rehearsals of different case handling scenarios, including those specifically focused on returnees. These scenarios should also include different challenges and solutions for different returnee profiles and situations (male, female, children and entire families).

Further reading:

The [RAN CoE policy paper 'Developing a local prevent framework and guiding principles'](#) focuses on how to develop the necessary framework and components for local prevention action plans. What are the principal challenges involved in this work and what are the guiding principles? The paper is based on broad practical experience and collective wisdom from more than 20 cities across Europe.

The [RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices on Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Multi-Agency Cooperation](#) presents several concrete models.

Information Sharing Protocol

A major issue for multi-agency cooperation is **legal barriers to information sharing on individuals**. This makes committing to an ISP between the agencies participating in the multi-agency cooperation structures essential. An ISP clarifies legal barriers to information exchange between different agencies and outlines how cases will be discussed and handled during multi-agency meetings. It also allows for clarity on the chain of custody in the information flow process (how information is passed from the security service to the police and then to other agencies).

Local Point of Contact

Creating one point of contact in the local social services and other agencies will **build confidence in information sharing mechanisms**. Social services often complain that information about returnees is piecemeal or even lacking. It is important to get information and intelligence from all partners on the individual, the community and the family before, during and after travelling. Do not forget to inform partners about what happened with the information they shared.

Practice in action:

The [Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism](#) functions across national and local levels and is a clearinghouse for good practice. It provides direct operational support to local municipalities handling returnee cases.

Different cooperation models possible

There are different ways to ensure cooperation when needed. Depending on the organisational structure and the scale of the returnee problem, multi-agency coordination at a local level can be either a permanent or temporary structure.

- *Multi-agency structure at local/regional level:* Using and adapting an existing structure for multi-agency cooperation is important to ensure cooperation, efficiency and coordination. Work with returnees is usually conducted within existing multi-agency processes. The Danish SSP model involves close-knit cooperation between schools, social services and the police, and has functioned for over four decades in support of crime prevention. This type of structure also exists in the Netherlands, in its “Safety Houses”, which also focus on crime prevention. In Belgium, a separation was established between a security platform (the “Local Task Force”), gathering local representatives from various security services, and a socio-preventive platform (the “Local Cell for Integral Security”), gathering various municipal and social stakeholders; however, an organic connection was created between the two platforms, through the so-called information officer who participates in meetings for both.
- *Intervention teams to assist at local/regional level:* Some countries and regions have adopted special multi-professional teams that can be called for assistance at local or regional level instead of multi-agency structures. The Finnish Anchor model is such a hub, where professionals work on crime prevention and counter extremism interventions through coordinated, targeted action. The model extends to cooperation with an NGO, which supports disengagement from ideologically motivated violence through mentoring.
- Of course, formal multi-agency structures can co-exist with intervention teams, although it is strongly recommended that there should be coordination or cooperation protocols between them, to avoid overlaps or redundancy.

Practice in action:

A local police unit in The Hague has created a Counter Terrorism Extremism Radicalisation Backbone of police experts, who may be consulted by colleagues not completely familiar with extremism and returnees. A backbone officer is available for consultation 24/7. An internal handbook for all officers contains instructions to follow should an individual appear to be subject to radicalisation and wanting to join a terrorist movement. One of the chapters is titled ‘What to do when a returnee appears on the radar’ and sets out who to contact and what to register in the police systems.

The Aarhus model revolves around the Info House and the regularly scheduled multi-agency meetings involving social services, schools and police representatives. For issues such as FTF returnees, Aarhus has established a Syrian contingency involving working groups for different forms of intervention, such as screenings and risk assessments, mentoring, family networks, and social and employment.

Multi-agency cooperation tips:⁽⁵⁰⁾

- **Rehearse procedures** and ISPs using different returnee scenarios and real-life cases.
- As soon as information is received about a departure, files should be opened on the individual; this will aid pursuit and investigation as well as prevention and resocialisation.
- **Establish who (which agency) takes the lead** as case team manager.
- Consider establishing a specific multi-agency cooperation team for returnees, if necessary, or hold special returnee meetings with the local/regional multi-agency team.
- **Establish contact with the returnee and their family as early as possible** in the process. Building a relationship with returnees and their families is key. Most families have a need to understand the situation, how they can get their child back and what will happen after the returning child sets foot on home soil. The engagement should be carried out by police with relevant skills and expertise, like family contact officers or a trusted community police officer. Although they will identify themselves as police, their main task is to support the family in police matters.
- Ensure **cooperation between the social welfare services and the police** before approaching a family that has seen a relative either depart for a conflict zone or return.
- Build a **relationship with the family**, or ask another agency to do this.
- Focus on **siblings** and other family members who may become vulnerable to violent extremism.
- Children are seen as victims first and foremost. However, events in Syria and Iraq have shown that **children as young as nine could also pose a risk**, either in the short or long term. If the returning father or mother is in custody or jail, child protection takes over. The child must be assessed from several perspectives, and it could be months or even years before risk behaviour presents.
- Ensure swift and specialised access to **mental health specialists**. The Danish Dignity Institute, which works on the reintegration of returnees, emphasises early treatment; 90 % of returnees to Denmark have come from families in which at least one of the parents was traumatised.
- In most countries, changes in legislation mean that travelling to Syria and Iraq falls under **terrorism laws**. Returnees to these countries might therefore be held in custody, and some receive a prison sentence. This provides a window of opportunity for approaching such individuals.
- Assessment at local level should not focus exclusively on risks. It is intended to support risk assessment, but should help to create tailor-made plans for individuals. Therefore, certain parts of the assessment can be more oriented towards **care and resocialisation**.
- The multi-agency team may need to establish/manage relations with **NGOs** in the field. In most countries, exit programmes are run by an NGO; an NGO is better placed to build trust and credibility with the returnee. Since collaboration with the police might violate this trust, there must be clear agreements and processes regarding information sharing. Transparency between the agencies involved and towards the returnee is key. Coordination of the resocialisation programme is the responsibility of the municipality or exit organisation. The police may be involved if there are concerns over safety, either from their side or from another agency involved.
- Establish **process-orientated and individualised action plans** to ensure coordination, continuity and follow-up in each case. These action plans are tailor-made and outline options for mentoring, psychological and trauma assistance, parent networks and counselling, and possibly exit programmes. They engage not only the returnee but also the closest social support (i.e. family).

Prosecution Route

This chapter focuses on the response strategy once a returnee is prosecuted and becomes part of the judicial process, and specifically on the imprisonment stage.

General overview and issues

In EU Member States, an investigation will be conducted, as a general rule, into all returnees suspected of living with/taking part in terrorist groups and activities abroad, to see whether the returnee should be prosecuted based on criminal activities. Upon return or at a later stage (such as when evidence comes to light regarding criminal activities), arrest and interrogation usually take place. Based on the evidence available, further steps will be taken within the criminal justice setting.

Differences between returnee offenders and other violent extremist/terrorist offenders

Within the criminal justice system there are many different types of violent extremist/terrorist criminals. These differences are based on personality, experience, motivation, capability, intent, disillusionment or belief in the Daesh cause, signs of trauma or resilience, or length of stay abroad. The same applies to returnees. Additionally, the experience in the war zone might have led to disengagement or deradicalisation in some cases; there are also cases of individuals who left for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons, and who might or might not have been indoctrinated by Daesh. The circumstances in which persons lived while abroad tend to be harder to establish than those of people living in a domestic, extremist environment. Although the latter can have a psychological impact, those living in a war zone (especially given the atrocities committed by jihadist movements) are more likely to suffer from PTSD. These are aspects that create challenges with regard to establishing intent and finding the right balance between prosecution and reintegration. For returnees it is generally also more difficult to find evidence to substantiate their prosecution.

While the experiences and concrete acts of the returnees vs. homegrown terrorists may have been different, there is currently no specific criminalisation as FTFs. FTFs are prosecuted as “terrorists”, under the various criminal offenses such as membership in a terrorist organisation and planning/executing a terrorist attack, as well as newer offences related to terrorist activities – for example, travelling such as for the purpose of committing, or contributing to the commission of, a terrorist offence, aiding a terrorist organisation with resources, recruiting, inciting to terrorist offences and so on.⁽⁵¹⁾ Additionally, there have been recent cases of prosecution for crimes against humanity such as genocide and torture. After an initial take on women as victims rather than perpetrators, women returnees are currently also prosecuted in EU countries.

The differences outlined above with regard to the first vs the second and third generations of returnees (see also Section 2.3.1) has implications for the prosecution stage. Based on the assumption that the first wave was more idealistic and less aware of the actual Daesh ideology and actions, some practitioners noticed that they were easier to deal with than other extremists as many returned disillusioned with the ideology, the terrorist organisation and/or the circumstances in which they had to live. Some of the returnees of the second wave appear to have been more indoctrinated, as well as trained and rehearsed in how to act and respond to (formal and informal) questioning. The third wave poses

⁽⁵¹⁾ Directive (EU) 2017/541 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2017 on combating terrorism and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA and amending Council Decision 2005/671/JHA. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32017L0541&rid=6>

particular challenges, as it involves both radicalised individuals (i.e. the ones who chose to stay until the end) and the more diverse contingent of women and children. The latter two categories are associated with a high prevalence of trauma – not least due to the detention conditions in camps and the recruiting and radicalising attempts of some of the women detainees there. While prosecution for some of the women and some of the older children in some countries will be inevitable, emphasis should be laid on reintegration and rehabilitation measures, and in particular psychotherapeutical counselling.

A specific issue relates to **recidivism**, including in relation to foreign fighting. While many of the FTFs already had previous criminal convictions, there have also been a number of cases of previous terrorism convictions, as well as more specifically individuals who attempted to leave, were convicted, and on release attempted to leave again or engaged in other terrorist activities. This illustrates **the importance of rehabilitation and reintegration as imprisonment is only the first step in the process** of ensuring that these individuals do not pose a risk to society anymore.

Returnee-specific challenges in the prosecution route

The prosecution route for returnees involves a number of challenges, both as such and in relation to the rest of the prison population, particularly other terrorist and extremist inmates.

- Different FTF returnee profiles within the prison and probation setting: There are individuals who intended to travel as an FTF and were stopped before or during travel, and those who have actually been in a terrorist conflict zone. It is worth considering those who are stopped as a separate group, as the failure to reach the intended destination can increase the feeling of being treated unfairly in the West, while the attractive image of living in Daesh is not challenged by the horror and reality of war and bloodshed. Added to this might be the frustration for failing to achieve their original purpose. Amongst the cohort of returnees from the war zone there is also variety with regard to their criminal offences. In cases with shorter sentences, prison and probation authorities will have less time to assess, rehabilitate and reintegrate them. Preparation for their release therefore requires careful planning and a multi-agency approach to make sure released returnees do not fall back into their old patterns and networks.
- Difficulties in gathering evidence: A specific challenge for those dealing with FTFs and returnees compared to, for example, homegrown right-wing extremists, is access to information and evidence that would support a criminal prosecution. European countries have increasingly used battlefield information in court proceedings, such as for example with regard to battlefield evidence.⁽⁵²⁾ Recently, prosecution based on war crimes has also been used in addition to or instead of prosecution on terrorism counts.
- Withdrawal of citizenship: This measure effectively removes the possibility of prosecution and furthermore deradicalisation or, if carried out during imprisonment, significantly reduces the person’s willingness to participate in rehabilitation programmes. In cases where circumstances prevent physical expulsion, such inmates will pose a high risk upon release.



Case study Returnee on early release

Male returnee returned to town A in 2015. He was imprisoned for a short time and granted an early release. He had a diploma and no criminal record and his reintegration

⁽⁵²⁾ Battlefield evidence usually refers to “materials that originate from a conflict area, and include materials collected by other actors, such as the military, non-governmental organisations, UN entities, the International Criminal Court (ICC) and other organisations.” Eurojust, Battlefield evidence increasingly used to prosecute foreign terrorist fighters in the EU, [para. 5](#).

went well. As a group of returnees (against whom he testified) also became eligible for early release, the returnee became anxious because the chances of him running into them were quite high.

Lessons learned:

- In a relatively small town, abiding by release conditions such as avoiding contact with certain people from the old network and/or taking part in a deradicalisation programme is quite challenging as networks are concentrated and resources scarce. Relocation may be considered so that the individual can honour release conditions. This should be weighed against the possible negative effects of relocation.
 - Cases are sometimes linked; this can open the door to more information and a more complete picture.
 - A clear information sharing procedure is needed as linked cases can also mean danger for the professionals working on them, as well as the people close to the returnees should specific information get into the wrong hands.
- Sentencing and regimes: As preparatory acts of terrorism have also been criminalised, the prison population has become diverse, including with regard to level of indoctrination and security risk. This should be reflected in corresponding prison regimes and programmes. It should be avoided that leaders or ideologues attempt to recruit or further radicalise others in prison. At the same time, opportunities for normalisation and deradicalisation should be created.
 - Public opinion on returnees: The image of returnees in society and political pressure makes it difficult for staff and management to make decisions that involve security and fairness (how strict should you be compared to other prisoners?) and how this is perceived by the returnees (we are being better looked after than others?). In some countries there are opinions according to which terrorist offenders should be detained indefinitely. The human rights implications and the appropriateness of this should be addressed.
 - Radicalisation in prison: Currently, European prisons are confronted with an unprecedented number of extremist and terrorist offenders.⁽⁵³⁾ This not only poses special security challenges, it also harbours the possibility of radicalisation and proselytising in prison. The impact of returnees who might enjoy status due to their war experience and thus contribute to radicalisation in prison, or might help with deradicalisation efforts, needs to be assessed.
 - Female returnees: Jurisdictions have become increasingly experienced with women returning from the conflict area and becoming part of the criminal system as there are no exceptions for women from prosecution based on their gender. At the same time, gender awareness and women's programmes for returnees in prisons remain insufficiently implemented.
 - Juvenile returnees: the prosecution of older children is possible but has been so far little implemented. Given the fact that so date only a few children have been repatriated and that the majority of them are young, this challenge will remain for possible new waves of repatriation.

⁽⁵³⁾ Basra & Neumann, Prisons and Terrorism. Extremist Offender Management in 10 European Countries.

Guiding principles from a prison perspective

The guiding principles on dealing with returnees in a prison environment are similar to those for working with violent extremist/terrorist offenders in general. They have been outlined in two papers produced by the former RAN Prison and Probation (RAN P&P) Working Group. The main conclusions on dealing with all kinds of violent extremist offenders (VEOs) are:

- The safety of society is best ensured through promoting the well-being and rehabilitation of offenders.
- Terrorism crimes cover a range of activities; individuals sentenced for terrorist acts do not all represent the same risk to society.
- It is important to ensure a healthy prison environment by avoiding overcrowding and training staff as necessary.
- Offenders are capable of positive change and they need support to disengage from violent extremism.
- Universal human rights must be upheld at all times and under all circumstances.
- Promoting positive staff–prisoner relationships and healthy prison climates is a precondition for reducing risks related to radicalisation and contributing to rehabilitation and reintegration.
- Multi-agency cooperation is crucial to preventing radicalisation and supporting desistance processes.
- Cooperation between police, prison, probation and prosecution (4Ps) is essential with regard to exchange of information as a precondition for analyses and decisions, the coordination of their activities, and in order avoid duplication or gaps. A number of cooperation models exist, as outlined in more detail in the RAN P&P ex post paper 2018 below.

Practice in action:

[Cooperation between 4P entities](#) (police, prison, probation and prosecution)

In **France**, in order to improve the exchange of information between prison, police and intelligence services, an intelligence service was created within prisons. Furthermore, the prison administration is part of the anti-terrorist coordination unit L'unité de coordination de la lutte antiterroriste (UCLAT).

In the **Netherlands**, the Dutch Safety House model involves multi-level and multi-agency cooperation for cases that are particularly complex. It aims for a balance between soft and hard measures and a tailored approach. The community police officer liaises with intelligence and the local Safety Houses.

Further reading:

The [RAN Collection of inspiring practices search engine](#) provides an overview of aims, methods, lessons learned from the prison and probation fields, and a number of concrete interventions developed within the EU in response.

The [RAN P&P Ex Post Paper of 2018](#) 'Dealing with violent extremist and terrorist offenders: Formalising cooperation among police, prison, probation and prosecution' outlines the rationale and principles of multi-agency cooperation targeting both management and staff at the aforementioned entities as well as national and local policymakers in the EU Member States.

The [Council of Europe on Prisons and Community Sanctions and Measures](#) provides an overview of the standards contained in different conventions, recommendations, protocols and guidance documents regarding prisons and community sanctions.

Concrete methods and intervention models in a prison setting

In the prison setting, the quality of being a returnee may be considered as part of the risk assessment, yet it does not involve a special regime or measure different to the approach taken with terrorist inmates in general. Furthermore, in some countries such as Sweden, there is no special regime for violent extremists either, based on the assumption that criminogenic factors are common across offender types. Once a returnee has been sentenced to prison, there are two main areas in which prisons can apply concrete methods and interventions:

- Safety and security (to ensure the safety and well-being of the prisoner, the prison population, staff members and wider society – this can be seen as short-term security, during imprisonment).
- Rehabilitation and reintegration (to support the prisoner in desisting from the violent extremist path and preparing them to lead a crime-free life once back in society. This should also provide long-term security, after imprisonment).

It is important to keep a prison regime balanced between security demands and needs of rehabilitation.

The **process, timing and decision-making** for these methods and interventions will differ in each jurisdiction, based on the legal framework and specific courts' decisions, the assessed risk posed by the returnee, the availability of professionals to deliver interventions, and the specific rules and regulations in place in the prison.

Generally speaking, the returnee will enter prison once an arrest has been made and preparations begin for the trial. In some cases, returnees do not have to remain in prison during the pretrial phase but can stay at home (perhaps with electronic monitoring). Risk assessment will begin during this phase, carried out by probation staff, psychologists or social workers (depending on the infrastructure in place), and the results will in most cases be presented to the court. It is unlikely that other interventions will be launched during this phase as returnees do not want to incriminate themselves – indicating that they have, for example, radicalised may negatively influence the trial (they can also be advised by their lawyers not to take part). Additionally, the presumption of innocence needs to be considered at this point.

Once the trial has ended and sentencing (prison or community) has been decided, the returnee will be placed accordingly. Different jurisdictions have different rules on whether **placement is made in a general or specific prison or prison wing** and who takes these decisions (e.g. the judge, the ministry of justice, the prison governor).

The initial risk assessment that was carried out pretrial will form a basis for the prison to work with the offender. There are a number of internal and external risks to be considered: (secretly) radicalising others, committing suicide, escape, carrying out acts of terrorism after being released from prison, directing terrorist actions by others outside, influencing others to carry out terrorist acts upon release. **Risk assessments should always be repeated over time** to assess whether the risk profile of the offender is changing. This assessment will also **inform the interventions and the overall rehabilitation and reintegration plan** that will be put in place. Decisions on these interventions should be made in teams involving different professionals, such as prison staff, the prison governor, psychologists, prison staff from rehabilitative programmes, police and so on, depending on the specific national and local infrastructure.

Safety and security methods and interventions

Returnees may pose specific challenges if they have stayed in a war zone for some time and have certain conflict skills (such as manipulation, fighting skills, how to use everyday objects as weapons) that could endanger others. If they are severely traumatised and/or suffering from other mental obstacles and illnesses, they may also be a danger to themselves and those around them.

In recent years, a lot of effort has been channelled into designing specific safety and security measures for violent extremist and terrorist offenders in general. These measures will be of added value for work with returnees:

- Specialised monitoring and information gathering: Specific monitoring and information sharing tools have been designed within the prison system and/or in cooperation with police, probation and intelligence services to keep track of potential radicalisation processes in prison. Not all those who are suspected of being radicalised have been sentenced for terrorist (related) activities. In some returnee cases, it could be difficult to prove terrorist activities but possible to prosecute for other criminal behaviour. It is important to monitor within the wider prison population whether radicalisation is occurring, or whether recruiters are active. The Italian prison service and Ministry of Justice have developed a specialised monitoring system called the Situation Room, described in the paper referenced below.

Further reading:

The [RAN P&P ex post paper on the study visit to the Italian penitentiary system](#) provides an overview of the Italian approach to dealing with radicalisation in prison and terrorist offenders. It explains both the security and information gathering methods as well as their approach to rehabilitation.

- Specialised risk assessments: In many criminal justice systems in Europe, risk assessments are used to understand an offender's risk of, for example, recidivism or violent behaviour (see also the dedicated section on risk assessment above). A number of risk assessment tools have been developed recently, whereby VERA-2R has been adopted within the criminal justice system of several Member States.⁽⁵⁴⁾ According to prison practitioners, risk assessments have also been used in returnee cases, in which they have proven to be helpful. A challenge may be posed by the fact that police or intelligence services often use different risk assessment tools than prison and probation.
- Specialised regimes: the term "regime" refers to both the specific set of safety and security measures followed for violent extremist/terrorist offenders and the regime choice. This can be dispersal of these offenders within the general prison population following the "normalisation principle" or concentration, meaning grouping the inmates in separate prisons or wings. Special wings are now present in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and the UK. Furthermore, they might be placed in a medium- or high-security facility, whereby regular risk assessment continuously informs the detention regime. Sometimes their placement is geographically determined, prioritising close proximity to the courts that handle such cases or to the place of their usual domicile. The former RAN P&P Working Group developed an overview of such regime choices and their advantages and disadvantages.

⁽⁵⁴⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network, Risk Assessment in Prison. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2021-04/ran_cons_overv_pap_risk_assessment_in_prison_20210210_en.pdf

| REGIME CHOICE | POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES | POTENTIAL DISADVANTAGES |
|---------------|--|--|
| Containment | Close monitoring | New and stronger bonds forged amongst prisoners |
| | Limited effect on mainstream population | Eroded trust between staff and prisoners |
| | Focused interventions | Entrenched oppositional mindset |
| | Specialised staff | Perceptions of unfairness reinforced |
| | Reassuring to public safety | Labelling effects, stigmatisation |
| | | Status associated with being in a special unit |
| | | All VEOs assumed to be of equal risk |
| | | Difficulties finding staff |
| | | High financial cost |
| Dispersal | Less stigmatisation and marginalisation | Generalist staff, training costs |
| | No status derived from placement on special unit | Difficult to ensure high quality of intelligence |
| | Opportunities for positive influence from others | Challenges in knowing prisoners and dynamic security |
| | | VEOs may exert influence over others |
| | | VEOs may be influenced by criminal gangs |
| Combination | Tailor-made response to individual needs/risks | Selection criteria /risk assessment is imprecise ⁽⁵⁵⁾ |

Further reading:

The [RAN P&P Ex Post Paper](#) provides an overview of the Dutch approach to terrorist offenders in general, as well as a more detailed account of the special regime in the prison of Vught. It encompasses risk assessment, the advantages and disadvantages of having a special wing, how the regime works and has developed over time, and staff issues.

- **Specialised staff:** Whether or not violent extremist/terrorist offenders are placed in special wings, many EU countries are investing in training specialised staff – in particular, social workers, psychologists and guards to work with these types of offenders. This usually occurs above and beyond general training on radicalisation and prevention for all the staff. Although not limited to returnees, there are some aspects to extremist offenders that may create challenging situations for staff. Inmates might be dismissive or violent; on a broader level, it might be difficult for non-specialised staff to interpret their actions and make appropriate decisions. As dynamic

⁽⁵⁵⁾ This table is a summary. The various elements are explained in more detail in the [2016 RAN P&P working paper](#).

security research shows, day-to-day relationships between staff and offenders are crucial in maintaining a safe and secure prison environment. The perspective of more women returning and being imprisoned can pose specific challenges for staff and require additional training.

- **Dynamic security:** Recently, the principle of dynamic security has been highlighted in the context of managing terrorist and extremist offenders in prison. Dynamic security essentially posits that positive and professional relationships between staff and prisoners help maintain order and prevent escapes. Dynamic security can decrease conflict and help detect security issues as well as improve the observation of behavioural changes in prisoners.

Further reading:

The RAN P&P ex post paper '[Current Challenges of Sentenced Extremists for Prison Regimes](#)' outlines, amongst others, the principle of dynamic security that links the quality of social interaction between staff and prisoners to risks inside and outside prisons.

Rehabilitation: methods and interventions

In the narrow meaning of the word, rehabilitation refers to the process of ensuring that the inmate does not revert to their criminal activities. For terrorist and extremist offenders, this translates into "disengagement" – a process at the end of which the individual ceases to get involved in extremist or terrorist acts. Disengagement can occur in parallel with deradicalisation, which involves additionally a distancing from the extremist ideology. In some jurisdictions, deradicalisation is already enforced in prison, while others focus on disengagement through to the probation period. Both disengagement and deradicalisation can also take place outside prisons. Exit work therefore and exit organisations can and have been involved both in prison and outside prison. Finally, rehabilitation overlaps with resocialisation or reintegration, whereby the individuals return to being functional members of society. This usually involves practical activities such as finding a job, housing, education, changing social networks, etc. Reintegration is usually carried out by probation services of exit organisations, however the process and the plan should be already initiated in prison. In a broader meaning, rehabilitation has also been used to refer to the entirety of the process post-prosecution and -imprisonment, thus encompassing also exit and reintegration.

The length of a returnee's prison sentence will affect how much time can be invested in rehabilitation in the prison setting. As the general public has a tendency to regard returnees as individuals undeserving of "help", it may be **difficult to secure sufficient resources and programmes** despite the risks involved of not providing such services. Rehabilitative interventions come in different shapes and forms and are explained in detail below. To date, no specific integration or rehabilitation programme for returnees exists. There are however numerous interventions and programmes aimed at disengaging, deradicalising and rehabilitating terrorist inmates.

The RAN guiding principles developed in the areas of prison and probation make the case for **rehabilitation being tailored to the offender**. Most rehabilitation plans are a mix of interventions, based on the offender's risk and needs assessment. The plans are designed by a team of different professionals in various compositions (staff running rehabilitative interventions, psychologists, social workers, prison guards, prison governor, psychologists), and they will be discussed with the offender. Whether taking part in the interventions is voluntary or obligatory depends on the sentence conditions and on the prison's policies. In general, practitioners believe that voluntary participation will lead to better results as there is an intrinsic motivation to take part. In cases where such motivation lacks, there are a number of methods to stimulate it, such as affecting individual situational factors, taking

care of basic needs, establishing early on the terms of the relationship, etc. It is important to consider rehabilitation and reintegration as a holistic process involving risk and needs assessment on a regular basis. Transition management is key and involves cooperation between prison, probation, exit workers and police.

Further reading:

The RAN REHAB [conclusion paper](#) 'Motivation in rehabilitation work: How to stimulate it?' outlines a number of methods to stimulate motivation and gives concrete examples of promising practices. It also contextualises these practical tools within scientific debates.

The [RAN Rehabilitation Manual](#) offers guidance for practitioners working to rehabilitate radicalised and terrorist offenders, both within and outside prison. It provides a comprehensive overview of the chronological phases of rehabilitation, as well as the types of actors involved in each of these phases. Practitioners working in these contexts as part of the rehabilitation processes are offered a structured assessment of important points of attention and concrete actions that should be performed in each phase and depending on their roles.

Taking into account the **needs and wishes expressed by the offender** is also essential for the rehabilitation plan. If they want, for example, to learn a foreign language or a specific trade, it is helpful to see whether this can be integrated within the rehabilitation plan as it will both help foster good cooperation with the offender and ensure there is a focus on the future. Learning skills and establishing contacts with relevant networks can facilitate reintegration into the labour market, which is essential for reintegration.



Case study

Returnee rehabilitation in prison

Male returnee in the age range of 25-28 travelled to Syria after the proclamation of the so-called caliphate. He came from a middle-class family and had a well-paid job and good level of education. He stayed in Syria for 3 months. There was no clear evidence of involvement in combat. He was able to return by saying he was picking up his wife at the Turkish border. He was however arrested a couple of months after his return and his arrest received a lot of media attention. Whilst in prison, he was in contact with an NGO providing support. During this work, it was observed that detention and isolation made him unstable. He also had a strong distrust of the system and was therefore reluctant to take any advice from those trying to support him. The influence of politics and the media increased this distrust and made it more difficult to build a trust-based relationship.

Lessons learned:

- NGO staff should consider using their own names and biographies to demonstrate authenticity – doing so in this case increased the returnee's confidence in the NGO's sincerity.
- Persistence often pays. In this case, the NGO maintained contact even when the detained returnee refused to see them. This was to make sure the returnee felt valued.
- Not asking direct questions about the stay in Syria but showing an interest when the topic is brought up can be helpful. The NGO involved in this case never pushed this conversation.
- Prejudice and bias can be avoided by not reading all files and media reports before meeting the individual.
- It helps to ensure good contacts with the prison administration and other authorities.

- Offering regular interventions: Every prison system has in place standard interventions to support the rehabilitation of prisoners. These include access to work, leisure activities, education, psychological assistance and various types of courses such as those on violence management. These types of activities may have a normalising effect after their experiences of living in a conflict area. These activities can in themselves therefore have a disengaging and deradicalising effect. Additionally, they will support the reintegration work and offer continuity of care and approach.
- Working on the ideological dimension: Whether or not imprisoned returnees maintain an extremist ideology and mindset depends on their motivations and drivers to become an FTF in the first place – and their experiences and exposure to this dimension during their stay with a terrorist group. Initial assessment is necessary to determine the extent to which a rehabilitative intervention aimed at influencing the returnee’s mindset is necessary, or whether other interventions will provide a better “fit” with the returnee’s risks and needs. Should the assessment show a need for intervention at the ideological level, there are several forms in which this intervention can take place:
 - One-on-one counselling: In these sessions, a professional with expertise in ideology, theology, extremism or related fields will talk with the returnee. The objective is to “open up” the returnee’s world view to different perspectives and interpretations through conversations. Some countries have appointed special “deradicalisation experts” to conduct this kind of counselling. Voluntary participation in these counselling sessions is recommended; the sessions also create a safe space to share thoughts and emotions.
 - Group dialogue sessions: As a means to reflect real-life situations (in which people often live amongst others), and to make use of differences in views and opinions, group dialogue sessions can be an effective way of triggering emotions and a thought process on world views. It is best to combine a group approach with an individual approach. Careful consideration should be given to:
 - who can be part of the group (careful selection is necessary, it is best to not put together offenders who are already “teaming up” within the prison, it is helpful to have diverse profiles);
 - a voluntary or obligatory approach (voluntary is recommended);
 - who will lead the group (this should be someone with expertise on the topic and experience in group dynamics);
 - group dynamics and creating a safe space (to make sure there is no intimidation/bullying that disturbs the learning process).
 - Education and reflection: There are several ways in which the returnee can themselves reflect on beliefs and world views. Offering a diverse collection of books, magazines and documentaries that show a variety of perspectives on, for example, foreign policy, double standards and discrimination may be a trigger for detained returnees to educate themselves and reflect, especially during the hours they spend in their cell.

Practice in action:

Group dialogue sessions

The German organisation Violence Prevention Network (VPN) has designed a group training programme called [Taking Responsibility – Breaking away from Hate and Violence – Education of Responsibility](#). They work especially with young extremist offenders.

- Providing religious and spiritual support: By nature, prisons are a context in which many offenders at some point feel the need for spiritual or religious guidance. A range of impetuses may drive this need: the desire to continue practising a religion, to gain

direction and a meaning to life, to help find “peace of mind”, to help re-establish self-worth, to support behavioural change, to gain protection from certain groups, to have the opportunity to meet members of the opposite sex, to gain free access to special resources and so on. It is important to understand this variety in motivations as these should be perceived as “normal” and not directly alarming in terms of extremist religious ideology.

Practice shows that some imprisoned returnees practice and are interested in their religion. Providing proper religious care through chaplains (in these cases often imams but also figures from other religions) will help harness the positive effects of a religious lifestyle and will help steer prisoners away from extremist religious ideology by discussing different religious interpretations and perspectives.

In providing this care, it is important that chaplains are properly vetted and trained to work in a prison setting. The same goes for religious materials and sources made available in a prison setting. It is worth underlining that chaplains should be able to work in a confidential setting (to also remain legitimate in the eyes of the prisoners) and should not be automatically tasked with deradicalisation objectives (as they would need specific training for this).

Further reading:

The European Organisation of Prison and Correctional Services (EuroPris) has an expert group on radicalisation in prisons that has developed a [report on prison chaplaincy and deradicalisation](#).

- [Reconnecting with family and the social environment](#): A key feature of extremist and terrorist groups is their aim to isolate vulnerable people from their normal social surroundings so that they may influence and recruit them. In many cases, restoring positive relationships with the family and social network is an important step in rehabilitation. This also ensures a safety net upon release from prison. However, in some cases the social network and family do not have a positive impact or may even be conspiring with the offender while they are in prison. A careful assessment is therefore necessary before involving family and social network in rehabilitation interventions. In some cases, the family feels ashamed and stigmatised by the affiliation of their relative with a terrorist group and does not want to be in contact. If this is the case, it will take time to rebuild relationships and trust. The process of reconnecting with the family may prove to be more difficult when it comes to converts who have become FTFs and returned. In those cases, the family and social contacts are not usually capable of understanding why their family member converted in the first place and are not sure how to deal with this. As the release date approaches, it is important that there is a safety net to avoid the offender falling back into old patterns or being re-recruited immediately after release.

Further reading:

The RAN paper '[Radicalised and terrorist offenders released from prison: Community and family acceptance](#)' outlines in depth the rationale and advantages for involving families and communities in the rehabilitation process and includes a number of practical tips.

The RAN FC&S paper '[Families of Foreign Terrorist Fighters](#)' includes further advice on issues such as stigmatisation and how to deal with authorities.

Practice in action:

The Austrian Social Net Conference

The Austrian Social Net Conference is a promising practice, currently implemented for juvenile inmates and involving the family and social network in preparations for the release of a terrorist offender.

For more information, contact [Neustart](#), the Austrian probation service.



Case-study

Returnee rehabilitation involvement of family

A young male travelled to Syria in 2012 for the first time. He was there for 6 weeks and then returned. During 2013 he travelled to Syria twice, each time spending 6 weeks in the country. He was suspected of fighting for the al-Qaeda related group Jabhat al-Nusra. Even though he was suspected of criminal behaviour, grounds for prosecution were not sufficient. The multi-agency partner team had been trying to establish contact with him since 2010, but it has been constantly on and off, very much depending on his situation at each point in time.

During 2015 the returnee got married and became a father. In March 2016 he was arrested and imprisoned for a crime involving theft of large numbers of passports. The multi-agency partner team used this opportunity to build a relationship with his wider family, and in particular a closer and tight relationship with his wife and little boy, offering them help from the authorities. In December 2016 he was released from prison and in January 2017 he contacted the authorities voluntarily and asked for help to re-establish his life. In February he entered an exit programme. The authorities remain closely involved with the wife and child, and a mentor has been assigned to the returnee to strengthen his life and education skills.

Lessons learned:

- It is important to establish many entry points to the returnee and their family and to create confidence and good relations.
- Prepare for endurance and persistence when approaching the individual.
- Providing psychological support and trauma intervention: This is a standard intervention for prisons. In general, an assessment of the mental health of an offender is part of the overall risk and needs assessment. For returnees, the same should be in place, with particular attention paid to psychological problems and traumas that might have developed because of their stay in a conflict zone. Should other mental health issues be detected (such as borderline syndrome, autism, etc.), treatment for these issues should be made available, and taken into account when including the returnee in other schemes. Prisons need to improve their capacity and/or access to trauma experts to deal with this particular group.

Further reading:

The RAN H&SC paper '[Understanding the mental health disorders pathway leading to violent extremism](#)' explains which and how mental health disorders can affect radicalisation and includes recommendations for policy and practice.

The RAN paper '[Ethical Guidelines for Working on P/CVE in Mental Health Care](#)' describes the task of mental health professionals working in the context of P/CVE and provides guidance on how this can be undertaken to be consistent with ethical practice.

- Offering mentoring programmes: Mentoring programmes for violent extremist and terrorist offenders are/have been in place in several countries, such as Denmark, Norway and the UK. The programmes can be adjusted to fit the profiles of returnees in prison. The basic idea behind them is that a specific person is assigned as a mentor for the offender, and they meet on a regular basis to talk and in some cases undertake activities. Mentors can be members of staff, community members, NGO professionals, religious leaders, ex-offenders, etc. To have an effective mentoring programme, the following should be put in practice:
 - Whatever their background, the most important criterion is that there is some connection or fit between the mentor and mentee on which a trust-based relationship can be built.
 - In a prison setting it is also important that the mentor has good contact with the prison staff who deal with their mentee on a daily basis.
 - Mentors should be carefully vetted before they are put in contact with a possible mentee. If either one is not comfortable with the match, the mentorship should not continue.
 - It is important that the mentor–mentee connection is not there to reach an objective or deliver a specific result, but that it is one of the interventions in the process of the offender’s rehabilitation. This is also important to not put pressure on the relationship and to ensure the mentor is not seen as “part of the system” (a system that many VEOs distrust).
 - Mentors should be trained before the mentor programme starts. Training should focus on the circumstances they can expect when working with the returnee, the signals that are a cause for concern and need to be reported to prison authorities, how to have open conversations and build trust, and how to explain boundaries and manage expectations.
 - If the intervention framework allows for it, it is advisable to maintain good mentorships after release and make sure the same mentor and mentee can still meet.
 - The safety of mentors and their families/social networks should be taken into account at all times. Mentors should have a place to report suspicious behaviour. Working only with first names and having a specific phone number or email address for contact may help to protect the mentor against negative intentions (should they appear).

Practice in action:

One-to-one male and female Terrorist Act (TACT) offender rehabilitation

The Unity Initiative is a specialist interventions consultancy in the UK. They have special programmes to (ideologically) rehabilitate terrorist offenders and returnees from Daesh. Read more about their programme on their [website](#).

Back on Track

Denmark was one of the first EU Member States to develop a mentor programme for violent extremist and terrorist offenders. An important part of Back on Track is also training mentors to strengthen their competencies in various dialogue techniques as well as in their coaching and conflict management skills. [Read more about the programme in the RAN Collection](#).

- Working with former extremist (offenders)/former soldiers: As part of the education- or ideology-focused interventions, meetings with former extremists or former (veteran) soldiers (those who have also experienced war and conflict situations) may help to shed a different perspective on the experiences of returnees; they can learn and reflect based on stories dealing with fear, anxiety and trauma. Because of their experience, formers and veterans may have more legitimacy and respect in the eyes of returnees

and they will be able to better relate to, understand and connect with them. When working with former extremists, it is particularly important that:

- they really are formers, and have openly distanced themselves from extremist ideologies and groups;
- they have been trained and are experienced in working with extremists and preferably also offenders;
- monitoring is in place to ensure that they do not have a hidden agenda to influence or recruit those with whom they are in contact, or to obtain information. The safety and security of former extremists should also be assured – they may be viewed as traitors.

Further reading:

The [RAN EXIT ex post paper on how to set up an exit intervention](#) presents additional information on how to work with formers.

The joint RAN Exit & P&P paper on [building bridges between probation and exit work](#) outlines challenges and solutions to increase cooperation between these two fields of activity.

Guiding principles from a probation perspective

Reintegration back into society formally starts in the probation phase; it should however already be initiated during imprisonment. Reintegration aims to prevent violent behaviour and enable inclusion and participation in society. **A sense of belonging and acceptance makes commitment to violence less sustainable.** Radical ideas are not dangerous in themselves, even though they may remain a risk factor for violent behaviour in some circumstances. The RAN P&P Working Group has distinguished some general guiding principles for good practice that will also guide work with returnees, and which are substantiated by the 2020 RAN Rehabilitation Manual:⁽⁵⁶⁾

- Reintegration plans should be included in the working agenda for the offender as early in the sentence as possible. This means that rehabilitation plans already take into account the length of the sentence and the opportunities for continuing interventions after release. For example, when a mentor is part of the rehabilitation programme, ensure they can stay on after release. This is also important for religious counselling and programmes as they can connect with religious organisations in the community. Furthermore, rehabilitation measures should be constantly (re)evaluated, depending on the individual's personal development.
- Risks and needs assessments (as explained in "Investigation and Risk Assessment") are key to designing effective reintegration programmes. This should be done in the context of continuous monitoring. Probation services (or the national equivalent) should cooperate on this assessment during the final stage of the prison sentence. Individualising the assessments is essential; they should facilitate the desistance and/or deradicalisation process by recognising a potential to contribute to society. It is recommended that multidisciplinary teams evaluate offenders' individual needs and risks.

⁽⁵⁶⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network, Rehabilitation Manual Rehabilitation of radicalised and terrorist offenders for first line practitioners. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_rehab_manual_en.pdf

- Transition management is key. This involves cooperation between different organisations (prison, probation, police, local authorities, support organisation, etc.) to ensure the offender has a smooth transition from the prison environment back into a local community. As transition periods are those points when the risk of recidivism is the highest, it is important to have plans in place prior to the full sentence being served. Continuity of care between prison and probation needs to be ensured; this means sharing information (including with other services such as intelligence or local prevention teams) and can also mean using similar tools and approaches.
- Trust is central to effective probation work, and often the process of matching extremist offenders with probation officers is carried out with the building of trust in mind. Probation officers who share a cultural or religious background with the offender may help to foster trust.
- A multi-agency approach is key. Involve as many relevant actors as possible in the development and definition of goals and options for the individual's particular process from the start. Studies on desistance – how individuals cease or desist from crime – suggest the importance of co-producing a process with others. These “others” include correctional officers and additional persons in social networks. Representatives from other collaborating organisations, including community organisations that help with job seeking or religious or spiritual guidance, and social services, can meet social support needs and decrease sources of risk. Friends, family members and other meaningful relationships are crucial for desistance trajectories and for reinforcing a positive view of non-violent behaviour as well as a positive identity. This co-production with others is key to reintegration because it is not only the effort and decision of the offender to want to reintegrate in society, it is also society (especially those around the offender) that needs to accept them and be willing to offer a second chance.
- In case the original families and communities might negatively affect rehabilitation, relocation should be considered.
- It is important to clearly define and communicate different actors' roles and responsibilities during each phase of the rehabilitation process. Define a leading role during each phase, taking into account particularities of different administrative structures across EU Member States.
- For the purpose of designing programmes, consider age, gender, religious and ethnic aspects, and differences.

Methods and intervention models in a probation setting

Prison and probation settings share some overlaps as well as differences. Both have in common the fact that no specific interventions for returnees have been developed. Therefore, the methods and interventions used for terrorist offenders on probation will also be valuable when dealing with returnees. As returnees go back into society after a prison sentence, there will be additional challenges for the returnee themselves as well as for the support services and the community. These may hamper reintegration interventions, as explained in the overview of different types of interventions that is given in this section.



Case study Support after release 1

Male returnee, left for Syria in 2013 when in his early 20s together with his girlfriend. He didn't have a high level of education and was not able to hold on to jobs. He had stayed away from criminal activities and had no criminal record prior to leaving. He returned in 2014 and is therefore seen as one of the first generation of FTFs. He had stayed in Syria for 6 months. He was convicted for taking part in combat in relation to Daesh, although he denied being part of Daesh. As his return was in 2014, there were

not so many barriers and he simply crossed the border. He returned together with his wife, who was pregnant at the time (this was an important reason to leave) and who gave birth whilst back in their home country in the EU. Upon return he reported to the local authorities and police but remained in the community for several months before he was officially arrested by a large arrest team. As he had already reported himself to the authorities, he felt the scale of the arrest was unnecessary. He was prosecuted and sent to jail for 2 years. He was then out on probation for about a year and he lived with his wife and child in another town. Probation services were initially involved, reporting their assessments to the court. During his stay in prison the probation services had limited contact; weekly contact was established after his release. He was consistent and reliable in his visits with probation, but the team noticed that he became more outspoken in his sympathies towards Daesh and the fact that he had been in combat.

Lessons learned:

- Even though the probation services had indications that he was connecting with some of his old network, they could not talk about it with him because that would have made him suspicious. They had to wait until he provided them with an “opening” to make sure his trust was not compromised.
- The 2-year stay in prison left a mark on this returnee. He experienced the strict regime as very hard and humiliating and his sympathy for the Daesh ideology increased. This is also because he was placed together with other convicted terrorists with similar mindsets, which created less space for counter- and alternative messaging. He did get some support from staff members and an imam but the effects of this seem to be minimal. Probation practitioners must be aware of such histories and the damage detention can potentially cause.
- Building trust proved to be very time-consuming and required patience as there was much distrust. Having an open and transparent attitude towards the returnee about what they can expect from the probation officer and how they will report on their case is important to regain trust.
- Probation practitioners are tasked with supporting the reintegration of offenders and in these cases should be prepared for a long and complex trajectory. In this case, reintegration is very difficult. The returnee tried to connect to a mosque but they did not welcome him. He is also part of a work reintegration trajectory that is coordinated by the local authority but he hasn’t found work yet. He doesn’t want to be in contact with the police. He is only in contact with the local authority, probation and the family support service. He also showed interest in psychological support. His wife does not wish to have contact with anybody. The returnee also seemed to have no desire to reintegrate into society in his home country as well as a wish to live in an Islamic country. He realised however that moving to his country of heritage is not an option because he would be arrested immediately.
- As many different organisations were involved in this case, it was crucial for probation to have good multi-agency cooperation. The availability of a partner table at which different organisations could talk about the case, search for ways to share information and learn about each other’s interests and objectives was very useful.

- Probation support: In most cases, the end of a sentence (or early release) will be conditional and include follow-up visits with probation to support and monitor the returnee’s reintegration trajectory. Probation professionals serve as “case managers” who lead the way to other institutions and support agencies such as local authorities, police, NGOs and so on. The length of probation support will usually depend on the decision by the court. Practitioners have indicated that this is often quite short, making it crucial to have a broader support plan after obligatory support through probation ends. Local authorities, who in many cases oversee financial

and other forms of support for the returnee, can play a role in this, as well as NGOs or community organisations and mentors. As working with terrorist offenders on probation can be quite stressful (due to the public and political anxiety linked to terrorist offenders), it is important that probation staff are empowered and supported in their work. Support should include:

- Training for probation officers: Specialised training on radicalisation, ideology, how to address signs of concern and so on can help probation officers feel more secure in their everyday work.
- Working in teams: Working together with other probation officers who work with the same offender group and specialists/experts with extensive knowledge of terrorism, radicalisation and related fields can also help create a safe space for probation officers to share their challenges and concerns.

Practice in action:

Dutch probation TER teams

The Dutch Probation Service established a special team to deal with terrorists, extremists and radicals (TERs) on probation in 2012. The team comprises 13 (internationally) trained, specialised probation officers. Read more in the [RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices](#).

- Practical support: As in any reintegration process, there will be a number of practical issues to organise for the return of a convicted FTF to society. First of all, they will need a place to live. Experience shows that careful consideration should be given to whether the returnee returns to their original hometown or is located elsewhere. This will depend on a number of factors such as:
 - willingness of the local/regional authority to take them back;
 - willingness of landlords/housing associations to provide housing;
 - willingness of family members to provide housing;
 - connections to the old network (are they positive or negative, do the release conditions restrict contact with (some) members of the old network, what is the returnee's "status" in the old network, e.g. hero or traitor?);
 - whether multi-agency support structures are available in the foreseen location.

In addition to housing, some form of financial support will most likely be provided through the welfare system as finding a job can be challenging. Employers may be fearful of including a convicted terrorist and returnee in their workforce. Most countries also have special lists of convicted terrorists that will make it more difficult, for instance, to open a bank account. Support from a national/local authority is needed and is usually conditional upon the returnee cooperating with the authority and even taking part in rehabilitative programmes. Also, in terms of education, the returnee will need help to connect to educational institutions. Generally, it is imperative that the measures taken do not hamper individual reintegration steps such as finding a job. Removing the person's ID or restricting their access to bank accounts can, for example, constitute such barriers.

Along with probation officers, local authorities and other support professionals may also support the returnee in rebuilding a positive network and connecting to religious institutions, sports clubs, leisure organisations, voluntary work and so on. However, in each of these cases the public image of FTFs and returnees may make acceptance very difficult in these circles. Because of media attention, keeping a low profile can also prove to be difficult.



Case study Support after release 2

Man, now 28 years old. After travelling to Syria in 2012 he returned to his hometown at the beginning of 2014 with his wife and one child. His return was noticed by an alert community policy officer and reported to the authorities. He was then arrested, prosecuted and sentenced to 3 years in prison for joining a terrorist organisation. During his imprisonment, there was close cooperation between the director of the prison, the prison psychiatrist, the probation officers and the case manager in prison. These parties started preparing for the release of the man 6 months prior to his release. By asking the man “What do you need when you are released?” or “How do you expect to spend your days when released?”, they involved him in the planning. A multi-agency reintegration plan was conducted. The focus of this plan was to reduce the risk he posed by making his swift reintegration into society possible, and prolonging treatment and monitoring.

A specific set of release conditions was formulated in cooperation with probation. Although on welfare, he had to spend his day earning this support at a community working facility for reintegration. This facility monitored him specifically on signals of radicalisation and/or recruitment of others working at the same facility. He also received mental health treatment and mentoring. The contact between him and his mentor, who was also the local case manager, was stable. The multi-agency team involved in the man’s reintegration comprised the local coordinator and case manager, a mental health professional (therapist), a case manager from the welfare organisation, police, probation, a family support worker and an exit worker. Cooperation with the prison psychiatrist and probation officers and then local case coordinator continued, and discussions on the case took place regularly.

Lessons learned:

- It is important to get to know the FTFs in your hometown by name, as well as their families and former surroundings. Doing so increases the chance of being informed when the FTF returns.
- Using the family’s desire to keep any children in the family can be used as leverage to contact the returnee. In this case the returnee was keen on having his child living with his parents and not in foster care. By talking to the family and then to the returnee about this, the local authorities could establish contact with the returnee.
- Cooperation with the prison staff and probation officers and involving the returnee in their reintegration plan are crucial when preparing the return to society.
- Starting to build a relationship with the returnee while they are in prison can be a valuable investment. This returnee stated that the mentor only had influence because the mentor contacted him when he was still in prison.
- If the returnee is on the United Nations (UN) terrorist list, their assets are frozen. To start a “de-lifting” procedure, you need to contact national government. If this is not done before their release, they will not be able to earn money, open a bank account or access an existing account. The de-lifting procedure takes several months.
- It is helpful to make clear agreements and define tangible goals for the reintegration process – with the partners in the multi-agency team but also with the returnee. If this is not done properly, the whole integration process risks becoming a type of “sticky plaster”.
- Frequent face-to-face contact with the returnee is a must to assess how the returnee is really doing.
- Keeping track of the returnee’s activities also by monitoring their social media accounts is vital. In this case, an analyst from the municipality monitors the (public) social media communication of the returnee and passes on information

to the mentor. The mentor confronts the returnee with their statements or actions on social media during the mentoring sessions.

- Reintegration takes time. It is a very slow and complex process. Once you start, prepare to be in it for the long run.

- Psychological support: Practice shows that it is very difficult to determine the psychological state and level of trauma amongst returnees because they are usually reluctant to share any stories of what they have experienced abroad, even after they have been convicted and spent time in prison. This also poses a challenge for probation services, which are tasked with guiding returnees to fitting psychological support, as well as creating an open and trust-based relationship. In most cases, there needs to be an “opening” created by the returnee themselves to talk about psychological problems, allowing probation workers and other professionals to offer help in securing support. Practitioner experience shows that trying to force returnees to talk about their experiences will have a negative effect.
- Family and community support: The family and social network around the returnee play a crucial role in rehabilitation and reintegration. There are many varied scenarios: **families who were left behind devastated, families who think their relative is a hero, families who have travelled and returned together** (with only some members convicted), families that were established abroad and so on. This wider network needs to be taken into account when providing support. Probation officers should always be aware that one never really knows what goes on behind closed doors and how tight family bonds can be. Should the family and social network seem to have a negative effect on the returnee (e.g. reinforcing extremist thoughts), probation officers and other partners should focus on bringing new people into the social circle to provide a counterbalance. These could be religious leaders, community mentors or NGO professionals (*also see considerations on mentor programmes and working with formers in the prison setting section – they also apply to probation*). If the family and social network seem to be a positive force for change, probation officers and other partners should harness that potential and see if they can include family members in elements of the rehabilitation process – for example, through joint mediation sessions or undertaking leisure activities together. The main objective would be to strengthen family bonds again and avoid isolation of the returnee. It is recommended to capitalise on family support that already exists, while at the same time screening for individuals who should rather be protected from family influence, such as in cases of domestic violence. Alternatively, methods of providing tangible and emotional support for released prisoners should be created such as alternative networks whilst in prison, with co-workers, new friends, staff of church and civic organisations.
- Ideological support: The outcome of the risk and needs assessment will provide an indication of the extent to which the returnee is still ideologically motivated and whether this is still extremist in character. This assessment should be made in continuation with the ones carried out in prison. While probation officers dealing with returnees are usually trained in issues related to radicalisation and extremism, they are not necessarily apt to address ideology and indoctrination. If these are relevant in individual cases, external organisations that specialise in deradicalisation can be involved. Some probation officers as well as other support professionals dealing with returnees have indicated that the experience of being in **prison can have in some cases had a negative effect on ideological development**, meaning that it has hardened returnees’ convictions. This may be caused by prison circumstances that returnees have found to be humiliating and dehumanising (e.g. overcrowding, visitations, long hours alone in a cell) or through contact with other prisoners who shared their ideology. The result is distrust and suspicion towards “the system” and authorities. Even though more and more prisons offer rehabilitative programmes and activities, they may still be in stark contrast to the regular conditions for prisoners.

When this is the starting point for a probation officer to work with a returnee, it will be difficult to build a trust-based relationship, and much time and effort needs to be put into that relationship. Participation in initiatives designed to influence mindset can be obligatory (part of the release conditions) or voluntary (an offer from probation or other support organisations that the returnee needs to agree to). These type of support programmes may take the same forms as described under the prison interventions (one-on-one counselling, group dialogue, education and reflection), but in a community setting. When discussing ideology, a variety of professionals might be involved. It might be necessary to address broader conspiracy theories, as well as other widespread stereotypical ideas, and not just specific ideological content. Importantly, working on ideology and religious work should be separate and should be carried out by different people.

Practice in action:

Maison de Justice in Belgium

In order to support and create motivation, a number of principles are followed and involve: individual empowerment; not acting on the offender’s behalf; non-normativity (i.e. leaving values and life choices to the individual); and limiting the damage caused by the measure to the offender’s life.

The Belgian centre for assistance of people concerned by any radicalism or extremism leading to violence (CAPREV) provides social, psychological and legal assistance in a multidisciplinary team including the following disciplines: psychology, criminology, political science, law, anthropology, social work and education. Interventions can be voluntary (in prison or afterwards) or under a judicial mandate (during probation), and they include listening, advising and supporting by/from private individuals as well as professionals.

CEAPIRE (Centre of Expertise and Advice for Prevention and Intervention of Radicalism and Extremism) works with an approach to communities that involves trust, reputation and integrity. Important steps in reaching out to communities are: recruiting volunteers and individuals who themselves have large networks; identifying and establishing communication with key figures and strategic networks; using rational but also emotional arguments; and identifying a P/CVE network of professionals with similar issues and objectives.

Healthy Identity II programme

The Healthy Identity II programme is designed by the UK’s Prison and Probation Service. Its purpose is to try to prevent individuals from committing future extremist offences. To achieve this, it encourages and empowers participants to disengage from an extremist group, cause or ideology.

Read more about [the Health Identity II programme](#).



**Case study
Support after release 3**

A male returnee in his mid-20s, the youngest child of a poor family. He had felt his whole life that he had to “prove” himself. He went to Syria after the proclamation of the so-called caliphate to become a suicide bomber. There is however no clear evidence he really participated in combat during his 3-month stay. He reported to authorities 3-4 months after his return. Although at that point no action was taken, several months later he was arrested with helicopters, weapons and a large number

of police in the apartment. He spent 26 months in prison. During this period, he was regularly visited by his parents, but compared to his siblings he received little attention. The case received a lot of attention from the media and politicians. This led to the returnee having severe anxiety before his release. He felt the whole system was against him, everyone knew him and he was being observed all the time. He felt that no one wanted him to reintegrate.

Lessons learned:

- Around the clock support can be needed to help a returnee deal with anxiety – in this case, this was provided by an NGO.
- Providing access to a theologian for counselling can be helpful if religion plays a central role in the individual's life.
- Regaining and retaining a structured lifestyle can be key. In this case, an NGO is supporting attempts to create that structure through housing, education, social activities, etc.

Further reading:

Joint RAN P&P & YF&C paper '[Radicalised and terrorist offenders released from prison: Community and family acceptance](#)' on involving the family and community in the rehabilitation and reintegration of terrorist and extremist offenders.

Non-prosecution Route / Resocialisation

The focus of this chapter of the manual is on the resocialisation of returnees outside the criminal system. This can be returning men and women who have not been prosecuted (yet), men and women who have been prosecuted but found not guilty, and men and women who have already been to prison and are now released and not on probation. This approach bears many parallels with the principles and methods involved in probation and exit work.

Introduction

This chapter covers response options regarding the resocialisation, rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees along the lines of four topics:

1. family support;
2. mentoring and counselling;
3. mental health;
4. practicalities.

Each section looks into one of these topics and provides, next to a brief general overview, the elements that should be taken into account when drafting methods and interventions, examples, tips and cases.

For probation responses, see Chapter 5 'Prosecution Route'. For resocialisation responses specific to children, see Chapter 7 'Child Returnees'.

General overview

When returnees come back, national police and/or intelligence services will first debrief them to **establish the risk** the returnee poses and whether prosecution needs to take place. When returnees are not prosecuted (yet), or when prosecution took place and the individual is not or no longer imprisoned, they will return to society. The general idea is that the safety of society is best ensured through promoting the social well-being and rehabilitation of returnees. Those persons who are and feel part of society are less likely to fall back and become attracted to terrorist or violent extremist groups (again). The **resocialisation process must be tailored to an individual's situation**. When supporting a returnee in their resocialisation process, it is necessary to take stock of the reasons behind their return, their personal social situation, their mental state and their ideological convictions. Some of the returnees might furthermore be monitored by intelligence services even if the prosecution route has not been taken.

Four guiding principles for the resocialisation and reintegration of returnees

1. **Resocialisation, reintegration and rehabilitation** are important to prevent returnees from harming society.
2. A **tailored and differentiated approach** based on the risk profile of each returnee is necessary. Returnees are all different and need distinct approaches and diverse interventions and tools.
3. A **multidisciplinary approach and local-level involvement**, both for risk assessment and reintegration, are important. All relevant organisations should be involved in a comprehensive effort to resocialise and reintegrate the returnee. Local or regional

authorities are best placed to coordinate this comprehensive approach towards a specific returnee at the local level.

4. **Information exchange** between intelligence, police and social organisations from national and regional levels is paramount when dealing with returnees. Extra investment in information exchange between national and local level, and between different organisations, should be considered.⁽⁵⁷⁾

First-line practitioners such as social workers, exit workers, family workers and mental health coaches use numerous programmes, methods and interventions that have proven to be successful for resocialising, reintegrating and rehabilitating (former) radicalised persons within society.⁽⁵⁸⁾ These initiatives can also be used for returnees as long as they are tailor-made to the returnee, and if the differences between returnees and other (former) radicalised persons are taken into account.

Further reading:

The RAN paper '[The challenge of resocialisation: Dealing with radicalised individuals during and after imprisonment](#)' details and illustrates challenges, barriers and solutions to reintegration.

For practitioners supporting returnees in their resocialisation, whether social workers, mental health professionals or family support workers, it is important to take into account the following eight aspects whilst designing and delivering interventions specifically for returnees:

- **Design interventions on the basis of a risk and needs assessment:** A returnee can pose a threat to society. A risk assessment of the short-term (attack, recruitment) and long-term (psychosis, violent behaviour) threats the returnee poses is mandatory. If a risk assessment is not provided, ask for it via the local police or the national returnee contact person – not to stigmatise, but to establish the risks and the facts. This information (the unclassified parts) is also important to share with other organisations and persons who play a role in the resocialisation of the returnee. For more details on risk assessment, see Chapter 3 'Investigation and Risk Assessment'.
- **Be prepared for an increased level of information sharing:** Because returnees can pose a threat to society, they are subject to extra attention by the national and local government, police and intelligence services. Be prepared therefore to share information and ensure the necessary information sharing mechanisms are prepared and in place. Discuss information flows within the local or regional multi-agency coordination team. Discuss specifically what information is needed, what kind of information needs to be shared and with whom, and when you will exchange information about the returnee. It is best to do this the moment preparations begin for the individual's return to the local community. Establish ISPs, in particular amongst social services and intelligence/police as well as between the local and the national administrative level. Consider having one or two designated liaison officers at the local level and part of the multi-agency team who make sure that relevant information about the returnee flows from local level to national and vice versa.

Advice from a local coordinator with experience of returnees: "Early on there needs to be a sharp clarification of roles between the national police, intelligence agency, local police and local authorities. Roles will depend on the type of returnee,

⁽⁵⁷⁾ These guiding principles are agreed on in all EU communications about FTF returnees. For example, see EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, 'Foreign terrorist fighter returnees: Policy options', Brussels, 29 November 2016 14799/16.

⁽⁵⁸⁾ For inspiring examples, see the RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-best-practices_en

background, capacity, the fighter's intention and capability (level of threat) and psychological state of mind."

- **Use tools and methods that fit people with strong convictions:** Most returnees still have or have had a strong ideological conviction. They were all subject to severe indoctrination. This means not only commitment to jihad-Salafism and its fight against the infidels but also strong ideas about, for example, democracy, sexual orientation and the role of women.⁽⁵⁹⁾ When mentoring them, prepare to use techniques and interventions used when dealing with strong convictions. Address these "beliefs" when mentoring and counselling (see Section 6.2.2 on Mentoring and Counselling Responses for more details).
- **Unwillingness to reintegrate:** There will be returnees who do not want to reintegrate in society. If this happens, discuss with the local multi-agency coordination team and assess who has the best relationship with the returnee. Is this the family worker via the family members of the returnee? The social worker? The child protection worker? Or the police? This person/organisation should make it clear to the returnee that they might be monitored on account of having joined or tried to join a terrorist organisation. Maybe this person can convince the returnee to cooperate. If absolutely unwilling, discuss the bare minimum of cooperation needed (based on national regulations) with the local multi-agency team and with national authorities. Make this mandatory for the returnee. (Local) police can enforce these obligations. Mentoring a returnee to disengage or deradicalise will however have no use if the returnee is pressured to take part. If confronted with an unwilling returnee, consider contacting probation officers to discuss specific persuasive tools and interventions.

Further reading:

The RAN paper '[Repatriated foreign terrorist fighters and their families: European experiences & lessons for P/CVE](#)' describes a number of structures and protocols for information sharing such as in the context of the returnee coordination mechanism in Germany or the Local Task Forces and the Local Integrated Security Cells on Radicalism in Belgium.

Practice in action:

Systemic exit counselling

The German NGO Legato in Hamburg is specialised in systemic exit counselling and has developed a special programme for counselling returnees. This takes the possible risk a returnee can pose, their possible dogmatic views and the specific challenges of exiting a terrorist group into account. For more information, contact [Legato](#).

- **Place a special focus on the safety of the returnee's immediate social contacts:** As returnees have been carrying out or witnessing extreme violence on a frequent basis, the likelihood of extreme and/or violent actions on their part is increased. Pay extra attention to the safety of persons around the returnee, as well as that of first-line practitioners working with the individual. Keep stock of the returnee's risk assessment and discuss the risk of violent behaviour and the way to deal with this risk within the multi-agency coordination team (see Section 6.2.2 on Mentoring and Counselling Responses for more details).
- **Have assessments of mental and physical health in place:** Living in terrorist territory, in a war zone or in detention camps means it is likely that returnees are suffering from

⁽⁵⁹⁾ The element of ideology and indoctrination plays an even bigger role with returning children, especially when returning from living with Daesh (see Chapter 7 'Child Returnees').

trauma and other mental health issues; they may have been carrying out very violent acts, witnessing extreme violence and/or death of family members, or been a victim of violence (rape, beatings, etc.) and living in an acutely unsafe environment for a long period. Assess the mental state of the returnee when dealing with them (see Section 6.2.3 on Mental Health Responses for more details). The living conditions in terrorist territory and detention camps are dire and unsafe. Be on the lookout for physical medical needs as a result of injuries, war wounds, malnutrition and disease. Prepare to provide treatment or refer accordingly if necessary (see Section 6.2.4 on Practical Responses for more details).

- **Be aware of the high profile of returnee cases:** All returnee cases get considerable amounts of media and political attention. It will feel like the whole of society is watching the returnee and the way they are treated by government and social work organisations. What “extras” they get, where they are going to live, who is paying for them and how much of a threat they still pose will all be followed closely. Contact the communication experts from your organisation and (via them) the communication experts within the local authorities and prepare a communication strategy about the returnees you are dealing with or preparing to deal with. See Chapter 8 on Cross-cutting Issues for tips regarding the communication strategy.
- **Be aware of the risk of isolation and stigmatisation when trying to resocialise:** Most people are very aware of the atrocities of Daesh, al-Qaeda and other violent extremist groups. Persons returning from these terrorist organisations will be treated with distrust and hostility. Returnees will be stigmatised and isolated from the local community they are going back to. This will pose an extra challenge to the resocialisation and reintegration of returnees. You may want to put extra effort into informing the local community and the local administration about the reasons why and how the returnee will be integrated and why this reintegration is necessary in order to prevent future violence. Relocating the returnee to another town or city may also be an option for consideration, although it is then important to ensure good communication with the authorities of the place of relocation. Take stock of possible sectarian divisions. Some Member States reported incidents between Kurdish groups, ex-Syrian Army fighters and returning Daesh FTFs.

Concrete methods and intervention models

Family support responses

The **family members** of the returnee can play a crucial role in the challenging period of resocialisation and reintegration into society. Most persons break off their contact with their social network before travelling to terrorist territory and are only in touch sporadically with their mother and/or father and siblings. When they return, family members are often the only social contacts left. It is important to build a relationship with the family of the FTF. Strong and established contacts with the family will support the cooperation when the FTF returns.

Family members can provide a **gateway back to society**. It is important however to assess to what extent the family is supportive of the returnee and — if applicable — their spouse and children. Support for those who have a positive influence on the returnee is helpful. However, not all family members and friends are good companions during resocialisation as they might be supportive or part of the terrorist or violent extremist movement. Additionally, family relationships and circumstances might have otherwise contributed to radicalisation, such as through domestic violence. This should be assessed before involving them.

RAN developed a **10-step approach to working with families**. The steps are indicated in the following graphic and visualised as a circle as they will influence each other. The steps are both applicable in general and on a case-to-case basis. In the RAN ex post paper ‘Working

with families and safeguarding children from radicalisation. Step-by-step guidance paper for practitioners and policy-makers', the 10 steps are explained and illustrated with practice examples. Fundamental principles that form the foundation of a good family support approach are also shared in this RAN paper.⁽⁶⁰⁾

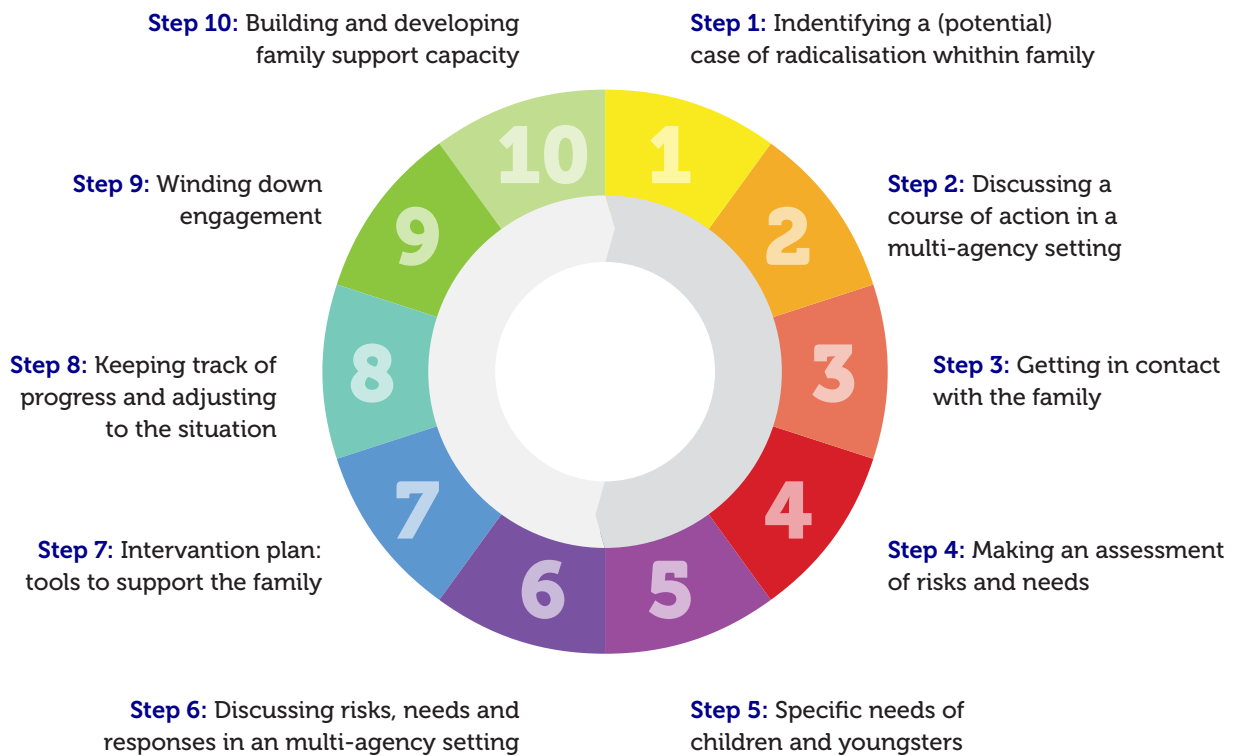


Figure 3: 10-step approach to family support

Further reading:

Working with families and safeguarding children from radicalisation: This [RAN ex post paper offers a 10-step approach to family support](#) that is also applicable to families of FTFs and FTF returnees.

Methods of family support: For tips on capacity building and methods in family support, see this [RAN ex post paper 'Family support: what works?'](#)

Overview of practices: For more examples of interventions and processes regarding family support, see the [RAN Collection of inspiring practices](#).

Practical advice to deal with challenges: '[Challenges and solutions when working with families of foreign terrorist fighters](#)'. This paper provides information on how to deal with the psychological consequences of departure and with stigmatisation, authorities, and practical and legal questions.

The paper '[Radicalised and terrorist offenders released from prison: Community and family acceptance](#)' details solutions to challenges such as assessing risks and needs, preparing families and communities, and working with them for the purposes of rehabilitation, including examples of concrete practices.

⁽⁶⁰⁾ See Radicalisation Awareness Network, Working with families and safeguarding children from radicalisation. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2020-09/ran_yf-c_h-sc_working_with_families_safeguarding_children_en.pdf

Additional elements to take into account when involving and/or supporting the family of a returnee:

1. **Assess the relationship between the returnee and their family and social network:**
The relationship will have been under a lot of pressure. The returnee left the family, may have isolated him or herself from them before leaving, and has been away with probably not much contact. Also, the family members might harbour grievances towards the returnee and the fact that they left to join a terrorist organisation and may have suffered their own alienation/hardship as a result of this decision. Conversely, the family members might be very supportive of their relative and see him or her as a hero who made the right choice. **Practitioners working with these families should assess the relationship between the returnee and their family members. Is there still a relationship between them? And if so, what is the nature of it?** Is the family willing to support the returnee even if this might mean other people in the community isolating or condemning the family for doing so? Do the family members support the terrorist group and further or ongoing radicalisation? Keep in mind that the family situation might have fed into the breeding ground for the radicalisation of the returnee in the first place. If the family is not a contact option, try to establish contact with other persons with whom the returnee used to be close.



Case study

Assessing the returnee's relationships with his mother

Male, imprisoned after his return from Syria, was released on parole. Before his radicalisation process, the relationships with his family and especially their perception of him contributed much to his low self-esteem. He was made to feel inferior to his siblings who had been successful professionally, while he had lost his ways in petty criminality. Joining the radical group at the time provided a sense of status and belonging. That said, the significance of his mother remained high, so much so that his main regret about the Syria trip and ensuing conviction was the fact that he caused his mother a lot of suffering. He felt that he had to correct this. His mother does not seem to have a deep understanding of what her son is going through. She insists on him getting married, which is a major source of stress for him, since he does not have a job, nor an apartment. In his despair, he started using drugs again.

Lessons learned:

- Relationships with the family, in some cases significant persons in the family, can be fundamental in understanding someone's radicalisation and how their motivation can be triggered. These relationships can be used for rehabilitation and reintegration work.
- In some cases it will be necessary to work with parts of the family too. This can range from generally improving the relationship between them and the client, to raising awareness of certain issues within the family, or involving them in the reintegration work.

Advice from an experienced exit worker: "Supporting the families of foreign fighters will deliver benefits once the fighters return. If these families trust the exit organisation, they can become important partners and motivate the returnee to cooperate with the programme."

2. **Be transparent about information gathering and sharing with authorities:** Those who travel to terrorist territory usually have some contact with their family members during their time away. Contact is even more likely when someone is trying to return or planning a return. It is therefore wise to contact the family members of those who

have left, and to invest in a relationship. They might need and want your support. **This relationship might provide valuable information** and an opportunity to prepare for a relatively smooth return. Information from the family should be shared with (local) police and/or (local) authorities. Be explicit with the returnee's family that information will be shared – and which information exactly – with (local) authorities. This should be transparent. You are dealing with a person who joined a terrorist organisation, the family needs to face this, and its consequences.

3. **Inform the family about the legal consequences of aiding their children:** Parents and family members are usually very involved in trying to get their child (even if they are an adult) back. They have a tendency to look for different ways to help and speed up this return, for example by sending money and travelling to Turkey or Syria themselves. Legal frameworks and jurisprudence on these actions differ between countries and might involve the criminal offence of terrorism financing. Family support practitioners should therefore be trained and informed about the legal consequences of these actions in their own countries so they can advise families accordingly. Close cooperation between practitioners and national government on the topic of aiding return and/or sending money is mandatory.
4. **Be aware of additional risks to which returnees and their families are exposed:**
 - the returnee might be mentally unstable, traumatised or still angry at their family and might try to harm them;
 - the terrorist organisation might want to take revenge against the returnee for leaving and threaten the returnee and their family;
 - Daesh considers the children of (former) Daesh fighters their property and have threatened the returnee and their family, seeking to coerce them to return the child in several cases.
 - the community might want to take revenge against the returnee for being part of a terrorist organisation and/or the family for supporting the returnee;
 - the returnee might otherwise be confronted with stigma in the community.

These risks should be discussed in the local multi-agency intervention team and if needed with national government. National and local police and mental health professionals can help assess the situation and mitigate the risks.



Case study Rehabilitation can be scary

Male, imprisoned after returning from Syria. He is considered dangerous and he provokes prison staff on a regular basis. His family is well off yet the relationships are not very close. His father was happy about his turning religious as that meant that he was off drugs. The radicalisation process took place under the direction of a mentor who introduced him into the new world view. He never acquired deep religious knowledge. On return, his attitude towards Syria and Daesh remains ambivalent. On the one hand he describes the training camp as some of the best days in his life. On the other hand he admits that witnessing violence upfront was something he could not live with. He is afraid of leaving the prison. He is afraid of being treated like a criminal, and of not finding work.

Lessons learned:

- Families will be worried about how they will be perceived within the community and might attempt to bury the problem altogether, such as was the case here. This is usually unhelpful, as clients might feel left alone and abandoned. It would therefore be important to address with family (members) the issues that led to radicalisation in the first place and explore avenues out.
- In cases where both the family and the circle of friends are rather detrimental to rehabilitation, new social networks need to be created.

- 5. Take into account the position of the family in the wider community:** Depending on the situation in the community, the returnee's family might be isolated or severely distrusted by the surrounding community since their relative is or was part of a terrorist organisation. If so, support the family in their reintegration into their community by developing a specific reintegration plan for them. Do not forget that this needs multi-agency cooperation and possibly a communication expert to help communicate the situation of the family on a broader (but still local) scale.

Practice in action:

Inventory of helplines and hotlines: [This paper](#) assembled relevant helplines and hotlines regarding P/CVE work in the EU. Search for your country to find all relevant entries.

Support for parents of FTFs: Violence Prevention Network (Germany) has family counselling to provide support for parents and relatives of radicalised youngsters and/or FTFs. See: [Parents & Relatives](#).

Resilience training: The Belgian government, funded by the EU, developed a resilience training programme for youngsters at risk and their family members. It is called [Bounce](#). The programme can be used by any country, and it includes train-the-trainer guidance.

Family Support Centre: The [Dutch Family Support Centre](#) is an example of how to support families of radicalised persons (including FTFs).

Counselling service on radicalisation: The German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) provides support to family members and friends of persons who are radicalised or in the process of becoming so. Since 2012, the [Advice Centre on Radicalisation](#) has served as a first point of contact for deradicalisation/disengagement in the field of Islamist extremism and is the central interface between public authorities and civil society actors involved in deradicalisation. The Advice Centre offers families general knowledge on Islamist extremism, giving advice to individuals and even helping parents or other relatives of youths who left the country for Syria or Iraq, or who returned from these countries, through its own helpline. Together with the federal states, a nationwide network of civil society counselling centres and state-run exit programmes has been built up at a local level, which is constantly being expanded and enhanced. The Advice Centre coordinates the transfer of cases to its experienced local network partners and also funds numerous model projects within the scope of deradicalisation and disengagement.

Further reading:

Principles for reintegrating: For more information regarding the reintegration of returnees, see [Malta Principles for Reintegrating Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters \(FTFs\)](#).

Mentoring and counselling

When the returnee is willing to reintegrate, mentoring and counselling during this process is essential. They need to integrate and reintroduce themselves to the community, neighbours, employers, and maybe also a lot of agencies and commercial organisations (banks, insurance company, etc.). In this section we will look into mentoring and counselling responses to returnees.



Case study The role of mentoring

An 18-year-old man attended high school and a local mosque. He became a member of a radical Salafi youth group. As he became increasingly radicalised, there were dramatic swings in behaviour. He changed from an outspoken, kind and dedicated person to becoming introverted and withdrawn. He was seen several times as a supporting spectator during a terrorism trial. He dropped out of school and his work in a local supermarket. In May 2013 he left for Syria with a friend. The family was left in shock and felt very insecure. Talks were initiated between the local CVE coordinator and the parents. The parents were invited to participate in the local parent network, and to attend meetings frequently. Six months after departure, the 18-year-old returned. His father contacted the local coordinator immediately. The next day, the local coordinator met with the returnee and his father. He appeared physically and emotionally exhausted. The returnee was open, friendly and forthcoming and stated he “wanted his old life back.” The returnee was extremely grateful for the reception on his return and all his signs of radicalisation are gone. A few weeks later the returnee was introduced to his mentor. He was also allowed to return to school on the condition of mentoring and counselling. This was very successful, and in summer 2016 the returnee graduated as an A-student.

Lessons learned:

- Be prepared to invest in relations with the family and the returnee so that ideological and theological themes can be addressed within a mentoring scheme.
- This case illustrates the importance of establishing contact with the family and involving them early on in the process. This pays off later.
- Mentoring is essential in guiding the returnee and ensuring they follow through on their commitments.

Mentoring and counselling a returnee as they return to society is also called exit work. Exit interventions and tools used when providing help to radicalised persons wanting to exit the violent extremist organisation they were part of are also useful when dealing with a returnee. See Chapter 5 for more information on mentoring programmes.

Practice in action:

Four-step exit programme for returnees

Aarhus, has developed a four-step exit programme for returnees. A description of the programme is available on p. 8 of the [RAN ex post paper ‘Setting up an exit intervention’](#).

Counselling and deradicalisation

The German organisation Grüner Vogel (Green Bird) offers counselling programmes for persons involved in radical Salafist groups or on the path towards violent jihadist radicalisation, including those who travelled to Syria and other combat zones. See their [website](#) for more information.

Counselling in case of extremism

The Austrian Extremism Information Centre offers face-to-face counselling and expertise as well as workshops and lectures to help relatives, social workers, teachers or any other person concerned that someone might have joined an extremist group. The advisory service is free of charge, anonymous and confidential. More information is available on this [website](#).

Streetwork and counselling

The ADERO Counselling Centre at VAJA e.V. in Bremen (Germany), works on countering radicalisation processes affecting youngsters in the context of fundamentalist

Islamism and Salafism. They provide counselling to the radicalised person and their parents, relatives or other persons belonging to their social circle. For more information, [contact VAJA](#).

Alongside the eight aspects to take into account whilst designing and delivering interventions specifically for returnees mentioned in Section 6.1, there are two extra elements to take stock of when mentoring a returnee.

- **Be clear about objectives and goals:** Before starting a mentoring project with a returnee, formulate clear objectives and goals for this mentoring. Several practitioners noted that it is hard to establish if and when the goal of the mentoring is reached for returnees. They reported that needs for mentoring are infinite. Clear goals and objectives should be formulated to prevent a situation in which the mentoring remains too shallow and not challenging enough for the returnee. This will not support proper reintegration into society.



Case study

Returnee pregnant to a well-known FTF

A woman in her early 20s followed her husband to Syria in 2015 to stay with him in Daesh-claimed territory. Six months after she arrived, her husband died. With help from a family member who travelled to Turkey and used his contacts there, she returned to her home country pregnant. She claimed she did not fight. She left after her husband died, and did not want to be married to another man from Daesh. After her return, she was briefly arrested and her passport was confiscated. When back in her hometown a social worker from the municipality – informed by national government about the upcoming return – got in contact with her. This first-line practitioner checked whether the woman was mentally ready to become a mother. She seemed ready, but there were signs of depression and trauma. The practitioner feared the woman might go back to Daesh the moment the child was born. One-on-one counselling was arranged for the woman. Her family and former friends supported her the whole time.

Lessons learned:

- Support from family members is crucial when reintegrating into society. This woman returned to a forgiving and open environment, and it was also very helpful that the woman's friends welcomed her back.
 - The security risk is a crucial issue. It helps to get attention and budget but it makes sharing information very difficult. Intelligence and police do not easily give information because most of it is classified. This makes assessing a case quite hard. In this case the threat of Daesh and their claim to the baby increased the security risk even further. It would help if the sharing of information could be more transparent and faster.
 - When to stop mentoring? With returnee cases it is harder to assess when an individual is integrated within society. As long as they can travel to Daesh or be contacted by Daesh, it pays to be very cautious.
- **Security:** Mentoring and counselling a returnee to mentally leave the terrorist organisation they were part of means working with individuals who are accustomed to violence and crime. The risk of violence against the practitioner involved is very real and must be taken seriously. The risk will differ per case and organisation. The overview in Figure 4 describes safety measures to be implemented should the situation so demand.



Figure 4: Infographic about security

Advice from an experienced practitioner: "The security of first-line practitioners involved with returnee cases needs to be reassessed. They also need to receive training, briefings and debriefings from competent experts. Those who have most knowledge and expertise are usually those from security services and military educational institutions. However, those who frequently meet with returnees face to face – like practitioners – usually do not have the required knowledge about the challenges and security dilemmas."

- **Strong convictions:** Most returnees still have or had a strong ideological conviction, including views on how society should function, and quite dogmatic beliefs on, for example, democracy, sexual orientation, the role of women and education. To successfully integrate within society, they need to be aware of the fact that their opinions might not be shared by the majority of the community into which they are reintegrating. When mentoring them, prepare to use deradicalisation techniques and interventions used when dealing with strong convictions. If needed, lessons can be learned from those organisations that support right-wing extremists in their reintegration, or interventions used to reintegrate members of IRA or ETA.⁽⁶¹⁾ More information about mentoring and counselling is available in Section 5.5 'Methods and intervention models in a probation setting'

Practices:

For more examples of interventions and processes on mentoring and exit work, see the RAN [Collection of inspiring practices](#).

⁽⁶¹⁾ For example, Exit Germany, an organisation supporting right-wing extremists wishing to leave their right-wing extremist group (<http://www.exit-deutschland.de/english/>), or for more information about disengagement of IRA members, see Fergusson et al., Deviant Peer Affiliations, Crime and Substance Use: A Fixed Effects Regression Analysis.

Mental health responses

Returnees are more likely than the average person to suffer from mental health problems. Spending prolonged periods in terrorist-claimed territory and conflict zones can leave significant psychological scars. Much of our knowledge about this comes from conflict-induced trauma suffered by regular armed forces.⁽⁶²⁾ There is the risk of PTSD amongst those returning from conflict zones – whether they have fought or not – which can leave them traumatised, vulnerable to radicalisation, and potentially a danger to themselves or society. **While PTSD is at the far end of the spectrum, those returning from conflict zones can also be subject to a wide range of trauma-related problems:**⁽⁶³⁾

- **Physical:** Trouble sleeping, overly tired; stomach upsets, trouble eating; headaches and sweating when thinking about war; rapid heartbeat or breathing; worsening of pre-existing health problems; feelings of shock, numbness, inability to be happy.
- **Common mental and emotional reactions:** Bad dreams, nightmares; flashbacks or frequent unwanted memories; anger; feeling nervous, helpless or fearful; feeling guilty, self-blame, shame; feeling sad, rejected or abandoned; agitated, easily upset, irritated, annoyed; feeling hopeless about the future.
- **Behavioural reactions:** Trouble concentrating; edgy, jumpy, easily startled; being on guard, always alert, concerned too much about safety and security; avoiding people or places related to the trauma; too much drinking, smoking or drug use; lack of exercise, poor diet or personal healthcare; problems carrying out regular tasks at work or school; aggressive driving habits.

Psychologists working with returnees also report some suffering from “moral damage” rather than PTSD: their belief systems have been altered by what they have seen in Syria and/or Iraq or other terrorist conflict zones, which leads them to question their **moral image of the world and belief systems**. They might also be left with a sense of betrayal after being exposed to the reality of the conflict, or be disillusioned with the radical cause itself. These reactions are, in a sense, a good thing; they offer an opportunity for intervention. But left unsupported, these persons are also vulnerable.⁽⁶⁴⁾

Next to psychological problems induced by staying in terrorist-claimed territory, studies show that a disproportionate percentage of FTFs suffer **from mental health issues**. Data from 3 EU Member States indicate that up to 20 % of FTFs suffer from some mental health-related issues. Switzerland indicated that between 15 and 20 % have mental health problems, whereas in the Netherlands, research indicates that 60 % of individuals who are known or suspected to be jihadi radicals suffer from mental health issues.⁽⁶⁵⁾

Practice in action:

- **Multi-level counselling:** The French organisation [CAPRI \(Centre d'Action et de Prévention contre la Radicalisation des Individus\)](#) has developed interventions to disengage radicalised persons. They provide mentoring programmes, support families, offer psychological counselling and work with theological experts. Interventions are tailored to the needs of the radicalised person.
- The [French disengagement and reintegration programme PAIRS](#) also works with interdisciplinary teams that include, apart from social professionals (educators, social workers and vocational counsellors), psychologists and a psychiatrist, along with professionals handling religious and cultural mediation.

⁽⁶²⁾ Briggs Obe & Silverman, Foreign Fighters Innovations in Responding to the Threat.

⁽⁶³⁾ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2010), Returning from the War Zone: A guide for military personnel.

⁽⁶⁴⁾ Briggs Obe & Silverman, Foreign Fighters Innovations in Responding to the Threat.

⁽⁶⁵⁾ Paulussen et al., Mental Health and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon: A Case Study from the Netherlands; Mehra, Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Trends, Dynamics and Policy Responses.

Further reading:

The paper [‘Rehabilitation and reintegration of extremist offenders from a mental health perspective’](#) details the role of the mental health professional in the rehabilitation process as consultant and as providing appropriate treatment or therapy, as well as concrete practices from Denmark, Germany and Sweden on how to involve mental health professionals in rehabilitation and reintegration. It also mentions some concrete methods such as: empathic confrontation, solution-focused therapy, and scheme therapy.

Considering the high probability of mental health problems, screening for mental status is essential.

Mental health screening for returnees⁽⁶⁶⁾

1. Social:
 - 1.1. What is their current situation in terms of family members, friends, education, daytime activities, living situation, financial situation, and religion or ideology?
 - 1.2. What was the situation during their time away in terms of family members, friends, living conditions, daytime activities, and religion or ideology?
2. Somatic: what is the current health status? Are there any medical complaints? (tired, chest pain, headaches, blurred vision, etc.).
3. Psychiatric: what is the current mental state? (agitated, mood swings, trouble sleeping, worried, aggressive, etc.). Also check for addictions and test the IQ of the returnee.
4. Analyse: weigh all the facts and come to a first draft conclusion.
5. Counter check: ask a colleague to analyse this case and combine conclusions.
6. Discuss conclusions in the local multi-agency intervention team — they might provide valuable input regarding the returnee and their resocialisation. Also discuss possible interventions and treatment.
7. Draw a final conclusion and, if needed, develop the intervention and start treatment.

Further reading:

The [‘Extremism, Radicalisation & Mental Health: handbook for practitioners’](#) details a number of frequent mental health disorders, how to recognise them, recommended support and intervention approaches.

The RAN paper [‘PTSD, trauma, stress and the risk of \(re\)turning to violence’](#) offers insights into related experiences in the context of armed conflicts in Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia.

The RAN paper [‘Ethical Guidelines for Working on P/CVE in Mental Health Care’](#) outlines a number of practical considerations with regard to confidentiality, risk assessment for mental health professionals, and how to distinguish between mental disorder and psychological difficulties.

When developing a mental health response for returnees, it is important to take into account the following five aspects:⁽⁶⁷⁾

- Do not presume to understand the returnee. Motives vary, and some returnees may not even have an in-depth understanding of their own motives. Presumptions can form barriers to building a relationship with the returnee.

⁽⁶⁶⁾ The elements of the mental health screening tool for returnees are based on interviews with mental health specialists.

⁽⁶⁷⁾ These considerations come from an experienced mental health professional who has worked with several returnees.

- Traumatic states can be difficult to assess and are often neglected, misinterpreted or not detected. Also, trauma does not necessarily manifest itself immediately. Ways of detecting and assessing trauma should therefore be included in the treatment for returnees. The mental health professional who will work with the returnee can prepare by contacting a trauma expert.
- Some returnees will need long-term professional treatment and/or medication. Organise this if needed; a lack of treatment or insufficient treatment creates risk.
- To successfully treat a returnee, a coordinated and holistic approach that targets different aspects is needed. If treatment is not coordinated carefully, it can create confusion and frustration for the returnee as well as impinge on the effects of the intervention. Discuss the treatment within the local multi-agency team.
- Patience and time is needed. Psychological processes are often difficult and take time, and needs may fluctuate. Access to services must therefore be ongoing and smooth.



Case study

FTF with avoidant personality disorder

Man, born in 1993. Drug addict father (cocaine, serial offender) and raised by a single mother. The father physically abused the mother, which led to the first contact with mental health providers (counselling because of abuse). The mother had a lot of debts, moved in with her employer, and married him. The man felt jealous and ignored, started drinking, smoking cannabis, and developed lots of problems at school. He gravitated towards the wrong crowd. A general pattern developed of never finishing anything (school, courses, jobs, etc.). The man was put into care (living in an institution) at 16, left the facility for a more open setting at 17 and converted to Islam at 18. While on holiday with his mother, he met a converted girl and her mother and was married within a year. Some months later, when he had just had a baby boy, he travelled to Syria (December 2012). His story, as told by him, is as follows:

He went to Syria believing he was starting a new life in a cheap, well-regulated Islamic country. His wife and baby would follow soon after he had everything arranged. When he saw Syria in reality (especially the second location), he became very anxious because of the fast developing war and ongoing armed fights; he told his "superiors" in Syria that he wanted to return to his home country. He was interrogated by these superiors on a daily basis for several weeks. They suspected him of being an informer for his country's intelligence service. After interrogation for 2.5 months, he received permission to leave. In total, he stayed 4 months in Syria in 2012-2013 as part of the "first generation" of Syria travellers. There are no details about how he returned. Back in his home country he was prosecuted and convicted for active participation in a terrorist network and imprisoned for a brief period. When he returned he received mental treatment for PTSD, but he stopped his medication after two days "because it tasted foul." Then he was referred to specialised trauma care (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, or EMDR), but did not like the waiting list ahead of him and did not pursue further treatment.

Lessons learned:

- Some radicalised persons are in need of lifelong mentoring. In this case, an avoidant personality disorder means that every move that man makes is "radical" or "drastic"; the general conclusion is that this reactive pattern and a certain level of dependency (on institutions) will stay with him throughout his life, in combination with a strong tendency to externalise and manipulate. Because he lacks resilience or identity of his own, this will remain an ongoing point of focus in his treatment, as well as learning to see out the consequences of "radical decisions".
- It is important to pay attention to cynical attitudes regarding treatment and to reassign practitioners/case managers if needed. Part of this man's problem/disorder was that he constantly held others responsible for fixing his problems. He never took any responsibility and manipulated others. One minute his

“new life” is handed to him on a plate, and the next he makes another drastic move and creates a whole new set of problems. This resulted in a cynical attitude amongst all professionals involved.

Practical responses

Returnees often stop informal and all formal relations before travelling to terrorist-claimed territory. Their job, housing, insurance and welfare has been stopped due to them not being present or not paying over a prolonged period. Most of them are no longer registered as a citizen in their hometown. When reintegrating in society they need help to get these practical things organised and to make this process as swift as possible.

Advice from an experienced first-line practitioner: “Most often, returnees lack proper/up-to-date registration in the public system and so cannot receive support and treatment. The time it takes to go through a regular process is too long, and requests may easily be turned down because of a lack of referrals or insufficient information.”

For each returnee, an overview of the more practical needs should be drafted. Most likely the person counselling or mentoring the returnee will have the best overview of what is needed. Discuss initially with this practitioner and draft an overview of what is needed. This overview should be on the agenda for the meeting with the local multi-agency intervention team on this returnee.

Practical

Practicalities mainly fall into eight categories.

- **Start:** Start by making sure the returnee is registered in the necessary national and local citizen databases.
- **Immediate treatment:** Assess the need for medical treatment due to war injuries, contagious diseases or mental disorders and refer accordingly. Treatments may have been provided the moment the returnee entered the country.
- **Housing:** Make sure the location in which the returnee will live is safe for them and the neighbourhood. If necessary, provide anonymous housing to avoid safety issues involving agitated neighbours.
- **Finances:** Help the returnee to apply, if needed, for financial support from local or national government. Also, help with opening a bank account, if needed. Returnees might be on the UN terrorist list as most FTFs are. If so, their assets are frozen. You need to contact national government to start a so-called de-lifting procedure. This takes several months. In the meantime, they will not be able to earn money, open a bank account or access their bank account.
- **Employment/education:** Help the returnee to take part in structured daytime activities. They should be employed or start an educational course as soon as possible.
- **Medical treatment:** Put the returnee in contact with their (new) general practitioner. They should be able to contact their doctor when needed. The returnee may have received medical treatment organised by national government when they arrived and were arrested. If so, the general practitioner should be informed.
- **Mental health treatment:** If not already done, help the returnee to contact local mental health services if needed.
- **Legal:** There may be specific legal questions to deal with, such as the formal recognition of a returnee’s child(ren), the payment of fines from before leaving for terrorist-claimed territory, or how to reunite with family members with a different nationality. Get legal advice for the returnee by arranging a (probably pro bono) lawyer or via a local coordinator if needed.

Child Returnees

The introduction to this manual provided an overview of the complex challenges at stake with child returnees based on their experiences abroad. This chapter focuses on how to respond to these challenges, taking into account both the safety and security of the child themselves and their environment, as well as the need to resocialise the child as quickly as possible into the new environment.

General overview

The challenges faced with children who have been confronted by extremism and terrorism require both immediate action and a long-term approach as many of the potential side effects could become apparent at a much later stage.

What do we mean by “children”?

As laid down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a child is any human being below the age of 18 years. The principles set out in the UNCRC have been ratified by all EU Member States. From a legal perspective, EU MSs differ in their jurisdictions when it comes to defining whether someone under 18 falls under juvenile legislation or adult legislation. Often, this will also depend on the nature of the crime.

Child returnees: definition in this manual

Within this manual there are three groups to take into account when talking about child returnees:

1. Children who left the EU (with their families or on their own) to live within a terrorist organisation abroad and who have returned (with their families or on their own).
2. Children who were born in terrorist conflict zones and who then travelled to Europe.
3. Children who were born in the EU to a mother and/or father who was involved with a terrorist organisation abroad (a female FTF returnee who has returned while pregnant with the child). In this case, the child has not lived in the EU before and has also not lived in the terrorist conflict zone. This category is also included in the manual because the returnee status of the parent(s) can have an effect on the child at a later stage in their life.

Dealing with children

A number of aspects fundamentally differentiate children from adults, such as: most children did not choose to leave and be involved in the conflict but suffer the consequences of their parents' decisions. Again with the exception of teenagers, their level of cognitive and emotional development is not comparable to adults and thus cannot be assumed to actively process ideology and thus be in any manner held responsible for their violent actions. The effects of traumatic experiences and being exposed to extremist thinking affect them differently and might also mean that recovery could be speedier than in the case of adults.

Overall, it needs to be mentioned from the very start that **“all children coming from Iraq, Syria and other conflict zones are first and foremost victims who have experienced significant trauma. Depending on their age, gender, type of trauma and time of exposure, these children require adequate short- and long-term care and treatment.”**⁽⁶⁸⁾ This means

⁽⁶⁸⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network, High-Level Conference on child returnees and released prisoners, p. 4. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/high-level_conference_on_child_returnees_and_released_prisoners_en.pdf

that the primary approach to children should entail: psychological and psychiatric care to deal with trauma, and normalisation and reintegration into society. In cases where children have been exposed to indoctrination or have been involved in conflict, additional measures addressing these should be included. These however need to be adapted to the specific case of children, which requires different types of therapies and overall approaches than in the case of adults.

General considerations

It is recommended to start work early, even in anticipation of the return, in order to rebuild trust, build a family narrative (how children will remember their story/family story) and prepare the multi-agency response. In some cases, returning children will be interviewed by police to collect information. In these cases it is important to ensure the well-being and the rights of the child are upheld. Multi-agency approaches are key, as lack of coordination may be counterproductive by antagonising the custodian family. The importance of trauma cannot be overestimated and should be considered in specific interventions, not just from the perspective of the child's well-being but also as a means to prevent radicalisation and possible future involvement in criminality.

Children of different kinds

Besides the obvious differences between children and adults, there are also various groups within the category of children, mainly delineated according to age:

1. Teenagers/adolescents (10-17 years)
2. Preschoolers and younger children (4-10 years)
3. Infants and toddlers (0-3 years)⁽⁶⁹⁾

Each category requires a different type of psychological and psychiatric approach. This is not only due to the age as such and the differences in individual development, but also due to the fact that they will have been exposed to different kinds of experiences. For example, it is known that Daesh themselves specifically focused on the indoctrination of children and their insertion in battle, albeit not as a matter of priority (see Chapter 2).

A further differentiation needs to be made by **gender**, which marks the types of experiences that boys and girls have been exposed to, as well as the types of measures to be used accordingly.

Specific measures and approaches need to be applied depending on these differences. Adolescent interventions for example are only possible if a child has reached a certain cognitive level.⁽⁷⁰⁾ In cases where older children (12 years and older) have returned from Daesh territory, and have presumably been witness and party to extreme violence, abuse and indoctrination, special measures might be necessary that address these experiences. In addition, and supported by criminological literature that points to the influences of peer groups on offending,⁽⁷¹⁾ there should be significant concern about the spread of extremist ideas amongst peers. However, it is vital that older children are treated with key services (e.g. psychological, educational, pastoral) tailored to their developmental level. They should not be included in adult services.

⁽⁶⁹⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network, High-Level Conference on child returnees and released prisoners, p. 4. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/high-level_conference_on_child_returnees_and_released_prisoners_en.pdf

⁽⁷⁰⁾ Theodore, Handbook of Evidence-Based Interventions for Children and Adolescents.

⁽⁷¹⁾ Fergusson et al., Deviant Peer Affiliations, Crime and Substance Use: A Fixed Effects Regression Analysis.

From the moment of conception and during pregnancy, children may already suffer from the circumstances in which their mother is living; these may also lead to long-term effects after birth. The impact of periods of stress on the developing child is particularly relevant here.⁽⁷²⁾ **If the mother is regularly undergoing a physiological stress response, this has a damaging impact on the developing foetus.** Threats to the development of the brain in the first 3.5 years (1 000 days) are also considered to have a huge impact on the child's ability to engage with the world around them.⁽⁷³⁾ As a consequence, this should be taken into account when dealing with young children who have been exposed to a conflict situation for a relatively long time compared to their age. The conditions in the detention camps in northern Syria have also facilitated various types of trauma, including through death of or separation from the mother and sexual abuse.⁽⁷⁴⁾

Regardless of the child's age, promoting the development of fundamental elements such as interpersonal skills, managing emotions, having a stable family life, etc. remain key to ensuring the possibility that these children will become contributing members of society.

Further reading:

The paper [‘Study Visit: Returned Women and Children – Studying an Ongoing Experience on the Ground’](#) outlines the measures that were taken to reintegrate the women and children into Kosovan society. The visiting practitioners engaged with stakeholders from government authorities, first-line practitioners and civil society organisations.

Guiding principles on working with child returnees

Experience in working with children who have returned from Syria and Iraq is still limited in the EU as only a handful of children have been actively repatriated. There is, however, a large body of experience and research on working with children who have been exposed to combat situations (e.g. child soldiers) as well as on severe trauma and extremist ideology in general. In addition, there are guiding conventions and international frameworks that shape policies establishing the rights and protection of children in vulnerable situations, and that can provide guidelines when designing policies and interventions in this area (see the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) handbook below). Finally, there are lessons learned from Western Balkans countries that have more experience in this area. Normalisation of the children's everyday life is based on regular schooling and adaptation to the domestic school system after return. Regular schooling is thus considered one of the most vital elements in the process of a child's reintegration and resocialisation.

Based on this experience, practitioners working with child returnees, whether a police officer, a mental health professional, a social worker or a teacher, should take into account the following whilst designing and delivering interventions:

- Children living/growing up in conflict areas are particularly vulnerable because of the abuses they face, as well as the violence they witness, and because of the fact that their normal social, moral, emotional and cognitive development is interrupted and

⁽⁷²⁾ Mulder et al., Prenatal maternal stress: effects on pregnancy and the (unborn) child.

⁽⁷³⁾ Hair et al., Association of child poverty, brain development, and academic achievement.

⁽⁷⁴⁾ RSI, Europe's Guantanamo: The indefinite detention of European women and children in North East Syria, 2021.

corrupted by the experience of war.⁽⁷⁵⁾ In addition to traumatisation related to living in a conflict zone, the process of resettlement (returning to the EU) may be a cause of further trauma. This is even more pronounced when families are separated, or when children have travelled alone.

- Children exposed to armed conflict are highly likely to face multiple and ongoing trauma⁽⁷⁶⁾ related to interpersonal/interfamilial violence, sexual abuse, hunger, malnutrition, neglect and abandonment. Exposure to multiple and repeated trauma represents a significant risk for a child's development and overall functioning.⁽⁷⁷⁾ In addition, further trauma as a result of resettlement and integration processes is a distinct possibility.⁽⁷⁸⁾ This may be caused by discrimination, social exclusion, instability, parental unemployment and the absence of peer networks of support.
- When children have been involved in violence, psychological evidence demonstrates an inability to adequately consent to involvement in violent activity and a lack of capacity to fully understand the consequences of this involvement. A child's upbringing, as well as their biological development, will determine at what age they can be expected to understand and oversee the consequences of their actions. Like child soldiers, child returnees can be seen as victims and in some cases perpetrators at the same time.
- Even though back in Europe and away from the conflict zone, practitioners should be aware that children might still be in a transitional environment. This is especially the case when their parents are incarcerated and they are, for example, living in foster care. This can be an impediment to dealing with trauma and rebuilding resilience.⁽⁷⁹⁾
- Daesh ideology and their carefully orchestrated community infrastructure have created the foundations of an identity for children that also serves as a protective factor, allowing them to remain resilient while living in those circumstances. Interventions aimed at addressing the ideology/world view of child returnees should take into account that deconstructing the foundation of their identity and transitioning to a new identity is a complex, long-term process. These kinds of interventions should therefore take place in the context of broader reintegration and rehabilitation processes and/or measures.
- Once returned, the social environment of the child (family, community and peer groups) will have a great influence on the success of rehabilitation and resocialisation. Practitioners should be aware that some returnees were in the public/local spotlight and are therefore stigmatised or celebrated amongst certain communities and groups. Children of different ages may become future targets of bullying and intimidation or, on the other hand, recruited back into extremist circles. This highlights the importance of normalising the children's experiences back in society and in schools, and thus the importance of managing these choices accordingly.

Further reading:

[UNODC Handbook 2017](#): This handbook provides guidance on the treatment of children recruited and exploited by terrorist and violent extremist groups, especially in the context of the justice system. It includes strategies for preventing recruitment of children by such groups, recognising children as victims, protecting them during investigation and trials, and aspects of the juvenile justice system, as well as rehabilitation and reintegration.

⁽⁷⁵⁾ Kohrt et al., *Designing Mental Health Interventions Informed by Child Development and Human Biology Theory: A Social Ecology Intervention for Child Soldiers in Nepal*.

⁽⁷⁶⁾ Ibid.

⁽⁷⁷⁾ Ibid.

⁽⁷⁸⁾ Fazel et al., *Mental health of displaced and refugee children resettled in high-income countries: risk and protective factors*.

⁽⁷⁹⁾ Resilience refers to a child's ability to cope with and respond to both the normal and exceptional challenges that arise during development.

Response strategy to child returnees

Key principles for a response strategy:

Based on the knowledge gathered so far on dealing with child returnees, but also related areas such as child soldiers, the following principles should guide interventions:

- The existence of trauma can be assumed in all cases and needs to be addressed as a matter of priority; the methods to deal with it will differ depending on the age of the children and the concrete experiences. It is known for example that very young children stand a better chance of eliminating the effects of trauma early on and with relatively less therapeutic effort.
- The main approach for children is reintegration; this means in these cases especially normalisation in society and especially at school. For older children, prosecution might be necessary, as well as additional approaches focusing on disengagement and deradicalisation.
- Regardless of the type of intervention, the specificities related to the quality of being a child need to be considered, which also implies the necessity of developing special programmes for children.
- The success of interventions in the case of children will very much depend on the overall architecture dealing with returnees in general, not least the availability and functioning of multi-agency approaches.
- Some general principles known from the approach to adults are also applicable here, such as the necessity of establishing a plan from day one, balancing security and social care concerns, and individualised approaches based on individual situations and needs.

Three key preconditions should guide the strategy for response interventions:

1. **A focus on early intervention and normalisation:** For the best possible results in resocialising returnee children into Western society, *begin* normalising the day-to-day lives of the children and socialising them into an appropriate social network as soon as possible after their arrival. Children will benefit from a structured “normal” and safe environment in which they can interact at day care or school with peers.
2. **A holistic, multi-agency approach:** While child protection services and schools are the main actors in ensuring the safe reintegration of child returnees, they need to function in the context of a multi-agency approach, whereby additional actors are also involved, such as social care services, psychologists and healthcare actors, local authorities, schools, prison and probation-related services (e.g. when parents are in prison), employment services, sports and leisure organisations, religious and charity organisations, intelligence and police.
3. **A tailor-made approach based on individual risk and needs assessment:** Each case will have its own background, dynamics, risks and opportunities for reintegration, which should be reflected in a risk and needs assessment. These cases therefore require a tailor-made approach, involving relevant actors as mentioned above.

The response strategy may comprise a variety of different interventions that serve to ensure safety and security for the child itself, as well as those within their social circle. In addition, there will be interventions that focus on rehabilitation and resocialisation of the child in a safe and stable environment (e.g. going back to school, receiving counselling, taking part in leisure activities) that address the child’s well-being as well as the risk of the child becoming violent and/or radicalised in the future. The methods and interventions that practitioners can use to work with returnee children are explained in more detail in the next section. Existing experience and practice in related areas can be used as inspiration for transferable tools. For example, a recent review of work on refugee children, war-impacted children, child criminal gang members, child victims of maltreatment and child victims of sex trafficking is at the basis of the Rehabilitation and Reintegration Intervention Framework. This consists of five levels (individual, family, educational, community and

societal) with five primary goals: 1) promoting individual mental health and well-being; 2) promoting family support; 3) promoting educational success; 4) promoting community support; and 5) improving structural conditions and protecting public safety.⁽⁸⁰⁾

Further reading:

RAN ex post paper '[High-Level Conference on child returnees and released prisoners](#)'.

Practice in action:

Instructions on how to deal with child returnees in France

On 23 February 2018, the French Prime Minister presented an [instruction for French authorities and practitioners on the management of minors](#) returning to French territory from the territories of operations of terrorist groups in Iraq or Syria.

The approach assumes that returning children evolved in a climate of extreme violence, reason for which they need special counselling. It contains five types of management in this area, namely: somatic and medical–psychological assessment and the need for potential psychotherapy; parental counselling; training of counselling professionals; coordination and exchange of information; evaluation and follow-up. Furthermore, it details the roles and procedures of various institutions involved, starting with the consulate, local authorities, judicial authorities and medical professionals. The document also specifies the children’s right to education and how the reintegration in the educational system should be carried out.

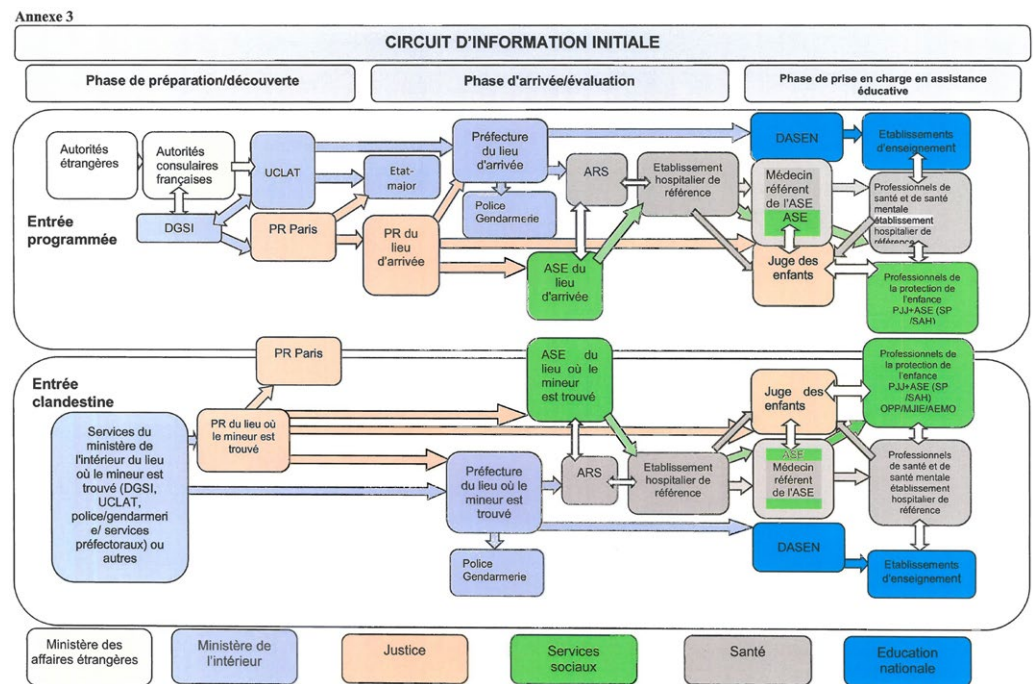


Figure 5: French government instructions on the management of returning minors, Annex 3, p. 17. Original source:

<https://www.cnape.fr/documents/instruction-relative-a-la-prise-en-charge-des-mineurs-a-leur-retour-de-zone-doperations-de-groupe-terroristes/>.

⁽⁸⁰⁾ Weine et al., Rapid Review to Inform the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Child Returnees from the Islamic State.

Methods and interventions

Legal response and child protection

When a child returns to the EU after their (or their parents') stay in a terrorist conflict zone, several **legal issues** become important. Practitioners working with these children should be aware of these, as well as the effects they may have on the child's rehabilitation and resocialisation.

- **Nationality of the child:** The nationality of the child, and linked to that, their citizenship, will depend on legal judgements within each EU country. Difficulties most often arise when the child was born in the conflict zone and there are no documents confirming the biological connection between the child and their parents. However, to be able to ensure the child's reintegration, it is important to determine their legal status. In cases of uncertainty, DNA testing can provide evidence of biological connection. When there is no DNA evidence of a biological connection, it will depend on the legislation and jurisprudence applicable in the relevant country whether or not the child will be allowed into the EU and with what status. Very complex cases may arise from children born from parents with different nationalities, or when a parent has been deprived of nationality.
- **Custody of the child:** Questions may arise over who has custody of the child. As with nationality, specific legal determinations will be country-specific. In most cases, if the parents are still together/one of the parents is seen as able to care for the child, they will receive (shared) custody. It is more challenging when the parent(s) is/are unfit to take care of the child because they are, for example, in prison, physically/mentally unstable or a potential risk to the child, or no longer alive. In those cases, relatives such as grandparents may want to claim custody. If no solution can be found in the child's social environment, a caretaker will receive custody and the child is likely to be placed in an institution or in foster care. Practitioners need to deal with child custody battles, as well as the destabilising effect that this has on the child and those around them. Practice shows that in most countries the children will often stay with the mother or with the extended family. A specific challenge is posed by children adopted by European women in Syrian camps or before.
- **Criminal prosecution and imprisonment of the child:** Child returnees of a certain age have been prosecuted in EU MSs. This follows essentially the general legal approach that takes a certain age as the beginning of legal responsibility for crimes in general; this is usually 14 but varies. In some cases, legislation allows imprisonment in adult prisons. While children have been prosecuted and imprisoned under terrorism legislation, the very large majority was involved in relatively light crimes, such as propaganda. According to international standards, such as the [UNODC Handbook](#), it is recommended to separate children from adults and also according to gender and that deprivation of liberty should be a means of last resort.

Further reading:

On the legislation and prosecution of children under terrorist and extremist legislation, including returnees, in selected EU MSs, see '[Children, the Justice System, Violent Extremism and Terrorism: An overview of law, policy and practice in six European countries](#)'.

- **Rehabilitation and reintegration:** As seen above, prosecution and imprisonment of child returnees has taken place. With regard to recruitment into armed groups or forces, international law, treaties and protocols support the line of thinking that children under 18 should not be prosecuted for these actions but should be

reintegrated and rehabilitated, whether they were forcibly or voluntarily recruited, and whether as active combatants or in a support role: “The United Nations, as well as many NGOs and child protection actors share the view that children associated with armed groups should not be detained or prosecuted, but should be primarily treated as victims by virtue of their age and the forced nature of their association.”⁽⁸¹⁾ It follows therefore that, even in a prosecution approach, rehabilitation and reintegration should still be prioritised.



Case study

Juvenile imprisonment and release from the RAN paper ‘Juvenile and young violent extremist offenders’

The young man returned from Syria, was arrested later and moved to the juvenile prison in Wiesbaden, Germany.

This is where the work started for the staff. The staff remember that he was very withdrawn in the beginning, never looking anyone in the eyes and not willing to cooperate. He wanted to die as a martyr. He believed he did not belong in society. After several unsuccessful interviews, the young returnee started talking and working with the staff. Vocational training was proposed for him, but he was not interested in the beginning. He was trained as a painter. The vocational training also gave him the possibility to expand further his social group and develop his intercultural skills. He was afterwards given literature, to broaden his knowledge.

After the first 4 weeks of correctional planning, he was moved to a part of the prison where he could interact with other inmates in his therapeutic community. He had his own cell, but the group shared common moments (e.g. lunches). He gradually started to distance himself from his past life and have regular social contact and visits from his parents. He maintained good behaviour in detention overall: the case conference (multi-agency table including the judiciary and the prison staff) eventually decided he was eligible for an early release. At this point, the staff had to start preparing him for release to avoid him being brought back into extremist ideologies. It is interesting to note that he was not scared of being contacted by extremist members but was mostly worried about being “brainwashed” again. He also agreed to start psychotherapy – an offer that he had rejected only 1 year before. After 6 months, he was released under close monitoring of police, probation and Violence Prevention Network (VPN) staff. He was required to report to them.

VPN staff continue to visit him (after 2 years from the date of his early release) once a month. They go to the mosque with him to pray or simply have a coffee and chat about the news. Unfortunately, he continues to have difficulties finding a job that matches his vocational training.

Lessons learned:

- Staff members persevered in trying to establish contact with the inmate which at some point helped break down the wall.
- The other inmates in the therapeutic community played an important role for him in learning social skills.

⁽⁸¹⁾ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Working Paper No 3, September 2011, https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/publications/WorkingPaper-3_Children-and-Justice.pdf; see also Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 44 of the Convention : Convention on the Rights of the Child : concluding observations : Democratic Republic of the Congo, UN. Committee on the Rights of the Child (50th sess. : 2009 : Geneva), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/648538?ln=en>.

- Many risk factors that drove his individual radicalisation process are similar to risk factors common for young offenders. Therefore, existing interventions could be adapted to the extremist offender.

- Rights of the child and child protection: All EU Member States have ratified the UNCRC and are bound to this under international law. The basic principle behind this convention is that all states act in the best interests of the child. In addition, it covers compliance with child custody and guardianship laws to ensure that every child has basic rights such as the right to life, to their own name and identity, to be raised by their parents within a family or cultural grouping, and to have a relationship with both parents, even if they are separated. There is an obligation for states to allow parents to exercise their parental responsibilities. There is also an obligation to provide separate legal representation for a child in any judicial dispute concerning their care and to ensure that the child's viewpoint be heard in such cases. In addition, the convention states that parties must "take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical and mental violence."⁽⁸²⁾ The EU takes this convention as the starting point for the rights of the child and has built its policies and actions in line with the UNCRC. When it comes to child returnees, especially those who are thought to have been involved in terrorist activities, the UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) report concludes that:

"Overall, the underlying principles of the CRC, including the right of the child to have his or her best interest treated as a primary consideration', do not appear to be implemented in relation to children engaged in terrorist related activity, nor in relation to measures imposed on their family members. Furthermore, it is not obvious that either article 40 (3)(b) [of the UNCRC], which requires states to introduce measures for dealing with children without resorting to judicial proceedings, or Article 37 (b) CRC which requires that deprivation of liberty should only be a matter of last resort for the shortest period of time, are being implemented in any meaningful manner when it comes to children engaged in terrorist related activity."⁽⁸³⁾

In line with these findings and conclusions, one of UNICRI's main recommendations is that: "States should be encouraged to ensure that children are specifically addressed in legislation dealing with terrorism and that the rights of children under international treaties are assured to them. This is likely to require special legislative provisions relating to children from the point of detention to the point of, and including sentence and reintegration in domestic legislation."⁽⁸⁴⁾

Further reading:

For more information on this topic, see the [Neuchâtel Memorandum on Good Practices for Juvenile Justice in a Counterterrorism Context](#).

- Multi-agency approach and information sharing: All EU Member States have structures and procedures in place to deal with vulnerable children. However, child returnees form a new group that requires the adaptation of existing structures to the current reality in terms of cooperation, determination of responsibility, coordination and information sharing. To work efficiently, swiftly and effectively

⁽⁸²⁾ UNICRI, *Children and Counter-Terrorism*, p. 61.

⁽⁸³⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁽⁸⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

in a multi-agency approach and to adapt it to child returnees, the following is necessary:

- Clear legal rules and regulations around information sharing, especially when it comes to dealing with children in vulnerable positions (such as drug abuse by parents, domestic violence, sexual abuse). Practice shows that the sharing of information gathered for security purposes is particularly difficult, though sometimes necessary for child services or social work to make a sound assessment of the child's needs. This requires room for security clearances in some cases. On the other hand, family support professionals might learn something about a child's background or circumstances that could influence the safety and security of the child. This type of information should be shared in a structured manner with police and intelligence services.
- Part of the response strategy should be to review current legal frameworks for cooperation between services so as to ensure safety and security, to protect the child's welfare and to develop appropriate legislation that allows the necessary information sharing.
- Bringing different expertise together around partner tables or in expertise units. For child returnees, there should be expertise on trauma (development and response), child development in general, intelligence gathering, the judicial system, family support, education and so on. These multi-agency expertise units can help with specific cases, with the design of overall training for first-line practitioners and assessing risks and needs.
- Legal guidance for practitioners: Practitioners such as family support professionals and social workers in contact with child and other returnees are faced with many questions from the returnee's family and social contacts, including some of a legal nature. These might address custody, support for sending money, nationality, citizenship and so on. Practitioners also talk about increasing numbers of court cases on these issues. To be able to provide correct information to the individuals and families, as well as to protect practitioners who might become involved in court cases, creating a legal back-office structure is highly recommended. This would be a place (either physical or through an online service) where social workers or family support professionals can ask legal guidance about the questions they receive from returnee families. Appropriate legal training for practitioners dealing with children can be considered. The scope of such training could be broadened and include a general focus on the rights of children, and in particular the rights of children who are victims of violence, and the rights of children in contact with the justice system.

Risk and needs assessment

The rehabilitation and resocialisation of children rely heavily on risk and needs assessments. These should address the child's physical and mental well-being, level of trauma, level of indoctrination/extremist thinking, attitude towards violence and so on. At the moment, no specific risk assessments for child returnees have been developed. However, practitioners can draw from existing psychometric tools that assess, for example, multiculturalism, group identity, cognitive flexibility and religious adherence.⁽⁸⁵⁾ It is important to distinguish between returnee girls and boys because they may be exposed to different forms of violence/trauma, and because they may require specialised interventions. While no specialised tool for children has been developed yet, it again remains important to consider the specificities of children as compared to adults and to furthermore draw on available tools that have been used for children in other contexts. In fact, Scottish authorities have explicitly recommended the use of the GIRFEC – Getting it right for every child – practice model collection of tools in the context of risk assessment for children returning from Syria.⁽⁸⁶⁾

⁽⁸⁵⁾ Saklofske et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Child Psychological Assessment*.

⁽⁸⁶⁾ Scottish Government, *Advice for local authorities – Safeguarding children returning to the UK from Syria*.

Practice in action:

The [GIRFEC National Practice Model](#) refers to three components: the Wellbeing Indicators, the My World Triangle, and the Resilience Matrix. It essentially captures the child's needs but also elements of risk and identifies the appropriate support in each case. Considering the fact that children are still in development, the focus of these tools on ensuring the preconditions for a positive development is of particular value.

Aarhus screening tool for families and children

The social services and Infohouse in Aarhus have developed a screening tool to be used by practitioners focused on a deradicalisation process. The screening tool is currently in use for cases of potential radicalisation within a family. It has four categories:

- 9 months to 1 year
- 1-6 years
- 6-12 years
- 12-18 years

For each category, a specific set of questions are asked of the professionals working with the family to assess the severity of the problem or if there is a problem at all. The questions centre on the child and fall in five categories ending with an assessment summary:

1. Development and behaviour
2. Family relations
3. School or day care (where relevant)
4. Health
5. Social life and friendships (where relevant)
6. Assessment summary

Detention

Deprivation of liberty for children should be a means of last resort and should be carried out with special care for vulnerabilities and opportunities for rehabilitation derived from the quality of being a child. Generally, detention should be separate from adults and observing gender. The UNODC 'Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups' furthermore outlines the following principles:

- Detention should be for the shortest period of time and administrative detention limited.
- Access to healthcare services must be provided, including for preventive and specialised treatment.
- Develop strategies and measures to prevent, identify and respond to violence against children, including counselling services.
- Providing education and vocational training is key; programmes supporting positive behavioural skills and dialogue can also be included.
- Providing recreational, physical and leisure activities is key.
- Religious and cultural rights must be provided.

Placement and living conditions

The custody procedure will determine where a child lives. This may be with their parent(s), grandparents or other family members. This may also be in an institution or in foster care with another family if the biological family is found to be unfit, or perhaps even a risk to the child's rehabilitation. This option should be a last resort as the impact upon

the child will be significant and unpredictable. The child may be back in the city or town they or their parent(s) originally came from, or starting a new life somewhere different. Alongside legal proceedings and (in some cases) constraints, it is important to underline the importance of the new living situation in the rehabilitation process. For rehabilitation purposes, normalisation must happen as soon as possible, but it can be influenced by factors such as:

- parental employment;
- having a structured everyday life;
- access to a private living space;
- access to education and leisure activities;
- living in a suitable community;
- access to peer groups;
- role models;
- a sense of self-determination.

Those responsible for deciding on the child's living conditions (this will differ per Member State, but is most likely to be influenced by parents/direct family, local authorities, child protection, juvenile courts) should take these factors into account.



Case study Returnee with three children

Female returnee, aged 30, went to Syria for 8 months with her husband and 2 children. She returned in the late stages of pregnancy with a third child and with her two other children. Her husband presumably died. She was not arrested, pending investigation. After her return, many organisations were involved. Multiple social services were involved initially, because of concerns about her children and her mental state (the children were underfed when they were returned), and kept monitoring the children's well-being. The police and municipality were also involved and visited her on a regular basis. A case manager was appointed to coordinate all the necessary care. In her informal network, her sister was active and assisted her in going to appointments or talking with officials. She was also in contact with her family and her in-laws, but to a lesser extent.

Lessons learned:

- It is important to assess the likelihood of a returnee going back to terrorist-claimed territory, for example to join a spouse. In this case, this initially seemed quite likely, so possibilities to prevent her from travelling to Syria were discussed, such as taking her passport. It is important to have good formal and informal networks that can provide information about returnees.
- Reaching an agreement between the social services and the returnee can keep a family together. Here, there were concerns over the safety and security of the children. But the returnee worked with the social services, keeping to what had been agreed, and her children were not removed.
- It is important to look at the wider network around the returnees. One of the challenges in this case was not knowing what the influence of her in-laws was, as their second son had also left for Syria. It was feared they could have a bad influence on her and her children.
- Investing in many kinds of support and building a relationship helps practitioners to assess risk and to find opportunities for disengagement and deradicalisation.

Family support

Whether with the biological family or in foster care, the direct social environment plays a crucial role in the rehabilitation process. Given that in the case of child returnees the entire biological family is likely to have experienced conflict and trauma, this is a considerable risk to the child's well-being and stability. Therefore support and expert guidance (e.g. psychological, trauma, theological, pedagogical expertise) should be provided for these families as a unit to help them deal with trauma and present circumstances, and to make them aware of how they can help create a safe and stable environment for the child to grow up in. (See Chapter 4 'Multi-agency Agreement on Intervention' for more on family support)

Specific attention should be given to the family's narrative regarding the experience in Syria and/or Iraq. Questions will inevitably arise from the child, which could lead to challenging feelings or misinterpretations of actual events and policy decisions regarding the child's family. Support should be given to families that struggle to explain to children what happened to them and their parents in Syria and/or Iraq and upon return.

Role of (pre-) schools

Having access to education is of crucial importance in child returnees' rehabilitation process. This is a significant protective factor as it instils a sense of safety, normalises the child's day-to-day life, ensures exposure to cultural diversity and increases interaction with individuals outside of the home.⁽⁸⁷⁾ Discussions amongst practitioners in the former RAN Education Working Group (now RAN Youth and Education – RAN Y&E) have led to important insights (summarised below) into how schools should be involved in the rehabilitation of child returnees without jeopardising the safety of other children, school staff and others directly involved.



Case study

Child returnee returning to school

In March 2014 a young male minor presented himself – with his father – at a school to register. After inspection, it turned out the boy had been in Syria for 3 months and had just returned. He also followed the training programme during his stay in Syria. He had appeared quite quickly in front of a juvenile court where the judge had decided that he should return to school as soon as possible. This decision was taken within a week of his return. The story of his return had several versions: 1. He escaped because he wanted to go home; 2. He went to Istanbul to buy warm clothing and then escaped; and 3. He returned together with an older friend.

Because the school in question at that time was confronted with several radicalising youngsters, the principal decided to have a confidential meeting with some teachers to enquire about their reaction and whether they would be able to manage having this boy in their class. The teachers responded by panicking, some began to cry and some even wanted to resign. Based on this experience, the principal decided to refer the boy to another school, and confidentially contacted a colleague. Only the principal, the social worker, the religious studies teacher and the form teacher were informed. The juvenile judge also instated a personal coaching trajectory, and the family – in this case a single father – was given guidance. The reintegration process went well.

- Normalisation as the guiding principle: The main principle, when dealing with returnees in educational settings, is to “return to normal” as soon as possible.

⁽⁸⁷⁾ Kia-Keating & Ellis, *Belonging and connection to school in resettlement: Young refugees, school belonging, and psychosocial adjustment*; Hart, *Child refugees, trauma and education: Interactionist considerations on social and emotional needs and development*.

Schools should provide a safe and regulated space, where the child or youngster feels supported, where there is structure and rules, and where stress is alleviated. The risk that the pupil is seen as “different” should be minimised, and efforts to minimise attention taken.

- Dealing with potential risks posed by child returnees: Because of their background and personal experiences, there may be concerns that child returnees pose a risk to other children at the school; while unlikely, an awareness of trauma reactions (such as acting up and, in a minority of cases, interpersonal violence) and preparedness for dealing with these reactions should be part of the training process for teachers. As stated previously, a risk and needs assessment should be carried out before bringing the child into an educational environment.
- Schools should encourage children to develop ideas and responsibility: Children should be supported as they become positive members of the school community and are given opportunities to be successful. This is even more important for children who perceive injustice and are angry or concerned about developments in their personal lives and in the world. Dealing with anger and perceived grievances and injustice is crucial to resilience against extremist risks.
- Overcome the reluctance in some schools to take in child returnees: Some schools will be reluctant to take in child returnees as they are afraid that extremist ideas may spread within the school, or even that terrorist acts may take place. This could create tensions in the school and wider communities. To overcome these challenges, a person/authority who is acceptable and trusted by school managers should be appointed to discuss, convince and negotiate with schools on cooperation.
- Information sharing on the arrival of a child returnee: It is important that the child does not just turn up at school unannounced. The school principal should be informed and the child should be dealt with according to the school’s child protection procedures. While there might be some benefits from sharing information with the wider staff, it could lead to biases and stigmatisation that slow down the process of normalisation. It may be useful to have conversations with the family on what information should be shared with whom.
- Schools should pay extra attention to how the new child is doing: The school management should make sure the child receives special attention, and that they are kept informed of the child’s activities and well-being. They can ask their staff questions, engage with the child or have a staff member monitor the child closely.
- Develop a support structure for schools: This is needed to make clear for schools who the experts are upon whom they can rely to deal with child returnees. In multi-agency cooperation, schools should cooperate with partners in childcare, social care, the police, mental health services, trauma experts, physical health services, youth workers, NGOs with relevant expertise and organisers of after-school activities to encourage integration.
- Provide for an intermediate period of readjustment for the child: This might help the child to start (over) in the school system (after having lived in a completely different setting). The period should be as short as possible. In some countries, children have to immediately enter the school system due to legislation/set-up of the system. During the readjustment period it is important to build up trust and become connected to the child and their family. During this period, a needs assessment and tests on language, psychological well-being and intellectual ability might take place.
- Find a good fit between the returnee child and the school: Some schools may be a better fit for the child than others. The authority responsible for schools or a specialised centre could play a key role in identifying the most suitable schools. They should be given extra training, support and funding. Returning to the old environment and former school might not benefit the child and family. Relocation is in the child’s interests, so that they – and the rest of the family – can make a new start without either stigmatisation or admiration. It is advisable to avoid registering these children in schools located near the sites of attacks in Europe due to the presence of traumatised or victimised children and staff members.

- Dealing with publicity and press reactions: Schools need to know that if they take in a returnee, this might cause publicity and tensions within the (school) community. Parents, press and politicians might start asking questions and raise concerns. A strategy is needed for this, and must make confidentiality paramount. Schools may be able use their crisis communication protocol. If they do not have a protocol yet, they might base it on how they manage children with criminal backgrounds returning to school. It is recommended that schools discuss their strategy with the local authority beforehand. Generally speaking, schools should not speak to the press.
- Special programmes for child returnees: As for any other sensitive issues involving children, young returnee children should not be isolated or identified for “special” treatment. This does not however negate the need for tailored individual support programmes following a needs assessment. The assessment should be carried out with the involvement of the whole family and the support network that exists outside of the school. The results will help the school assess learning capacities.
- Creating access to expertise on trauma and extremism: Although in general school staff are trained to deal with vulnerable children, some additional training on extremism and the circumstances in which child returnees have lived is advised. The school should also have access to an expert team on these topics for help and support in challenging situations.

Trauma-informed practice

As clearly stated in the RAN issue paper ‘Child returnees from conflict zones’,⁽⁸⁸⁾ trauma awareness is a skill that must be imparted to all frontline practitioners working with returnee children. The ability to recognise the signs and symptoms of trauma is essential for correctly interpreting a child’s behaviour and designing appropriate interventions. The need for this ability has been reinforced by practitioners within the former RAN Health and Social Care (RAN H&SC) Working Group, who have also touched upon the necessity for “trauma-informed practice” in working with child returnees.

Practitioners working with children who grew up in a radical environment (both in Europe and in current war zone areas) need to ensure they understand the different nature of trauma and its impact. Trauma causes a **load-dependent response** – the more trauma children experience, the more likely they are to have psychological and physical issues. Resultant behaviours include a tendency to misinterpret conversations and become hypersensitive, as well as either over- or under-reactions (or both) to stimuli. These children are often incorrectly diagnosed as having personality disorders, which highlights the need for professionals to share information on a child’s personal history.

There is a need for practitioners to understand the “survival brain” of these children in terms of the **flight / fight / freeze** response to trauma (natural responses from the lower brain functions. When perceived to be under threat, humans will either fight the threat, flee from it or freeze in their response). This is the point at which the “thinking brain” of these traumatised children is hijacked by the lower brain functions, which in turn go into “survival mode”. Children in survival mode will find it difficult to engage because their initial response is to survive or “react” rather than think “rationally” and have dialogue with professionals trying to support them.

It should be understood that these children do not “fail to engage” with services, as is commonly assumed, but rather that these children are “unable to engage” because of a perceived threat. Professionals working to challenge extremist ideologies cannot do so when a child is in flight / fight / freeze mode because a child is not capable of “thinking” at that point. It is important to ensure a child feels safe; the process of building a rapport

⁽⁸⁸⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network, Child returnees from conflict zones. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2020-09/issue_paper_child_returnees_from_conflict_zones_112016_en.pdf

and creating a welcoming and comfortable environment are key contributors to a child's **transition from the survival brain to the thinking brain**.

The process of creating a safe and stable environment and building a relationship with a child returnee can take several months. Although it is imperative to ensure effective engagement before work on counteracting extremist views can commence, some research argues that no meaningful therapeutic intervention should be attempted for at least 6 months, given the need for the child to physically and psychologically readjust to their new settings. That is not to say support should not be offered, but that children who have experienced severe trauma demonstrate particular issues with trust, and these may further hinder engagement in therapy.

To develop trauma-informed practice, practitioners of the former RAN H&SC practitioners recommend working with children on the basis of a shared care plan in which different authorities and care institutions have responsibility and provide different interventions, but one case manager ensures continuity of support. All partners involved should be aware of the presence of trauma and how to respond to it. This includes practitioners and frontline staff such as receptionists, who are often the first port of call when engaging with organisations. It is important that they understand the ways in which these children's and/or families' behaviours are linked to trauma (e.g. a child might be aggressive because they are in survival mode).

Further reading:

The [2016 RAN H&SC Ex post paper](#) deals with trauma and trauma-informed practice extensively and in relation to children.

The [2018 RAN Policy & Practice Event ex post paper titled 'Building resilience among young children raised in extremist environments – specifically child returnees'](#) and the [2019 YF&C Academy ex post paper on 'Children growing up in extremist families'](#) hold further information and recommendations on this particular topic.

Apart from these more general trauma awareness principles, it is important to use the expertise and services of specialised staff. The methods and approaches will be different depending on the age of the child. With respect to trauma therapy per se, the current situation outlines three elements: resort to methods of trauma therapy for children in other contexts; difficulties with applying existent methodology in the concrete case of child returnees, mainly due to the lack of information on the children's history; and the need to develop more specialised tools. **A recent French study outlines these issues and furthermore gives us a clear picture of the extent of the traumatic symptomatology amongst this group.** Out of a total of 32 cases evaluated by child psychologists and psychiatrists, it was concluded that care was needed in each case. The symptoms observed in the initial assessment were: sleep disorders, separation anxiety disorders, acute stress states, eating disorders, global development delay, language delays. After 3 months the following symptoms were observed: depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, adjustment disorders, PTSD.⁽⁸⁹⁾

Addressing extremist ideology

In some cases, it is possible that children, especially older ones, have **had some level of engagement with and exposure to Daesh's extremist ideology**. For adults, addressing the ideological component of radicalisation through interventions is usually referred to as "deradicalisation". Tailored deradicalisation programmes are however yet to be developed

⁽⁸⁹⁾ Klein et al., Under-Age Children Returning From Jihadist Group Operation Areas: How Can We Make a Diagnosis and Construct a Narrative With a Fragmentary Anamnesis?

for child returnees. It is important to note that, in many cases, once the child is in a stable home and engaging regularly in school, and the family unit is reintegrating into society (e.g. employment or education for the parents), the issue of extremism may self-resolve. This is because identity is closely linked to day-to-day experiences for children who grow up in a conflict zone. A change in experiences is often accompanied by a change in what and who the child identifies with.

Extremism must be addressed, and must be done so sensitively through a nuanced and careful approach. Instigating deradicalisation programmes for youths that directly confront youngsters on issues of ideology and identity might lead to a **crisis of identity for the youngsters**, exacerbated by the normal identity issues that accompany the transition from childhood to adolescence. It is therefore important to work on and rebuild an alternative world view based on positive and varied day-to-day experiences. The family, schools, community and leisure organisations can play a positive role in re-establishing a child's view of society and their identity and role within it.

Building capacity to deal with child returnees

This manual provides guidance on how to respond to child returnees. **It is key for Member States to build capacity** for child returnees, and in particular in relation to:

- Developing knowledge and expertise on child returnees through development of an overview of expertise including experienced professionals on trauma (development and response), extremism, child development, education and risk assessment. This expertise should be easily accessible for first-line practitioners dealing with child returnees and tailored to the local and national context the child returnees will be growing up in.
- Basic awareness training for practitioners in (direct) contact with child returnees (e.g. schoolteachers, social workers, members of leisure organisations). This basic training should at least cover:
 - information about the situation in Syria/Iraq to which these children have been exposed;
 - basic trauma awareness and response exercises when a child returnee shows particular behaviour;
 - how to report signs of concern and where to request additional support.
- Clear legal and organisational structures for dealing with child returnees.
- Existing child welfare and child protection services.

Cross-cutting Issues

This final chapter examines two broad topics of great relevance for those working with returnees: the different roles and motivations of female FTFs and returnees and existing practices in dealing with them; and how to communicate – both with returnees and their families themselves, and with the communities to which they will return.

Gender differentiation

Across Europe, the majority of FTFs are men (80 %). While women constitute on average 20 %, there are regional variations – the proportion of women is lower in Italy and Spain (10 %), for example. Women’s motivations to join are partially different than those of men (see Chapter 2); additionally, their experiences in the Daesh-controlled territory and later on in detention camps have been different to those of men. Therefore, specific approaches for women or gender-aware approaches are necessary.

The roles of women in Daesh have been multiple and have varied from support to education or even combat, albeit in exceptional circumstances. Beyond fulfilling their duties as wives and mothers, some have contributed as teachers and nurses, or to propaganda and recruitment. Women’s political motivation and their indoctrination cannot be ignored, such that their active role in the terrorist enterprise has been confirmed on repeated occasions. Often women were attracted by a romantic vision of living a pious religious life free from discrimination, and in which they become the bedrock of family and central to raising a new generation. For some female recruits, Daesh was an escape route from difficult identity issues, such as choosing between modern Western values and the retention of their families’ traditional Islamic principles. For others, joining Daesh constituted a way of gaining power and privilege. Regardless of motivation and roles, women’s positionality in the fundamentally patriarchal society created by Daesh remains precarious. Trauma and abuse before and during their stay in Daesh territory does not exonerate their own abusive behaviour, yet need to be considered in the context of interventions. Furthermore, the gendered nature of motivation to both radicalise and return should be part of the rehabilitation and reintegration plan. By “gendered” it is not meant the quality of being female, but the imaginaries related to masculinity and femininity that they have adopted during socialisation, and those that inevitably also mark the society at home in various ways and to different degrees.

Further reading:

The [2019 RAN EXIT ex post paper](#) details gender-specific aspects of disengagement, deradicalisation and reintegration efforts of exit work.

Female FTF returnees often returned to give birth to children and to escape the conditions of the detention camps and prisons in Syria and Iraq. **Women with children are often vulnerable and require significant support and commitment from social services.** Many of these women fear that they will lose their children due to child protection measures. Women returnees are often isolated and feel shameful vis-à-vis the rest of the community. This is compounded by the trauma they have experienced, together with their children, through exposure to the conditions of war and excessive brutal violence. Traumatic experiences can include war, death in the family, sexual violence, separation from children and conditions of detention. It is essential that a risk assessment of these returnees and their children is conducted, and that trauma support is provided, including for those not convicted of a crime. Women having experienced horrific conditions and the reality of living under a terrorist regime are often disillusioned upon return. In some cases, however, women might remain indoctrinated or they may have been involved in concrete offences,

including crimes against humanity such as torture or genocide. Principally, women's experiences could include having been a perpetrator, a victim, having witnessed horrors and having been victimised themselves. Understanding women's experiences in the Daesh territories and in the detention camps also needs to include the aspect of the community of women, the sisterhood, which could have influenced them towards deradicalisation or away from it.

Experiences with women returnees in EU Member States remain limited, as overall a relatively small number of women have been prosecuted or been the subject of interventions outside the criminal justice system. A number of practices have been developed especially in the area of psychotherapeutic counselling (see below). Recently, France has announced the decision to create two separate detention structures for women considered dangerous, a detention regime thus far only used for men. It is anticipated that these will be used for women returnees currently still in camps.⁽⁹⁰⁾ The experience of Western Balkans countries can be useful in this context, in particular with regard to reintegration back into society, and has been gathered amongst others on the occasion of study visits.

Further reading:

The [2019 RAN Study Visit to Kosovo ex post paper](#) outlines measures that were taken to reintegrate the women and children into Kosovan society.

The UN Development Programme (UNDP) report '[Invisible Women. Gendered Dimensions of Return, Rehabilitation and Reintegration from Violent Extremism](#)' provides a number of case practices from non-European countries with regard to gendered rehabilitation, establishing trust with police, combating stigma and radicalisation, deradicalisation through psychosocial therapy and so on.

Overall, practitioners have indicated the following measures as being useful when dealing with female returnees:

- immediate home visits by social services and police (either independently or together) to assess the level of commitment to terrorist groups;
- an assessment of relations with family members;
- child protection, as well as different options for counselling;
- swift access to trauma treatment and mental health services;
- parent coaching for returnees alongside mentoring;
- establishing family networks, supported by local authorities/NGOs;
- considering the impact of double stigma in communities upon return.

With regard to the concrete work with women from the perspective of rehabilitation and resocialisation, the following approaches have been communicated by practitioners:

- It is recommended to work with multiple methods as needed, including biographic work.
- Involve the network of relevant actors and, if appropriate, the family.
- If the person is imprisoned, it is recommended to allow contact with the children.
- Consider the role of trauma (including through one's own violence) and appropriate therapies.
- Use resources such as the mothers' affection for their children and the wish for normality.

⁽⁹⁰⁾ See: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/la-prison-s-adapte-aux-femmes-terroristes-20210325>

- Consider the involvement of actors external to the criminal justice system in case psychotherapeutic measures are needed as such or in combination with disengagement work.
- Consider the possibility that serious mental and physical conditions might exist and adapt the imprisonment regime and the measures accordingly. It is possible that female returnees will suffer from changes in personality due to situations of extreme stress.
- Find ways to reach out to women returnees outside the criminal justice system: through their families, and in cooperation with educational institutions.

Further reading:

The publication [‘Female returnees and their children’](#) outlines a number of concrete methods and approaches to work with women returnees depending on the phase of their rehabilitation process, starting with arrival and the immediate psychological assessment.

Practice in action:

The [Research Unit Deradicalisation of the organisation Grenzgänger](#) uses the approach of systemic counselling with women returnees and their children. The core idea of this approach is that the clients’ problems need to be understood in a systemic context made up of several layers of structures and actors, such as political, social, economic at the macro level, institutions, local administration, schools and media, then the communities, and finally family and friends. These actors and their roles, as well as the relationships to each other, need to be considered. The dimensions of the approach to counselling are: pragmatic challenges, the emotional level, and working with the ideology.⁽⁹¹⁾

The organisation [TRIAS Berlin](#) in Germany is specialised in psychotherapeutic work in the context of extremism prevention, including with returnee women and children and at various stages of their rehabilitation process.

Communication and counter-narrative issues

This section contains information and tips for response options at the local level for two specific communication questions:

- How to respond to communication challenges at local level when dealing with returnees – Local Communication Strategy.
- How to respond to the negative narrative of terrorist groups about returning to EU countries – Communicating about Returning.

See [Annex 2 on Strategic Communication and Counter Narratives](#) regarding returning FTFs and a description of the elements to take into account when drafting communication strategies about returnees for national government.

⁽⁹¹⁾ Dittmar, *Systemische Beratung als Deradikalisierungsansatz im Kontext des religiös begründeten Extremismus*.

Local communication strategy

General overview and issues

Handling communications concerning the challenges posed by returnees requires careful preparation. A potential threat combined with a perception of that threat by the general public, as well as the general public's predictable concerns on rehabilitating a person who has returned from "fighting" alongside terrorists, means **returnees are expected to generate a lot of media attention**. They may also become a **cause célèbre** for destabilising actors such as violent right-wing extremist organisations. Local authorities and their civil society and community partners need to prepare for increased or renewed media and political attention and pressure. It is therefore vital that a communication strategy is prepared for the entire approach for responding to returnees, ideally ahead of the arrival of the returnee(s) in the local community.

Why a communication strategy is essential

- It is a **controversial topic**. Communications around returnees are likely to draw maximum public attention.
- It is a **divisive topic**. Extremist and terrorist groups are deliberately deploying tactics and messaging designed to polarise and divide communities.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Returnees are a cross-cutting issue. The returnees 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.

Guiding principles when communicating about returnees

When devising a local communication strategy around returnees, there are several guiding principles to keep in mind.

- Prepare a **local analysis early** to determine how to be both proactive and defensive in communications work. The communications should be open and transparent.
- Ensure that the local returnees **communication strategy is dovetailed with all other relevant strategies**. It is very important that this work is aligned with other local and national strategic communications on radicalisation prevention and with communication strategies around radicalisation in prisons. A wrong step in handling just one returnee issue is likely to have huge repercussions for both areas of activity, and it has the potential to become a disruptive narrative for prevention communications.
- The aim of communicating is to steer the discourse towards a space that is as **calm and as rational** as possible. Sometimes communications will need to address, in the first instance, the audience's emotions, concerns and fears.
- Establish standard operating procedures and communication networks, including with the media, in preparation for unexpected events involving returnees.

Concrete methods

In its simplest format, we advise thinking through a communication strategy in seven steps.

1. Clearly **define the local issue** through research and understanding of community, media and wider stakeholder sentiment. In particular, focus on key target groups, such as those prone to radicalisation by right-wing organisations. In addition, ensure the communication strategy is integrated with other communication strategies – this issue will likely impact on other communications, and can also be inspired by them. What is the clear objective?
2. **Understand who you want to speak to** and how to speak to them clearly and in a way that makes sense to them. Who are the voices that resonate with the target audiences? What messages need to be conveyed, and how are these heard by the target audience?
3. Work creatively on campaigns and **work in partnership** with others, particularly between government (in the local multi-agency cooperation team), community and charity partners, and with the support of agencies (communications, design, media, etc.), and where possible social media companies. Can potential creative partners be identified? The national returnee point of contact should be informed about communication plans and can provide additional information.
4. **Who are the community voices** and partners with whom to work? Can they share stories that could humanise the issue of returnees? Clear, concise campaigns are needed to put forward the facts, but wider campaigns will be needed that address the emotions that this issue is likely to raise, including (extreme-right) hate speech or Islamophobia.
5. **How to reach an audience** will depend on who they are, but the mainstream media is not always the most trusted. Community partners might be able to use social media to reach those most “engaged” with the issue. Will this be organic reach or will it need to be supported by the paid-for advertising social media platforms provide? Will local community events help explain the issue? Initial research and analysis should have already answered these questions.
6. **Monitor the response** to any communication carefully. This is the primary feedback and can be used iteratively to inform work and adjust accordingly. This will also feed into an evaluation of the activity’s overall success and provide insights into shortcomings.
7. **Report and discuss communications efforts** and success amongst the other stakeholders in the local multi-agency team. This work will help inform future preventive communications and policy development on returnees. Ensure results are made available and prompt further communications planning to build on the success.

Practice in action:

Finland Community Seminars

In Finland, Community Seminars are organised at the local level. The seminars bring together different local actors from different public sectors (law enforcement, social services, etc.), NGOs that specialise in working with vulnerable groups and have expertise in local prevention efforts, religious communities and community-based organisations, with grassroots access to citizens and their trust. The seminars function as a trust-building and co-creation platform for local preventive practices and initiatives. After a seminar, the local authorities receive support from a local multi-agency team and action plan. The objective of this co-creation is to facilitate a transparent, inclusive and participatory process for all parties that also prevents stigmatisation and “targeting”, for example of Muslim communities. This is important also from the point of view of strategic communications – as polarisation around the topic of radicalisation, violent extremism and FTF returnees reflects a narrow and misleading image of the nature of violent extremism as a phenomenon. For more information, contact [Finn Church Aid and the Peacemakers Network](#).

Communicating about returning

General overview and issues

Several practitioners have reported family members of FTFs as saying that **Daesh has a specific narrative about returning** to discourage it (unless they intentionally want people to return). They claim that people returning from Daesh will get exceptionally bad treatment in EU countries. Returnees will be imprisoned immediately and for a long period, information about Daesh will be forced out of them during excessive interrogation sessions and returnees will never be accepted (again) by society. Apparently, Daesh's strategy on forcing people to stay by severely punishing persons who try to leave Daesh-claimed territory⁽⁹²⁾ is complemented by narratives about what will happen if they do leave.

These narratives are bleak – to say the least – aiming at convincing the potential returnee that going back to their home country is not an option. Returnees have to face the consequences of their actions. In reality, a return to society in their home country is possible; the general principles of the rule of law, healthcare, education and the welfare system will all apply. Since most returnees contact their family members before returning, these relatives are best-placed to inform the FTF about what will happen when they return. Those practitioners who are in contact with the families of FTFs can discuss with the families what happens and how their family member will be treated when they return.

Guiding principle when communicating with families about returning from terrorist-claimed territory

- **Transparency:** Be realistic and transparent when discussing the consequences and situations the returnee will face when coming back. The returnee has after all joined a terrorist group and will have to face the consequences. Be transparent about prosecution, monitoring by police or intelligence services, imprisonment and child protection interventions. And be equally transparent about resocialisation, medical and/or mental health treatment, employment and educational support, and housing and welfare options.

Further reading:

The RAN Practitioners paper '[Reporting about Violent Extremism and P/CVE. Challenges for Journalists – Recommendations from Practitioners](#)' outlines key challenges regarding sensitive media reporting on incidents of terrorism and violent extremism. It goes on to offer insights into the unintended consequences of some media coverage and offers recommendations from the perspective of P/CVE practitioners.

⁽⁹²⁾ Willsher, 'I went to join Isis in Syria, taking my four-year-old. It was a journey into hell.'

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Annex 1

Overview of risk assessment tools

This annex contains basic background information on the various risk assessment tools that are used by governments. The four risk assessment tools described here should be judged for suitability on their own merits and in accordance with the returnees' circumstances. Most of these risk assessment tools are used in prison. Structured professional judgements require training for those administering them.

A more general tool is the HCR-20 assessment tool, which is widely used to assess risk levels for violent behaviour. There is a significant evidence base for this risk matrix, which can also be used – if adapted – for assessing the risk of violent behaviour amongst returnees.

Extremism Risk Guidelines ERG22+

The Extremism Risk Guidelines ERG22+ is the product of UK government studies into radicalisation processes, has been adopted as an assessment tool by the NOMS Operational Intervention Services Group, and was launched in 2011. It is based on 22 primary factors of radicalisation and is used in the Channel Vulnerability Assessment (CVA) Framework. Each indicator is given equal weighting and indicates that there may be other factors observable beyond these 22 indicators (which are divided across three areas: engagement, intent, and capability factors).

IR46

The IR46 from the Haaglanden Regional Safety House (Veiligheidshuis) Model is a Dutch monodisciplinary police model for the assessment of risk that is tailored to multi-agency risk assessment. It is based on four phases and on Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism.⁽⁹³⁾ It is divided into two columns: Ideologies (Intentions) and Social Context (Capabilities). All in all, this model provides 46 indicators that provide the basis for multi-agency risk assessments in which each indicator is evaluated through multidisciplinary, structured and professional judgement.

VERA-2

The VERA-2⁽⁹⁴⁾ risk assessment develops specific indicators that combine beliefs and attitudes to support ideology; historical background and events that shape the person's ideas and beliefs; and commitment and motivational drivers and the capacity of the individual to plan and execute a violent extremist attack. These elements are then weighed against *protective indicators* that mitigate risk behaviour.

TRAP-18

TRAP-18 is a risk instrument that combines proximal warning behaviours (such as pathway, identification, fixation and novel aggression) and 10 longer-term distal characteristics (such as personal grievance, ideological framing and psychopathology). It is an investigative tool focused in particular on lone-actor terrorism.

⁽⁹³⁾ Moghaddam, The Staircase to Terrorism; A Psychological Exploration.

⁽⁹⁴⁾ Pressman, Risk Assessment Decisions for Violent Political Extremism 2009-02.

HCR-20 – Assessing risk of violence

To aid the judgement of assessors, many use the HCR-20, regarding it as an invaluable reference point for further pinpointing the causation and relevance of factors and case formulation, by including, for example, theories on personality, social cognition, social disorganisation and decision-making.

Based on extensive literature on factors that lead to violence, the HCR-20 takes its name from three time scales – Historical, Clinical (present), Risk Management (future) – and from the number of items (20) that it measures. Each risk item is assessed according to a three-level rating structure (Low, Moderate or High).

| I. Historical Risk Factors | Degree of Risk: LOW | Degree of Risk: MODERATE | Degree of Risk: HIGH |
|--|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>1. History of Violence</i> | | | |
| <i>2. Young Age at First Violent Incident</i> | | | |
| <i>3. Relationship Instability</i> | | | |
| <i>4. Employment Problems</i> | | | |
| <i>5. Substance Use Problems</i> | | | |
| <i>6. Major Mental Illness</i> | | | |
| <i>7. Psychopathy</i> | | | |
| <i>8. Early Maladjustment</i> | | | |
| <i>9. Personality Disorders</i> | | | |
| <i>10. Prior Supervision Failure</i> | | | |
| II. Clinical Items (current factors) | Degree of Risk: LOW | Degree of Risk: MODERATE | Degree of Risk: HIGH |
| <i>11. Lack of Insight</i> | | | |
| <i>12. Negative Attitudes</i> | | | |
| <i>13. Active Symptoms of Major Mental Illness</i> | | | |
| <i>14. Impulsivity</i> | | | |
| <i>15. Unresponsive to Treatment</i> | | | |

| III. Risk Management Items (future factors) | Degree of Risk: LOW | Degree of Risk: MODERATE | Degree of Risk: HIGH |
|---|---------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| <i>16. Plans Lack Feasibility</i> | | | |
| <i>17. Exposure to Destabilizers</i> | | | |
| <i>18. Lack of Personal Support</i> | | | |
| <i>19. Non-compliance with Remediation Attempts</i> | | | |
| <i>20. Stress</i> | | | |

Annex 2

Returnees: Communications and Counter Narratives

ESCN Advisory
May 2017



Returnees:

Communications and Counter Narratives

1. General Overview: The communications challenge

- 1.1. Daesh has already generated a paradigm shift in the quality of terrorist communications. But as the so-called 'caliphate' in Syria and Iraq collapses Daesh is having to adapt its messaging in order to remain relevant.
- 1.2. Daesh and its supporters are no longer asking people to make hijrah but are encouraging Western supporters, including returnees, to carry out domestic terror attacks in its name. Daesh has already begun to reframe its narratives by drawing more on the experiences of Muslims in the West to generate violent responses in those who have been unable to travel to the Caliphate and those who are returning from the conflict area.
- 1.3. Daesh 'official' communications are in decline, preferring instead to increase its use and dependency of 'unofficial' networks. These 'unofficial' networks draw more powerfully on the 'push' factors which reinforce the perception that you cannot live a reconciled life as a Muslim in the West. These unofficial networks are made up of fanboys and supporters, many of whom will be represented by those who have returned from serving Daesh in Iraq and Syria.
- 1.4. Daesh's new strategy is to 'divide, polarise and radicalise'. By deploying narratives which exploit a sense of discrimination, prejudice and inequality, fuelled by the growth of anti-Muslim sentiment in the West, Daesh is generating a strong sense of injustice and victimisation.
- 1.5. As a result Daesh is creating a global community of the faithful through a single narrative of oppression and revolt, portraying the humiliation and powerlessness of the 'ummah'. Returnees represent a core cadre of loyal supporters and advocates whose personal experiences will lend weight to Daesh influencing efforts.
- 1.6. The return of 'former fighters' who have abandoned Daesh and families who have witnessed life under Daesh – 'returnees' – therefore, play a significant role in determining the success of Daesh's attempt to reframe its communications strategy. Equally, and in equal measure, they represent an opportunity to draw on real life testimonies which can refute and reframe the legitimacy of Daesh official and unofficial communications efforts.

2. Strategic communications approach

A disciplined application of strategic communications principles can support the design and delivery of specific communications efforts in response to the 'returnees' challenge described above.

2.1. Define the Problem

Member State approaches to returnees differ. To define the problem a research approach should be adopted process which defines what elements of returnees is of cause for concern within each jurisdiction, and how might communications might respond to this.

2.2. Understand the Audiences

The research approach further ensures we understand what emotional and psychological drivers should communications address to ensure they resonate with returnees. How do we communicate with them? Through what channels and which voices resonate?

2.3. Design the Architecture

Where rehabilitation and returnee programmes exist, though government led, are often carried out by civil society partners. Peer-to-peer interventions are almost exclusively delivered through partnership projects which draw on government and civil society experience in equal measure. A communications response should mirror that partnership approach.

2.4. Build the Partnerships

In many cases Member States will be required to develop new civil society networks to fill the capacity needs of developing projects and delivering interventions. What existing relationships can be worked through? What element of industry support is needed to make this work effectively?

2.5. Deliver the Campaigns

Based on a clear understanding of the problems and audiences, and delivered through the right partners within appropriate new architectures, communications can be highly effective in addressing 'returnees'. This particular approach will require the introduction of innovative and bespoke campaign and products which can be deployed, often through interventions, to address returnees.

2.6. Measure the Performance

The original research also helps to measure the performance of campaigns. As well as assessing reach through communications analytics, further quantitative and qualitative data could be leveraged to show impact – but only against a baseline undertaken in the initial stages of research.

2.7. Report the Success

Reporting success, but also learnings, internally within governments and stakeholders, helps build will and confidence in the effectiveness of communications as a tool to address this issue.

3. Developing a Response

3.1. Designing a research-led approach

3.1.1. Research is the foundation for all good communications and represents the first step in developing a communications response to a strategic issue. A research led approach to strategic communications ensures that communications efforts both define the communications problem and develop an understanding of the audience. If done well it ensures communications resonate with its intended audience, achieves the desired effect and provides evidence for its success.

3.1.2. However, while there is extensive research which has successfully developed an understanding of Daesh communications, research into 'returnees', though rapidly developing, is currently limited.

- 3.1.3.** Research should be developed which better understands the emotional drivers and vulnerabilities of returnees to establish what communications would be needed to address these emotions.
- 3.1.4.** Equally, research which understands the power and impact of personal testimonies of those 'returning' to reduce the power of the Daesh brand to recruit new supporters should be further explored as part of this exercise.
- 3.1.5.** European networks need to be encouraged to share experience and knowledge to devise better practice in the development of research approaches and inform an understanding of the problem and audiences.
- 3.1.6.** Qualitative research represents the best approach to ensure a highly nuanced and personalised understanding of the issue is developed.

3.2. Creating powerful content

- 3.2.1.** Research into the returnee phenomenon is highly individualised. The communications response needs to be too.
- 3.2.2.** The communications challenge posed by Daesh is a profoundly emotional and psychological challenge, drawing as it does on the personal vulnerabilities of its intended target audience. Daesh communications increasingly draw on emotions in preference to ideology or theology.
- 3.2.3.** The research approach, defined above, should aim to understand these emotional drivers at the heart of the returnee mind-set.
- 3.2.4.** Current analysis points to four critically important, related and mutually supporting emotional characteristics which have to date defined the appeal for Daesh.
 - 1.)** Innocent victim;
 - 2.)** Justice or revenge;
 - 3.)** Pursuit of celebrity or fame;
 - 4.)** Shame or guilt.
- 3.2.5.** By understanding these emotional characteristics, we can produce communications products which help either 'substitute them' or 'channel them towards different ends'.
- 3.2.6.** This process of emotional engagement is designed to create a 'moment of doubt', designed to challenge those thinking of joining the 'caliphate' and those, including returnees, from carrying out acts of domestic terrorism.
- 3.2.7.** This approach can be as much about 'positive alternatives' as 'counter-narratives' and the development phase of any approach should explore these options.
- 3.2.8.** A strategic approach should therefore address relevant emotional drivers, by offering positive alternative world-views and raising sufficient doubt in the mind-set of returnees.
- 3.2.9.** Focus should therefore be on delivering:
 - 1.)** Powerful communications which address the emotional drivers which are used to generate a response in returnees.
 - 2.)** Communications which builds relationships between individuals at risk and those able deliver relevant interventions;
 - 3.)** Communications which offers positive alternatives and channel individuals into more positive engagements;
 - 4.)** Communications which can be deployed in peer-to-peer engagements and generate effective online content.
 - 5.)** Communications which harnesses the voice of returnees where they are able to directly address the power of the Daesh brand influence through personal testimonies.

3.3. Deploying personal testimonies

- 3.3.1. 'Returnees' represent an opportunity to draw on a range of real, powerful and personal testimonies to reveal the falsehoods about Daesh's narrative. The content should show Daesh claims to be false.
- 3.3.2. Returnees, therefore, if deemed 'non-criminal' and where deemed no longer of concern for the security services, can potentially be used as voices for wider prevention communications.
- 3.3.3. The stories of former fighters who abandoned Daesh or families who witnessed life under Daesh can be used to talk to those at risk of radicalization, particularly to the call to travel, to engage in violent struggle, or join an organization abroad.
- 3.3.4. It cannot be stressed enough how this must be done carefully, both to ensure they are trained properly, and are aware of the physiological pressures public discourse will bring. A duty of care to the individual must be maintained, and it may well yet be too soon for such endeavours.

3.4. Addressing communities in a full-spectrum response

- 3.4.1. Daesh's new strategy is to 'divide, polarise and radicalise'. By deploying narratives which exploit a sense of discrimination, prejudice and inequality, fuelled by the growth of anti-Muslim sentiment in the West, Daesh is generating a strong sense of injustice and victimisation within Muslim communities. Extreme right wing organisations are responding, by exploiting the perceived increase in domestic threats.
- 3.4.2. Governments and communities therefore must be prepared to address the negative communications from such groups who may increasingly capitalise on the issue of returnees to stoke community tension, fear and violence and further exacerbate the risk to community tensions.
- 3.4.3. In this context communications efforts aimed at reducing isolation, polarisation and stigmatisation need to be considered.

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Practitioners