CONCLUSION PAPER
RAN Small-scale expert meeting
13 December 2021

Exploring post-conflict reconciliation: an approach for communities, returning foreign terrorist fighters and their family members.

Introduction

The RAN small-scale meeting on exploring post-conflict reconciliation of returning foreign terrorist fighters (RFTFs) and their family members took place online on 13 December 2021 and brought together 16 European and international practitioners and researchers. The explorative workshop aimed to understand the potential of using post-conflict reconciliation approaches, methods and practices on returning foreign terrorist fighters (RFTFs) and their families. The presenters and participants represented a wide variety of professional backgrounds, including civil society organisations (CSOs), government authorities, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and academics.

The discussions addressed the conflict in Syria and Iraq waged by the terrorist group Daʿesh. For post-conflict reconciliation to start, it's a requirement that the conflict has ended, and preferably a peace agreement is arranged. This has become more challenging with the variety of actors and complexity of the current conflicts including terrorist groups and proxy warfare. A peace agreement will not happen with Daʿesh or other fighting terrorist groups in the region.

The conflict in Syria and Iraq is complex as it encompasses a global element with a large amount of FTFs that travelled from numerous countries. Other elements are the magnitude of the violence, the attempts of propagandising the violence, and the indiscriminate perpetrations of (attempted) genocide of groups in the region. Additionally, the ideology to which Daʿesh subscribed is far from defeated and it keeps on affecting individuals, communities, and recruiting potential members to the group. In parallel, the need for continued efforts for prevention is of the highest importance.

As reconciliation related to terrorism is a newer approach with few practical examples in Europe and beyond, the meeting explored a range of preconditions, settings, and possible approaches which can serve to further the field. During the meeting, several perspectives were discussed, e.g.: legal, security, local communities, recipient communities, and victim- vs. perpetrator-focused.

Reconciliation approaches could be complementary to the already existing judicial-, victim-, and rehabilitation-focused approaches. Instead of dealing with each sector in separate silos, reconciliation would aim to bring them all together in an attempt to address the harm done and the needs of the receiving communities, aiming to reintegrate

the perpetrators and build peaceful communities. First and foremost it would centre around fact finding; both perpetrators and victims should be allowed to share their view of what happened and why this happened. Additionally, there should be room for the victims to share their grievances and for the perpetrators to explain their motives and possibly show remorse.

Another key prerequisite for a post-conflict reconciliation approach to be successfully applied is a victim-centred and community-inclusive perspective where the recipient communities are involved in the process and their needs are heard. Dealing with RFTFs includes a range of stakeholders who need to address security assessment, communication regarding the steps taken, and especially involving the concerned partners and communities. By engaging the communities in co-driving the process and defining their needs and the goals of the process, a reconciliation approach is more likely to be successful. Reconciliation aims to take steps to permanently **end the conflict** and **prevent further recurrence**.

Reconciliation is a voluntary, participatory approach that addresses community perspectives, aiming to transform conflict into coexistence. Reconciliation processes work parallel to legal, security, transformative, and individual processes and acknowledge the needs of the involved partners, the harm done and the potential risks. The aim is to create safety and address needs. Reconciliation initiatives have a strong victim-focused approach and work towards a common peaceful solution and way forward.

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

- The importance of the political will and support in designing and implementing reconciliation approaches for communities and RFTFs.

- Identifying the conditions under which the community is open to engaging in a reconciliation process with the RFTFs and the conditions for the community to accept the RFTFs.

- Preparation and outlining the steps is needed by conducting research with the aim to prepare the process, include the involved partners, identify possible outcomes, and equip and empower local communities and stakeholders to engage in the process.

- The importance of timing both for the preparations, the involved partners and for the appropriate time to engage in reconciliation processes.

Highlights of the discussion

The meeting discussions addressed a range of crucial questions and issues that should be taken into account during the preparations of a reconciliation approach, throughout the reconciliation process, and following up afterwards. Engaging the concerned, local communities is essential, as well as parallelly ensuring that the judicial proceedings can progress.

As there are few experiences of reconciliation linked with terrorism, especially in a European context, the discussions were explorative and aimed at identifying the circumstances, conditions, and needs for engaging in and setting up reconciliation approaches.

The following highlights were addressed:

1. Political will and support

The approach of how to deal with RFTFs and their families is different in the European Member States. The EU MSs didn't make the same choices concerning the decision to repatriate those individuals and how to manage them after repatriation. Arguments that they left voluntary to participate in a war waged by a terrorist cult have been part of the discussions. Other perspectives stress the security challenges these individuals could pose, including pointing to both the role of manipulation in the recruitment of the foreign terrorists who travelled, as well as the heavy burden the containment of the thousands of imprisoned FTFs pose on the concerned national, regional, and local communities in the region, both from a financial point of view as well as a security perspective. The security imperative of holding thousands of imprisoned Daʿesh terrorists in substandard security facilities in the region also increase the risk of escapes, escalating the risk of resurgence of the group. There are examples where Daʿesh attacked prisons in an attempt to free imprisoned members of the group to enable a re-mobilisation of its forces.[1]

It is paramount that there is political will to lead the process and policies to engage in reconciliation after repatriation, to assign funding for the approaches, and to mobilise in the efforts to engage in a reconciliation process with the concerned communities and the RFTFs and their families.

2. Identifying the conditions for reconciliation

Reconciliation approaches are victim-centred. Meaning the victims' voices and the concerned communities are most important when preparing and conducting reconciling measures. Timing, respecting the variety of voices and establishing clear conditions under which these efforts can take place are crucial during the preparations.

The approach will bring out and confront two realities, those of the returned FTFs (and their family members) and the community, after which there is a need to engage with these to create a path forward for reparation and justice. By identifying the conditions for reconciliation beforehand, the process can move forward with clearer expectations from all involved parties. E.g.: under what conditions would someone who lost a family member engage in the process? What does the community need from the (former) FTF when it comes to remorse, change in beliefs, etc.? What does the (former) FTF expect from the community in regards to forgiveness, acceptance, etc. and how do these expectations influence the reconciliation process?

3. Preparations and outlining the steps for the reconciliation process

The preparations and outcomes are made both by the stakeholder who is organising and driving the process, as well as the concerned recipient communities. An important element here is to identify the community, which is affected and concerned, and engage its members early on during the preparations. There needs to be respect for diversity and priority groups within the community. Moreover, at the start of the process potential consequences and outcomes need to be identified, both for the returning FTFs and the receiving community. How does the reconciliation process interact with the returning FTF's legal procedures (if applicable)? What if reconciliation does not turn out to be possible, but the former FTF does return to the community that was involved in the reconciliation process? Questions such as these need to be addressed beforehand.

In addition, a thorough preparation is essential. To be well prepared, certain aspects need to be taken into account when setting up reconciliation efforts:

- Language plays an important role, as it shapes the way we perceive ourselves and others. Therefore, involved stakeholders should at all times use **empathetic language**.

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[1] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/21/islamic-state-attacks-prison-in-syria-and-military-base-in-iraq

- At the base of these efforts is the **Do no Harm** principle—all efforts need to be well thought through and tailored to local needs, preventing the implementation of well-intentioned efforts that have negative effects in the long run[2].

- The behaviour of all those present should be shaped by the **RAFT principles**: Respect, Accountability, Fairness and Transparency.

- Each interaction should be **conflict-sensitive**, aiming to not worsen tension but instead encourage peace and justice[3].

- Conversations need to be **moderated** by individuals that are credible to and trusted by all stakeholders, and there should be a clear distinction between those conversations and the regular justice system and path[4].

- **Women's experiences** may differ greatly from men's, both in their original motivation to join an extremist group as in their reintegration process. This unique experience should therefore be taken into account[5].

- There needs to be a **pre-defined follow-up and evaluation** of the process. Reconciliatory encounters should not stand alone, and involved stakeholders should define beforehand how to measure success.

Ways forward

As this was an explorative meeting, the need for furthering the understanding and opportunities to use post-conflict reconciliation in the area of dealing with RFTFs and their families remains. Approaches that engage the affected communities, build on identifying the needs of the affected communities, and seek dialogue and ways forward will most certainly remain necessary. This is especially the case as the pandemic heads towards an end and more individuals might seek to return, or efforts to bring back families from the refugee camps in Syria and Iraq increases.

Although further exploring the topic is essential, the meeting made very clear that a community-based approach is necessary for successful reintegration of RFTFs.

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[2] Holmer, G., *Countering Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilding Perspective*, 5
[3] Ernstorfer, A., *Effective Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism – A Peacebuilding Systems Perspective*, 57
[4] Holmer, G. and Shtuni, A., *Returning Foreign Fighters and the Reintegration Imperative*, 12
[5] Ibid., 10

Recommendations

- **Further explore the opportunities**, conditions and approaches of reconciliation for communities, returning foreign terrorist fighters, and their families.

- **Prepare the receiving recipient local communities** by informing them of the process of reconciliation, as well as including an understanding of the process of radicalisation and how this affects the individual in radicalised environments. And the process of disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration. By addressing the complex, sensitive, and multifaceted process of radicalisation and setting out **preconditions for reconciliation**, the receiving communities can better prepare for the process.

- **Address the legal status** of the returning families and foreign terrorist fighters. Reconciliation approaches are parallel to the legal process.

- **Including families** in the **community reintegration**, re-connecting with communities, social relations, and extended family members. Grandparents are sometimes engaged in caring for the children of the returned families and are therefore relevant stakeholders.

- Approaches addressing violent extremism, need both to be **trauma-informed** and **culturally informed** to ensure approaches that respond to the individuals' experiences and needs and address the potential risks.

Relevant practices

Search for Common Ground (SFCG) is an INGO operating in the field of peacebuilding and P/CVE. During the workshop, they presented their initiative on the reintegration of young children in Nigeria under the SFCG children and youth section.

Follow up

- Post-conflict reconciliation as an approach could be further explored to address returning foreign terrorist fighters and their families. Acquiring further insights from practical experiences and examples, experts in the field of reconciliation and widening to adjacent fields such as mediation, conflict management, restorative justice, and peacebuilding.

- Advancing a more holistic grip around collective practices such as post-conflict reconciliation, mediation, conflict management, restorative justice, and peacebuilding in relation to P/CVE, especially in the interest of reintegration of violent extremists could be further explored.

- Providing opportunities for a study visit to post-conflict areas, e.g., DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration) programs and reconciliation approaches which are implemented in post-conflict areas. This could help shape more practical guidelines for setting up reconciliatory approaches with RFTFs and their families.

- When further exploring the topic, a distinction needs to be made between individual cases of FTFs returning to a community, and the peace process and reconciliation mechanism on societal level. We can't exclude that some European MS would be more willing to explore the first but hesitant with regard to the latter.

Further reading

1. Renner, J. & Spencer, A. (2012) Reconciliation after Terrorism. Routledge. 2012.

2. Altier, M. B. (2021) Violent Extremist Disengagement and Reintegration: Lessons from Over 30 Years of DDR. RESOLVE Network.

3. Rhea, R. et.al. (2019) Community-Based Reintegration support in Eastern DRC. Folke Bernadotte Academy.

4. Bosley, C. (2020) Violent Extremist Disengagement and Reconciliation - A Peacebuilding Approach PEACEWORKS. USIP.

5. Erdberg Steadman, L. (2020) Disengagement and Reconciliation in Conflict-Affected Settings. Special Report. UNIP.

6. Ernstorfer, A (2018) Effective Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilding Systems Perspective. Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series No. 13. Berlin. Berghof Foundation.

7. Holmer, G. (2013) Countering Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilding Perspective Special Report. USIP.

8. Holmer, G. Shtuni, A. (2017) Returning Foreign Fighters and the Reintegration Imperative Special Report. USIP.

9. Shtuni, A. (2021). Rehabilitation and reintegration path of Kosovar minors and women repatriated from Syria. RESOLVE Network.

10. Shtuni, A. (2020). The Reintegration imperative. Child returnees in the western Balkans. Policy note. Resolve Network.

11. UNDP (2017). Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment. UNDP.

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