Effective Communications when Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their Families Return

Key outcomes

At this RAN Practitioners small-scale expert meeting, several experts and experienced practitioners working with returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their families discussed their experiences with effectively and strategically communicating on returning FTFs and their families. The key outcomes of this discussion were:

- At the local level the strategic communication has less to do with big strategies for external communication towards the media and the general public (to influence public opinion), but in daily practice seems to have more to do with communicating with those who need to know for successful case management.

- Building on the insight that proactive (external) communication is not always desirable on the local level, and considerations from the GAMMMA+ model on strategic and effective communication (explained later in this paper), what *can* be part of a strategic communication plan is to be prepared for a "crisis situation", or another actor "hijacking" the narrative. Understanding the different target groups for communication and their needs was also found to be important.

- Actors at local level, where local governments and partners try to organise successful reintegration and resocialisation, feel they are sometimes not helped by the framing and language that is being used in debates at national level. Local acceptance, cooperation and support for resocialisation are under pressure by discussions and framing in parliament and national media where the returnees and their families are being portrayed as potential or real terrorists.

This paper presents the highlights of the discussion and recommendations in the small-scale meeting. Being a RAN Practitioners meeting, the discussion centred around practitioners' experiences with strategic communication supporting their daily actions aimed at reintegrating and resocialising FTFs and their families at a local level. How is the communication, with municipalities, schools and social actors, for instance, organised and what are their experiences and recommendations? There was also a discussion around the concept of strategic communication, starting from RAN's GAMMMA+ model.

Highlights of the discussion

In this meeting we learned from practitioners' experiences from Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

Local-level insights

Several participants dealing at the local level with returnee management were present at the meeting. The experiences shared during the meeting demonstrated that there are dramatic differences across the EU in how returns of FTFs and their families are perceived by the general public and framed in political and media debates. This has implications for the local-level actors managing the reintegration and the challenges they face with communications. The context and profile of the returnees often determine how much control national and local actors have over the narrative and to what extent they can mitigate potential implications at community level. There is a real dilemma around communications arising from this — participants shared that often the preferred approach is to not say anything to the public, yet in some cases this can lead to another party hijacking the narrative and steering the public debate, increasing the feeling of fear and insecurity amongst the public. This is usually the case with high-profile male (and some female) returnees facing prosecution, where media attention is expected to be high and heavily centred on the security aspect of the returns. In terms of child returnees, there are reporting restrictions and the care aspect is at the forefront.

Exchange of information between the different actors and professionals involved in returnee management is another key dimension of effective communication that practitioners are dealing with. This includes not only those involved directly in the multi-agency work with returnees, but also the parents at the school, neighbours and foster families. Some of the questions arising here are to what extent returnee coordinators can share information beforehand to prepare different concerned parties for the reintegration process, and also how to anticipate and mitigate potential uprisings at the local level (e.g. in schools or the receiving neighbourhood).

The discussions amongst participants about effective and strategic communication along these two key aspects resulted in several insights and lessons learned from the local level:

- In most cases, the integration in society worked well. There were some cases where there was some unrest in the receiving neighbourhood, but when the operation moved to another neighbourhood there was no resistance. Understanding the hyper-local context (e.g. at the level of receiving local communities, neighbourhoods and schools) is thus important when preparing for whether or not — and what — to communicate to whom.

- Keeping the external communication to the public low-profile or non-existing contributes to a successful return.

- In the discussed cases, the local authorities were in charge of the reintegration. Advisors from national centres often supported the local governments. Local actors need a clear division of roles and good coordination between national and local-level actors, including on communications. This ensures that everyone is speaking in one voice.

- Local practitioners experienced that while communicating in their local context it appeared sensible and safe to reintegrate returnees, in the national public and political debates the same returnees are labelled as dangerous and a potential threat.

- At the local level there is not a lot of strategic communication to the general public taking place, as this is not part of the mandate of local actors involved in returnee management. Another challenge is that they are heavily constrained in the information they can share with third parties outside of returnee case management. Even when certain cases trigger media attention, it is very difficult for local actors to be able to engage with the public debate.

- Local-level actors do communicate with involved stakeholders on a need-to-know basis, but do not think of communication in terms as "strategic communication". It is seen as an element of returnee case management, not as part of an overarching communications strategy where there are goals to be determined, as well as audiences, messages and messengers.

The GAMMMA+ model: relevant for communications around returnees?

The GAMMMA+ model ([1]), a set of guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) campaigns, offers several considerations and lessons learned in addressing sensitive issues. These insights, and their relevance for an effective communications strategy around returning FTFs and their families, were discussed during the meeting. It was highlighted that although the model was not created to support communication on returnees' reintegration specifically, it offers a practical way to structure strategic thinking around communications by asking the right questions regarding key elements such as Goal, Audience, Messenger, Message, Media and (call to) Action.

One of the contributors first briefly presented the model. It was explained that the model is not a solution but helps in **asking the right questions** and can offer some relevant insights on the topic of discussion.

- The **hyper-local context** (i.e. neighbourhood level) is important, especially in reintegration of returnees.

- Understanding your target audience can help to **avoid stigmatisation**. In the case of returning FTFs and their families, this entails understanding, for example, the sensitivities and concerns of members of a community where an FTF is to be reintegrated.

The discussions indicated that the GAMMMA+ model is particularly useful to structure thinking around the various needs of **different target groups (audiences)** of communication. Depending on the target group, the **goal, messenger and messages** of the communication will also differ. During the breakout sessions, participants discussed how the key principles of the model can be operationalised in communications around returnee management:

- **Returnees and their families:** Different practitioners are the main contact points and will do most of the communication (case managers, exit workers, youth workers, etc.). In the communication with foster/receiving families, expectations management is needed to manage potential tensions.

- **Educational and care sector working with children:** Teachers and school principals but also other parents are an important target group, where the local coordinators as well as other multi-agency partners play a key role.

  o Goal: Secure support by schools and others. Reassure them on the risks, and increase trust in the multi-agency approach.

  o Message: Why we do reintegrate? Children didn't choose, they have the right to be children (risks are assessed and managed).

  o Messenger: Communication around child-centred arrangements is done by a child protection social worker. School principals can also play an important role in mitigating tensions.

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[1] RAN C&N. (2019). Effective Narratives: Updating the GAMMMA+ model. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/pages/page/ran-cn-effective-narratives-updating-gammma-model-brussels-14-15-november-2019_en

- **Broader audience** (general public and media): Communications are likely to be done mostly on a central level.

  o Goal: The goal of the communication is to reassure them.

  o Message: Communicate that "we are managing this", we are cooperating with relevant security and social actors.

  o Messenger: Communication is done "faceless", by communications teams and spokespersons, and not on social media.

- A main point of discussion was on the dilemma of **proactive versus reactive communication**.

  o On the one hand, participants from the local practitioners' perspective indicated they do not have much proactive communication going on. They also need to take into account the privacy of returnees for example, especially around returning children. So it is mainly information sharing with involved stakeholders on a need-to-know basis.

  o On the other hand, there is the risk of other actors (e.g. media outlets) hijacking the story/narrative/discussion, for example if they find out about an individual case and frame it in a certain way. To mitigate this risk, proactively communicating might be the way to go, or at least be prepared for crisis communication.

  o In some cases, practitioners at the local level had some advance information on returning children, but they were not allowed to inform receiving families or councillors, which may harm the relationship with these actors when cooperating later on — in case they hear from the media first. **Security versus well-being needs to be weighted carefully**.

- Important as well is **timing**. The general public often needs time to digest and get used to a certain idea (i.e. the idea that FTFs are returning to their country), but after a certain time period the public debate calms down. For example, when an FTF returns this might attract a lot of attention in politics and the media, but when an FTF reintegrates into society after sitting out their sentence, chances are this goes unnoticed/more under the radar.

Recommendations

Following the highlights of the discussions during the meeting, several recommendations can be made for local- and national-level professionals involved in returnee management:

- There is a need for more **consideration and coordination** between the **national level and local level** regarding communications around returning FTFs and their families. Local level actors need to deal with the implications of national-level communication choices. Having a more coordinated approach in a communications strategy on both levels can help in streamlining the reintegration process of returnees.

- If you do not pursue proactive external communication (on the local level, for example), **being prepared in case of a situation where you might need to intervene** (i.e. misleading or incomplete media coverage) can be part of your communication strategy. Steps that can help in being prepared are:

  o Do a mapping of P/CVE actors/stakeholders relevant for your local public opinion (media/policymakers/civil society organisations).

  o Prepare to present (in easily understandable terms) what you are doing in your line of work (goals/success stories/calculated risks/challenges) and if/how you are safeguarding the local community where returnees reintegrate (e.g. schools). This is *not* about individual cases but rather about your general policy and reassurance of the community.

  o Consider building (trusted) relationships with key actors in print, radio, TV and online media proactively so that when a crisis appears you have each other's phone numbers and understanding.

- Use the **institutions and networks** that are already in place and can help you — school psychologists, youth coordinators and police spokespersons are prepared for handling crises (including communications-wise) such as child suicide, at-risk children, school busses crashing, deaths and other extreme situations; discuss with them and prepare on a case-by-case basis.

- **Identify allies** who have similar perspectives, but also potential **troublemakers** (think about who is interested in scandalising, and which issues are emotionally loaded). Consider research/data if available and **build some case scenarios**, including worst-case scenarios, in order to be prepared for crisis mode communications. Experiences show that different groups of returnees prompt different public reactions.

- Consider the **different profiles of returnees** (framing should not be the same for all, not all are FTFs) — for example, regarding children privacy is the primary concern and these cases are mostly approached from a care perspective, while with male FTFs, security concerns may be framing the public discourse.

- Consider the **different target groups of communication** — a different level and nature of communication are needed (general public/media, local communities (schools, neighbourhoods, etc.), foster families, etc.).

- It is advised to **prepare to communicate not about specific cases but on the general approach**; what the legislative and policy framework is, which institutions do what and why, to strive for reassurance.

Follow-up

Following the highlights of the discussion during the meeting, and the recommendations drawn from the discussion, several suggestions for follow-up RAN activities can be made:

- Meeting of (national) policy and local-level actors to talk about cooperating in a communications strategy around returnees (cross-cutting event).

- Meeting/training for local practitioners on "being prepared" for worst-case scenarios, for example, when different actors are hijacking narratives around returning FTFs and their families.

- A RAN policy support paper with examples from different contexts with successful return experiences, lessons learned and good practices.

- While social media plays an important role in the context of communicating on returning FTFs and their families, it was not the focus of the discussions during this meeting. It would be beneficial to have a future meeting that specifically focuses on the role of social media in communications around returning FTFs and their families.

Further reading

Clubb, G., Barnes, E., O'Connor, R., Schewe, J., & Davies, G. A. M. (2019). Revisiting the De-Radicalisation or Disengagement Debate: Public Attitudes to the Re-Integration of Terrorists. *Journal for Deradicalization*, (21), 84-116. https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/279

RAN LOCAL. (2020). Local Communications for Returning FTFs

RAN C&N. (2019). Effective Narratives: Updating the GAMMMA+ model

RAN Centre of Excellence. (2017). RAN Manual. Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families

European Commission