CONCLUSION PAPER
RAN Study Visit
13 December 2023 – Brussels, Belgium

Adolescent boys returning from Da'esh territory

Key outcomes

The safe repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration of adolescent boys to Europe from the conflict zone of Iraq and Syria is a pressing concern for EU Member States (MSs). In addition to the general multi-professional management of 'returnees', this particular group of returnees gives rise to gendered and age-specific challenges for practitioners and policymakers alike. This extremely small number of boys are, in the first instance, victims, as they were involuntarily brought to Da'esh territory, and their experiences while living in the so-called 'caliphate' and since its downfall have been traumatising. At the same time, some have received weapons training, been subject to intense indoctrination and been exposed to a variety of factors associated with radicalisation leading to violent extremism. The paper captures the main insights from a RAN Practitioners study visit to the Union of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG) in Brussels on 13 December 2023, where expert participants from a number of EU MSs and other European countries discussed these challenges and the different approaches available to them. Through an exploration of a detailed case study, participants were able to identify critical junctures, knowledge and information requirements, and future considerations for the management of adolescent returnees.

Some overarching lessons from the study visit are:

- At the point of repatriation, information is usually incomplete, hastily distributed and there are no bespoke resources or services in place due to the speed of return. This is an inevitable and unavoidable consequence of the need to protect the operational integrity of the repatriation mission, such that the security services cannot disclose information sooner. This requires rapid decision-making on the part of the welfare and policing agencies at home. Their professional judgements must be premised on adapting existing resources and services and which leave open as many options as possible for rehabilitation and reintegration within available national frameworks.
- As yet, security concerns regarding this cohort have not been realised. Expert participants reported from their experiences that adolescent boys were a) often coerced and unwilling witnesses (and sometimes participants) in violence rather than active and supportive actors; b) behavioural and environmental changes undermine ideological commitments and norms learnt while living in the conflict zones; and c) adolescence, insecurity and trauma are often better explanations for 'risky' behaviours upon repatriation than radicalisation.
- The longer children and adolescents are held in detention centres in Iraq and Syria, the more challenging their successful reintegration and rehabilitation becomes. This should not override the imperative and MSs' human rights obligations for their repatriation, but instead indicates that more specialised and trauma-informed support will be required.

This conclusion paper begins with a summary of the discussion and the presentations offered by Flemish authorities during the study visit as well as the insights delivered from the case study. It then addresses three overarching themes: masculinity and adolescence; security concerns; professional wellbeing and case management. These themes are highlighted in response to the particularities of this cohort (adolescent boys returning from former Da'esh territories) but are relevant to other returnee cohorts. The paper then offers some recommendations from the study day, before indicating 'next steps' and other sources of information.

Highlights of the discussion

The experts were introduced to the specific mechanisms and structures in Flanders that are drawn upon for the management of returnees, including adolescent boys. Belgium has a federal system, with certain powers and responsibilities devolved to regional authorities. To manage the fragmented state system, adolescent returnees have been managed through the youth care and juvenile justice systems.[1] Significantly, there have not been prosecutions of children or adolescents returning from the conflict zones of Iraq and Syria, and juvenile judges have not proceeded on the basis of presumed terrorist or criminal acts or involvement but treated them as 'welfare cases'.

A key component of Belgium managing repatriations and its returnee population is the national ['Common Database'](#). The Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) is the operational manager of the Database. CUTA is independent from political structures and generates evidence-informed/data-led risk assessments regarding radicalisation and extremism. CUTA conducts an evaluation for each individual in the Common Database. These evaluations hold information on individuals, regarding ideology, social context, capacity and psychological status. Information comes from a variety of sources, some classified, and some agencies are required by law to share all relevant information with CUTA. However, the information in the Common Database is non-classified.

Different state agencies, all welfare, judicial and security orientated, and competent individuals have different levels of access to the Common Database based on a 'need to know' principle and for data protection purposes. This allows relevant authorities to make informed decisions regarding security and/or rehabilitative or reintegration orientated interventions. While individuals in the common database are not informed of this fact, there are consequences in their everyday lives which indirectly alert them to their status. All minors who are over the age of 12 and who are in the conflict zone are being put in the common database. Returnees are removed from the database if their assessed threat level falls beneath a certain threshold for at least two years. As yet, there is no confirmed report available of anyone who has legally challenged the validity of the data or their presence on the database. Generally, the legal framework of the database is very strict and under high internal and external scrutiny.

A second component in Belgium that facilitated the successful repatriation, reintegration and rehabilitation of boys returning from former Da'esh controlled territories is the Strategy T.E.R. (Strategic Note Extremism and Terrorism), which was created among other local platforms where different authorities work together to facilitate case management. While national and regional structures are useful to set the wider frameworks, local level knowledge and cooperation is essential. The 'Local Task Forces' (LTF) bring together policing, judicial, and intelligence services to discuss individual security measures, while the Local Integrated Security Cell - Radicalisation (LISC R) consists of welfare agencies, local police, and local authorities (including the mayor). Local police participate in both platforms and act as a bridge between them. Another element in Belgium is the helpfulness of having one person responsible for the welfare and wellbeing of adolescent and child returnees – in this case, juvenile judges. However, this also brought challenges as judges had to become heavily involved in seemingly minor decisions until an appropriate legal guardian/foster person was appointed – this high degree of oversight and control was not something under which welfare and child support agencies were used to working – and then their involvement decreases according to individual needs and vulnerabilities.

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[1] In other jurisdictions, 'juvenile justice systems' may refer solely to youth criminal justice, however, in Belgium, this system includes resolving matters of child welfare.

European Commission

A case study of a specific case allowed the experts to identify two sets of issues that arise at critical junctures. The specific case involved the repatriation of an adolescent who was the stepson of a high-ranking Da'esh official and his 3 younger siblings. Details here are necessarily anonymised. In brief – welfare teams were made aware only 12 hours prior to repatriation that the children were arriving; they were aware that immediate family resided in Belgium; that the mother, step-father, and older sibling were presumed deceased; the siblings had resided in al-Hol 'orphanage'; and that the eldest was considered a 'foreign terrorist fighter' (FTF) by security services. Points of tension that arose from this case: the radicalisation risk he posed to his younger siblings vs the support he provided to them while they were in the conflict zone; the responsibility and rights of adult family members in Belgium; his rehabilitation post ISIS/Da'esh and the desire to 'return to normal'; the label/categorisation of a teenager as an 'FTF' by authorities.

Extrapolating from this case, the experts identified critical junctures in repatriation, reintegration and rehabilitation of teenage boys:

1. The first is the first ten days after repatriation: these are chaotic, stressful and intense for both the returnee adolescents and service providers. Nevertheless, establishing a stable point of contact, building trust through that key worker and rapidly establishing baseline provisions provides a solid foundation for the next steps.
2. The second critical juncture is establishing legal guardianship or fostering provisions for the children. This allows for the successful provision of support and gave oversight and an arbiter for instances when particular agencies disagreed over possible courses of action.
3. The third juncture relates to decisions regarding the children's rights and opportunities to close their cases.

The first ten days after repatriation

With regard to the first timeframe, practical aspects of the repatriation of adolescents (and prepubescent children) that emerged from this case were discussed. This included recognising that children of this age have limited agency and want to be involved in decision-making regarding their lives; 'toys' and rooms set aside may not yet be 'age appropriate' (well equipped for younger children but not so for the older ones); that they have partial understanding of the actions of their parents; initial questioning can be overwhelming and repetitive for them; hospitals provide immediate care but are not ideal environments for young children who are otherwise physically 'healthy'; and keeping adolescents from watching the news about them was important. From the perspective of support and service providers, further reflections included how to manage workloads, professional wellbeing, and wider socio-political considerations. Of note were a) the 'crisis' and 'acute' nature of the support needed – the children repatriated required decisions being made urgently on all aspects of their lives – and that this meant other cases were not given due attention; b) children would disclose sensitive and often traumatic information to the welfare team (often one person) who may not have had the training or support frameworks in place to process that; and c) the media released partial information that led to complications with family members. However, the responsible services were able to use this early case as a learning experience, establishing guidelines for future reference.

Legal guardianship and fostering arrangements

Within the topic of guardianship and fostering arrangements, experts discussed the complexity of family support networks and the guardian's preparedness for caring for adolescent children with complex traumas. A point of discussion was whether male adolescent returnees could be considered as similar to other children who have been subject to 'adverse childhood conditions' and 'trauma' who are managed in child welfare systems (e.g. children of cult members, refugee children, children in criminal organisations and gangs) or whether or not the uniqueness of their trauma and atypical upbringings require greater bespoke response than currently considered. A second point was how quickly children should be encouraged to 'return to normal'. In some European jurisdictions, children were placed in the care of family members; in others, they were in professional foster care or care homes, and in yet others, in a secure institution.[2] All agreed that the length of time children were placed outside 'ordinary' family life

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[2] Not incarceration or detention, but rather a facility for young people needing medical, therapeutic and social support.

should be minimal – the variation was what was constituted as minimal. In some countries this was measured in weeks while in others it was months. A related concern was that overly hasty placement with family members could result in insecurity and upheaval in the medium term if the family cannot manage the complex needs of the children. A follow-up point of discussion were family relationships and upholding the wellbeing of the child returnee. For returnee children, their relationships with their parents are complex. 'Father figures' and 'male role models' may have reinforced risky behaviours, toxic masculinities, and radicalised ideologies while in the conflict zone yet their (likely) deaths and absence in the boys' lives is likely to impact their rehabilitation and reintegration – especially if the boys are unable to discuss these relationships. Where mothers are incarcerated for terrorism-related offences, repatriated boys may struggle with the loss of that bond (potentially having formed a co-dependency relationship in the conflict zone). For educational and welfare key workers and families, a number of points were raised that were less apparent when dealing with younger children. Repatriated adolescents often asked complex questions about their parents, experiences and futures. Guardians and welfare support teams can struggle to facilitate positive child-mother relationships where mothers deny the seriousness of their actions or obscure their detention from children. The study-visit participants emphasised that guardians and educational institutions should always seek to honestly answer children in an age-appropriate manner rather than avoid, lie or obfuscate. The case discussed highlighted how allowing returnee adolescents to be active participants and have some control over their rehabilitation was an important consideration too. For families, they were processing their own grief and trauma and were not always prepared – especially for teenage boys who had previously had 'adult' responsibilities for their siblings and sometimes adult women, and were now expected to behave, and be treated, like a child. For example, for some adolescent boys, life under Da'esh was 'privileged', so 'normal' was to expect women to 'serve' them, whereas families and Belgian society expected them to do more for themselves, and not see women as servants. For schools, responding to inappropriate behaviour or conversations was initially difficult (a case was shared where a younger child offered to 'play' beheading by practicing on teddy-bears, and another where a teenager bragged that his father was a fighter and would kill another pupil's parent). Teachers and schools have been encouraged to respond in non-exceptionalising ways while challenging and correcting these behaviours and attitudes.

Long-term goals and outcomes of rehabilitative support care

Regarding the long-term goals and outcomes in the reintegration and rehabilitation of teenage boys, it is here that knowledge and information management becomes critical. Managing data held on the children over a lengthy period of time was seen as increasingly complicated due to privacy concerns, yet necessary in order to simultaneously deliver bespoke care and support. This information and case management matters, because it allows for appropriate risk assessment, and gives the children opportunities to graduate from welfare/security systems and for their cases to be considered 'closed'. What counts as successful? How do we measure 'normal' for repatriated teenagers? Adult markers – stable employment and housing – are not appropriate; but those used for younger children, such as educational achievements, may also be insufficient measures (despite often being used as a proxy for success by professionals regardless of the age of the returnee). Additionally, 'normal' adolescent behaviours might be considered as indicators of regression or radicalisation rather than success – e.g. challenging authority – if the returnees are only evaluated through a 'security lens'.

Overarching themes

Masculinity and Adolescence

The participants discussed a number of issues relating to masculinity and adolescence. The first being the gendered perception of 'threat' associated with the teenage boys' repatriation to Europe. The overlap of general societal fear of adolescent boys as threatening, particularly boys from ethnic minoritized[3] communities, with the specific fear of terrorism and radicalisation, results in a double burden regarding risks of stigmatization and discrimination. Second, conversations were held regarding gender ideologies in Da'esh. Adolescent boys growing up in Da'esh-controlled territories were also encouraged to view masculinity as shaped by particular rights and duties, that were often

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[3] Minoritized indicates that 'being a minority' ethnic or racial group is a social process, and places emphasis on the minority status rather than the specifics of race or ethnicity. The term confirms that *minoritization* is shaped by power. It is therefore preferred instead of the descriptive and seemingly static term 'ethnic minority'.

presented through Da'esh propaganda as righteous and heroic. It also advocated a gender hierarchy, underpinned by a narrative of male entitlement, which meant that teenage boys often took on the controlling, protective and breadwinner roles of adult men vis-à-vis women in the household (including mothers). On return, the burdens of adulthood are removed, but also the privileges associated with masculinity, yet new opportunities are limited because they are considered as dangerous as adult men returning from Da'esh territories by security and policing authorities. Adolescent boys returning to Europe therefore experience considerable dissonance regarding their gender identities and roles – responding to the disconnect and disparities in idealised gender norms[4] and roles in Europe vis-à-vis Da'esh, and to the contradictions in their treatment/place in society as simultaneously child-victims and adult-threats.

Security Concerns

All the experts agreed that the state had security concerns regarding the successful repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration of adolescent boys. They understood that these concerns are based on evidence gathered from Da'esh, but challenged the conclusions drawn. Without exception, the experts agreed that teenage boys should be repatriated as soon as possible along with other children and that the security risks can easily be managed. This is in part due to the exceptionally small numbers, the high degree of state interventions and oversight in the short- and medium-term lives of the children, and high levels of confidence in successful outcomes. All practitioners present were able to recount numerous 'success stories' of children repatriated across Europe. They also asserted that responding to teenage boys as security risks was likely to produce a negative 'self-fulfilling prophecy' whereas treating them first as survivors in need of support increased positive outcomes. Security and policing officials present were confident that they could avoid negative stigmatisation of teenage boys, both in their risk assessments and in their treatment of the children. It was highlighted that police across Europe have specialist training to interview and interact with children and teenagers in ways that avoid retraumatising them. The resolution appeared to be in building relationships and trust across agencies premised on mutual professional respect, for sharing information so that appropriate risk assessments can be made by relevant security agencies, and establishing transparent honest communication with adolescent returnees so that trust and confidence in decisions can be established (held both by state agencies, the returnee and their families).

Case Management

Experts discussed key points around case management in different countries. It was highlighted that while 'best interest' of the child is the underpinning principle guiding decisions, pre-existing legal and welfare frameworks shape what is possible for the management of adolescent boys. Left unresolved was whether bespoke frameworks are needed or whether returnee cases can be absorbed into child welfare/court structures. In either case, it was agreed that specific guidelines are essential to overcome critical, time sensitive and atypical matters arising – this included (as with other cohorts) lack of legal identities/paperwork; complex family relationships; and requirements from security services. The other element of case management was regarding staff wellbeing and resources available to them for continuing professional development. In relation to staff wellbeing, in the early cases of child returnees, social and youth workers did not feel enabled to use existing mechanisms (such as counselling or talking to line managers) about the traumas they were vicariously exposed to. This was due to the highly sensitive and violent nature of what the adolescent children discussed. It is noted that the practitioners in the study visit felt empowered to approach these cases as they would any other as 'lessons have been learnt'. The second component was recognition from practitioners and service providers that the experiences of children being repatriated now or in the near future is likely to be different to those who have previously been repatriated due to their experiences post-Da'esh, including more medical complications, more trauma and potentially greater exposure to factors associated with vulnerability to radicalisation, and older children are likely to be more in number (at the moment, the majority of those repatriated are under the age of 6). Therefore, they emphasised the need to 'keep learning', to update

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[4] Although outside the scope of the conclusion paper, it is worth noting that the rise of misogyny in Europe leads to further tensions for adolescent boys returning from Da'esh, in that the espoused values of gender equality in Europe are not experienced by the women of Europe, and teenage boys across Europe are subject to a range of conflicting messaging regarding expected gender norms and roles.

their professional knowledge regarding the situations in Iraq and Syria, and to prepare ahead for the needs of adolescents.

Recommendations

- Encourage adolescent boys to be active participants in their rehabilitation and reintegration – giving them some control and agency over the process can mitigate the dissonance and dislocation they're experiencing.
- Repatriate teenage boys as soon as possible along with other children. The potential security risks can easily be managed due to the exceptionally small numbers, the high degree of state interventions and oversight in the short- and medium-term lives of the children. Responding to them as security risks is more likely to produce a negative 'self-fulfilling prophecy' whereas treating them first as survivors in need of support increases positive outcomes.
- Age-appropriate and honest discussions with adolescent boys can be difficult for families, schools and professionals, however it is essential that these occur. A variety of means of communication and tools to aid discussion – including drawing, storytelling, role play, and more should be used.
- Indicators of successful rehabilitation and reintegration should be age appropriate. Similarly, models of radicalisation and terrorism threat assessments should account for the impact of adolescence.
- Practitioners should be mindful that teenage boys' cognitive, behavioural, physical and social attitudes may derive from changes brought about by adolescence, while also acknowledging the impact of their atypical and traumatic upbringing on their current selves.
- Ascribing the status of 'foreign terrorist fighter' to adolescent boys should be avoided as it is misleading, implies adult levels of agency and capacity and overemphasises risk and security threats at the expense of rehabilitation. Nevertheless, a case-by-case risk assessment is needed based on the capacity, willingness and abilities of the teenagers returning.

Relevant practices

1. **Union of Flemish Cities and Municipalities** (**VVSG**). The mission of the VVSG is threefold: a) to represent and defend local governments in numerous policy briefs; b) to support and strengthen local governments by providing knowledge through trainings and publications; c) to facilitate the network by bringing together local governments and their partners and ensuring cross-fertilisation of knowledge and good practices. Within this framework, VVSG coordinates the holistic approach for child returnees and their families and includes relevant partners on the local level. Importantly they facilitate the local multi-agency coordination partnerships (LISC-R) that address local issues and specific cases as needed.

2. Collaboration between **Social Services** (**SDJ** – a Flemish authority) and the Juvenile Court (a federal institution). Social Services advise judges at the Juvenile Court who are mandated to make decisions in the best interest of the child. Despite being managed within the judicial system, the children are not considered criminals or delinquents. This is because repatriated returnee children are considered 'vulnerable children' – as with other children who experience adverse conditions – who are in need of state support. The collaboration serves as the link between the public prosecution office and the youth social services, helps determine the level of support needed and provides oversight of its provision.

3. The **Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis** (**CUTA**). CUTA processes all relevant information and intelligence on terrorism, extremism and radicalisation leading to violent extremism. The Strategy T.E.R. is highly decentralised – although a national coordination unit and national working groups bring the relevant stakeholders together to ensure a common strategic understanding. At the local level, a 'taskforce' operates (LTF), helping to manage individual cases and general risks from a

security perspective. The information officer in the LTF also sits on the local social/welfare multiagency partnerships (LISC-R), and they act as a liaison and coordinator between the two. This is a vital bridging role to offset any conflicts in perspective and interventions between these two platforms.

Follow-up

Suggestions for follow up were made throughout the study visit. Some are listed here related to follow-up events for RAN to consider:

- Discussions and dialogue with security and policing agencies regarding their assessments and management of cases. Potentially combined meeting or study visit led by RAN police and prisons.
- Working with NGOs and civil society partners – how to, what can be offered, challenges with participation, in relation to repatriation, rehabilitation, reintegration of those currently in conflict zones associated with terrorism, and with deradicalisation, EXIT and Prevention work.
- How to work with overseas partners – e.g. those in Iraq, Syria and other third country partners – to facilitate repatriation, reintegration and rehabilitation, as well as deradicalisation, EXIT and Prevention work.
- Discussions about extremist and societies' gender ideologies and its impact on reintegration and rehabilitation of boys and men.
- Study visits / learning on adolescence in relation to deradicalisation, rehabilitation and prevention work.
- The relationship between incarcerated parents and children in youth care and how different EU MSs handle this challenge.

Further reading

- Conclusion paper RAN in the Western Balkans Study Visit: Managing the needs of child returnees, 2023.
- RAN Y&E Meeting: How can youth practitioners deal with current polarisation around masculinity?, 2023.
- RAN Mental Health: Trauma, violent extremism and masculinity, 2023.
- RAN Manual - Responses to returning foreign terrorist fighters and their families, 2nd Edition, 2022.
- RAN PRISONS: The role of multi-agency cooperation in dealing with female returnees in prison and protecting the rights of children with imprisoned parents, 2022.
- RAN Cross-cutting Thematic Event Paper - Management of returning FTFs and their family members with a focus on returning women and children, 2021.