

Conclusion paper

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# Digital study visit – Returnee coordinators in Germany: visit to Hesse and Berlin

**23-24 June 2020,**

Digital meeting

## Summary

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Many EU Member States are currently dealing with the issue of returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their family members, and are looking into the possible different approaches to handle this phenomenon. It is of key importance to gather practical insights and discuss the most common challenges in order to be as prepared as possible for this task throughout the EU. State authorities and civil society actors play a key role in the continued care of returnees, especially in the context of deradicalisation and reintegration. This conclusion paper elaborates on these aspects and provides several concrete examples and practical tips. One key lesson learned concerns the importance of providing adequate information to the actors involved in the management of returnees, and conveying to them (without scaring or overwhelming them) the prospect that some cases may pose a threat to national security. Another key lesson is that families receiving returning relatives should, when appropriate, be involved at all stages possible, as they can favourably influence reintegration efforts.

## Introduction

In the past years, the topic of returnees has become more and more prevalent in the field of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), and several RAN meetings have been dedicated to discussing the issue of their management and reintegration into society <sup>(1)</sup>. When referring to “returnees”, we refer to returning FTFs (men and women) and their family members (women and children).

Once repatriated, returnees must be quickly yet sustainably integrated into municipal structures, particularly the ones who are not imprisoned. State structures and civil society actors, such as associations and advice centres, play a key role in the continued care of returnees, especially in the context of deradicalisation and reintegration.

First-line practitioners and coordinating actors met during an online study visit to the returnee coordinators of Berlin and Hesse (Germany) to gain insights into the project’s organisational framework and two-tier working structure of strategic networking and operative case processing, as well as to discuss challenges that can occur during the coordination process.

## The German context

So far, Germany has seen a total of approximately 1 060 people leave in order to join a terrorist organisation in Iraq or Syria. Around one third of those who have left have already returned to Germany and a few hundred individuals remain in foreign territory or custody, according to the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. Evidence has been collected for about roughly half of those who returned regarding their participation in combat operations for terrorist groups or their support in any other way <sup>(2)</sup>.

When trying to assess the profile of individuals who have returned from Syria or Iraq to Germany, we can very broadly differentiate between returnees who came back before 2016, who often left with the intention to help “build a new society”, and subsequently became disillusioned with reality under Daesh, and those who returned after 2016, who had a better idea of what they were signing up for. In Germany, returnees may be subject to ongoing investigation and criminal prosecution. However, the collection of relevant evidence can be cumbersome, so that arrest warrants may not be issued upon arrival and judicial sentencing may take longer than usual <sup>(3)</sup>. In December 2017, the German federal prosecutor general announced that there will be no differences in official treatment between men and women returnees, “... thus accepting that the services provided by female members of the Islamic State, even when not combat-related, played a significant role in upholding the system” <sup>(4)</sup>.

### The German approach: State-driven coordination of civil society and state institutions

The handling of those individuals who have returned to Germany poses several difficulties for the federal states, as those who have participated in criminal activities need to be prosecuted first, and all of them will need to be (re)integrated into society. In order to coordinate repressive and preventive measures, the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees launched the model **project “Coordination for returning FTFs and families from**

<sup>(1)</sup> See, for example, the Conclusion Paper of RAN LOCAL on [local communications when FTFs and/or their family members are returning](#) (2020); the Ex Post Paper of the RAN Study visit to Kosovo, [‘Study visit: Returned Women and Children – Studying an Ongoing Experience on the Ground’](#) (2019); or the RAN Ex Post Paper [‘High-Level Conference on child returnees and released prisoners’](#) (2018).

<sup>(2)</sup> Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz. (2020). [Islamistisch motivierte Reisebewegungen in Richtung Syrien/Irak](#). Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 13 March.

<sup>(3)</sup> For example, the case of Omaima; further reading: Masadeh, M. (2020). [A lost phone brings a female ISIS returnee to trial for crimes against humanity](#). Just Security, 22 May.

<sup>(4)</sup> Coolsaet, R., & Renard, T. (Eds) (2018). [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](#). Egmont Paper 101. Brussels, Belgium: Egmont Institute. (p. 50).

**Syria and Iraq”**. Returnee coordinators have been assigned to seven particularly affected federal states, usually located within the state’s security authorities. The returnee coordination serves as an information interface between actors on federal, state and local levels, including security authorities, public bodies, local communities, civil society organisations and psychological institutions. The fundamental aim of the returnee coordinators is to facilitate a multidisciplinary and holistic case processing, including the following five main tasks:

- 1) Act as an **interface** by serving as the single point of contact for all relevant actors
- 2) **Network** by connecting relevant actors
- 3) **Inform and support** the relevant actors working on reintegration and deradicalisation
- 4) Steer the **strategic communication** in order to maintain an efficient exchange
- 5) **Identify inspiring practices** and **develop guidelines**

What seems to work very well is the fact that the returnee coordinators identified single points of contact in every institution they work with. In this way, they communicate with a small circle of contacts with access to the network of all involved actors, always keeping data protection in mind. The method of identifying a single liaison within an agency or institution was received very well by participants of the study visit. The returnee coordinators also act as points of contact for their federal state, and they connect and exchange with returnee coordinators from other federal states at regular intervals. This practice of having returnee coordinators playing the role of single points of contact between federal states could also be beneficial at EU level, to facilitate the exchange of information amongst different EU Member States on current developments.

One important element of the coordinators’ work is the organisation of round-table meetings before and after the arrival of returnees. This enables all actors involved to collect information, identify necessary steps that need to be taken and clarify responsibilities. The team of actors involved depends on whether the returnee is returning alone or with a family, whether there is an arrest warrant for one (or several) family member(s), or if minors return unaccompanied (such as orphans).

## Challenges in returnee coordination

During the study visit, returnee coordinators presented several of the challenges of (re)integration work and discussed them with participants. The meeting provided an opportunity to reflect on similarities and differences related to the national approaches, and participants came up with potential solutions to the challenges identified. The following section provides a short overview of the most pressing and prevalent challenges and reflects on possible solutions.

**1. Trust-based cooperation and information sharing:** The most challenging factor in this issue is the importance of information sharing. In some cases, security authorities may ask for more information than can possibly be shared with them or be unwilling to share important information about returnees. Youth services are often part of this conflict in the returnee context, as children’s well-being is central to their work and they are reluctant to share any personal information with authorities. These conflicts between state and civil society actors also occur in other settings apart from the returnee context, and may lead to an unwillingness to cooperate. One potential solution discussed was the possibility of social services assuming a mediating role between police and civil society organisations, as they are most experienced in working with the police. The issue of data sensitivity should be discussed thoroughly amongst all actors involved in the management of returnees, and practices that have proven to be successful in other areas could ease the cooperation also on the management of returnees.

**2. Role understanding:** In Germany, the returnee coordinators cannot and will not tell the actors involved how to act – every actor must work within their own authority and options. This also means that the different stakeholders shouldn't interfere in each other's work. It is difficult to work within a multi-agency setting and enable all the actors involved to have a clear understanding of their roles. If one specific institution hesitates to handle a returnee case, arguing that it should not be prioritised over "usual" cases, this slows down the process of reintegration and might frustrate the other partners involved. Possible solutions could be a stronger focus on coordinating and mediating in order to "push them to do their job without interfering", as one participant said during the study visit. It is also helpful to appoint one person as a contact point per institution, in order to share information faster and perhaps with more trust due to regular personal contacts.

**3. Different perspectives and interests:** Each of the actors involved has a different point of view concerning what is most important. For the police, for instance, the main concern is – understandably – the consequences of not managing the security aspects properly. The political perspective and the perspectives of the returnee's family and community can also create conflicts. To solve this issue, it is key to raise awareness amongst actors of the different roles involved in this multi-agency approach. One could offer trainings to all involved actors at the same time, in order to help them understand the many perspectives and interests that should be considered.

**4. Unwillingness to reintegrate and deceptive behaviour:** Returnees can show strong ideological views, lack of perspective on their future life in society, and they may also still be linked to radical networks. When minors are involved, there is a high risk of deceptive behaviour amongst parents, i.e. in order to avoid losing their child's custody. The decisions of parents have a strong impact on the management of their children. Assessment is key and must be made very conscientiously, as all subsequent measures depend on this step. A good solution to face these challenges is to find the best way to communicate the (re)integration programme to each returnee and their family. If they understand the benefits and truly wish to cooperate, they can be (re)integrated much more easily. Additionally, a periodical supervision by an independent expert on the multidimensional approach is key to maintaining a high level of professionalism.

**5. Problem awareness and nuanced understanding:** This challenge addresses the difficulty of understanding how urgent the cases involving returnees are, and how demanding the work with returnees can become. An example of this challenge is that measures taken in prison with returnees sometimes do not work well with measures taken after release. There are cases where a returnee might be offered psychological help in prison that does not continue after their release. Possible solutions that were discussed are exchange programmes to enable the actors involved in the management of returnees to become more accustomed with each other's working processes. Another important factor is to keep the networking with all involved stakeholders on a long term and consistently, in order to allow all actors to fully understand their roles and build trust with each other.

**6. Media attention and local publicity:** Media coverage of returnee cases tends to be high upon their return and usually decreases over time. Whenever the topic becomes relevant, media coverage increases again. This can harm the trust-based cooperation with other actors (i.e. when confidential information is leaked). High media attention makes practitioners, and especially the police, careful when sharing information with their partners. There is always a risk of polarisation: far-right actors could exploit the topic when it fits their agenda. For example, right-wing extremist groups can use a returning Islamist extremist fighter to promote their own ideology, with the risk of destabilising a community and creating stigmatisation <sup>(5)</sup>. One option in managing this issue is communication with and training of actors (schools, employers, housing market professionals, etc.) on the following questions: What can be done when anonymity is lost? How can one respond to a media request for a statement? A communication plan providing different scenarios and responses could also be helpful <sup>(6)</sup>.

<sup>(5)</sup> Also see: Meines, M., Molenkamp, M., Ramadan, O., & Ranstorp, M. (2017). *RAN Manual. Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families*. RAN Centre of Excellence.

<sup>(6)</sup> Also see: Wouterse, L., & Gssime, Y. (2020). *Local communications for returning FTFs*, Conclusion Paper. Radicalisation Awareness Network, 25-26 May.

## Key outcomes and recommendations

The introduction of German returnee coordinators from Hesse and Berlin is a good example of a working and well-designed multidimensional approach in (re)integrating returnees. The federal system in Germany necessitated a special approach, which also provides additional solutions to varying returnee support groups involving multiple states. It became clear during the study visit that many actors throughout Europe are facing similar challenges. Even though the approaches differ in Member States, specific elements that work can be adapted in other countries. The key outcomes and recommendations of the study visit are mentioned below.

- 1) **Be aware of your own role and responsibilities in the process** in relation to the other practitioners involved, and act within the boundaries of your role.
- 2) It is important to **find a balance** in these highly sensitive cases **between providing enough information to the actors involved**, to make them aware of potential threats to national security, **and ensuring they are not overwhelmed** or too frightened to carry out their duties.
- 3) Even though the early stages are usually more security oriented, **local authorities should be involved or informed as early as possible** and throughout all stages, as they play a key role for long-term reintegration.
- 4) **Legal security measures and reintegration measures should not contradict one another**: i.e. being prohibited from having a bank account can be counterproductive for reintegration efforts.
- 5) **Trust and information sharing** amongst the different professional profiles involved are crucial elements in a fruitful cooperation, but they are still challenging to achieve. Social services or local authorities could play a mediating role between police and civil society organisations.
- 6) **Identify single points of contact** in all involved institutions and organisations to facilitate multi-agency cooperation.
- 7) Develop a **communication strategy** in order to define clear roles between all actors involved and to ensure every stakeholder knows who to reach out to if they have questions.
- 8) **Initiate and maintain round-table meetings** in order to establish trust between involved stakeholders. Preferably, this would start before the returnees are repatriated.
- 9) **Provide training for all actors** in order to establish a common working basis.
- 10) **Supervision of case workers** and **evaluation of the process** are essential and could be conducted by an independent expert for a more objective view.
- 11) Working on **the returnees' motivation to deradicalise** is crucial for long-term reintegration into society. Find the best way to communicate the (re)integration programme to each returnee. If they understand the benefits and truly wish to cooperate, the returnees and their families can be (re)integrated more easily.
- 12) **Families should be involved at all stages (to the extent possible)**. They should feel included and not left out, as they can provide social support to the returnee and positively influence reintegration.

That said, it should still be decided on a case-by-case basis whether the family actually has a positive influence.

- 13) Keep in mind that there is a risk of returnees, including children, being **targeted by media or other actors as “possible terrorists”**, including in schools. Create a sense of confidentiality without downplaying the complexity of the situation.
- 14) In order to **avoid stigmatisation and media attention** during the reintegration phase, the only people who should be informed about the status of a returnee are those in **leadership positions** (i.e. in schools, employers).
- 15) When **children show problematic behaviour**, this could either be a sign of ideological indoctrination or of trauma (closely monitor them for PTSD symptoms). **Psychologists and/or psychiatrists** play a key role to assess mental well-being and should be involved to support reintegration.
- 16) The **assistance of former returnees** can be useful for the reintegration process, as they might share common culture or language, and could more easily build a relationship of trust. That said, it’s essential to keep in mind that before inviting the assistance of former returnees, we must be sure that their professional standards are adequate and that they have received proper training.

## Further reading

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