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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN Cross-cutting Thematic Event - Management of returning FTFs and their family members with a focus on returning women and children

14 and 15 December 2021, virtual meeting

Management of returning FTFs and their family members with a focus on returning women and children

Key outcomes

The aim of this cross-cutting event was to foster the networking and exchanging between practitioners, researchers and policymakers, serving as an opportunity to combine multi-disciplinary findings, information and experiences on three core aspects of returnee management:

1. prison-exit continuum
2. working with children
3. working with women

The meeting took place online on the 14 and 15 December 2021. The aim of this conclusion paper is to highlight the key outcomes, main points of the discussions and relevant recommendations, including promising practices.

The discussions took place against the background of changing realities concerning government initiatives and programmes, as well as individual experiences in Northern Syrian camps and on return. While repatriation essentially concerns women and children, existing approaches and experiences have been developed for men. At the same time, the understanding of individual radicalisation processes and of the individual transformations after the fall of the Caliphate remains limited. That said, emerging experiences in European countries in working with this target group and in the prison-exit continuum have led to several important insights, lessons learned and potential ways forward. These are outlined and structured by area of work.

This conclusion paper will elaborate on the main highlights of the discussion, focusing on emerging issues and challenges in the work with returning women, children and along the prison-exit continuum. Subsequently, several recommendations and lessons learned will be outlined, including promising practices.

Highlights of the discussion

The discussion of the perspectives and challenges related to the three main topics of women, children and the prison-exit continuum took place against the background of a changing overall context. European states have generally reached the conclusion that the repatriation of women and especially children is inevitable, not least to avoid larger security issues. With this in mind, there is generally an emphasis on repatriating children. At the same time, the prolonged stay of women and children in Northern Syrian camps and the conditions that exist there have added to the challenges of repatriating and reintegrating them. Overall, the backgrounds and stories of returnees are highly diverse, starting with the degree of indoctrination, active participation or victimisation, but also concerning motivation and perspectives of starting over. While working with women and children and along the prison-exit continuum is not entirely novel anymore, there remain a series of persisting and emerging aspects that need to be considered as we go forward, such as:

- The understanding of the radicalisation processes, worldviews and subjective realities of returnees needs to be more nuanced and more individualised, as opposed to treating them as a collective driven primarily by religion-based ideologies. Sensitivity to differences and a focus on individual motivations are crucial for taking the right approach to rehabilitation and reintegration.
- The experiences in Northern Syrian camps, during return and initial contacts with the communities have created new realities and challenges. This makes it necessary to consider various types of additional traumas, transformations and identities.
- Many children who were born in Syria do not have civil status documents (such as birth certificates). Rules and procedures to address this issue still need to be developed further.
- The individual vulnerability of children upon their return is manifold and includes aspects such as their status as orphans or separation from their mothers over extended periods of time. Stigmatisation is a central challenge that can affect children at school or within society more broadly and can create the risk of self-fulfilling prophecies.
- When working with children, there is the overall challenge of finding the right balance regarding confidentiality: between the imperative and fundamental right to have anonymity and the information needs of the people around the child such as teachers and foster care families.
- Reaching out to isolated children can be a challenge, as is the broader issue of creating tools that go beyond family separation.
- The decision about placement of children with foster care families, extended families or with their mothers remains a complex and sensitive issue whereas risks and needs assessment in these cases is not yet systematised.
- Foster families can be overwhelmed by the task or by the problems and level of trauma symptoms associated with child returnees. On the other hand, extended family members might still be working through the grieving process and thus have few resources to dedicate to the children.
- Reintegration of women and children in communities can be affected by the status of, or dysfunctions within communities.
- The reintegration of children can be negatively affected in cases where the mothers are sent to the countries of their second nationality after the completion of the prison sentence.

- There is comparatively less experience and know-how regarding the prosecution and rehabilitation of female returnees. Even in the context of new counts for prosecution such as crimes against humanity, finding evidence remains difficult in some cases. Additionally, prison programmes and risk assessment tools have been developed for men, which creates challenges particularly in the work with highly radicalised female returnees.
- Reluctance to admitting to an active role on the part of some women presents a continuing challenge to working with them as it prevents the development of tailored rehabilitation approaches. Short prison sentences or the lack of prosecution altogether can hinder rehabilitation work, as these individuals are harder to reach and might lack the self-conscious emotion of guilt.
- The multitude of actors involved in return, rehabilitation and reintegration work can lead to conflicts of interests or overlaps. This highlights the importance of having in place clear roles and a process of multi-agency cooperation.
- There is still variation among European states and challenges regarding the involvement of external CSOs in rehabilitation work, one of which is long-term funding necessary to ensure sustainability and proper evaluation.

Recommendations

This section presents a series of recommendations for the specific areas of the work with children, women and along the prison-exit continuum. Following this, a list of relevant practices will be outlined.

Children

Working with children in the context of the return and rehabilitation of FTFs is not new. At the same time, there is knowledge from other areas on dealing with aspects such as trauma, indoctrination in the family, abusive parenting, etc. In the case of children, the overall approach needs to consider various types of specific victimisation and focus primarily on normalisation. The latter refers to establishing regular daily routines in the personal and social realm, especially at school. This usually involves the concerted action of several types of authorities, whereas ideally one actor should have the lead and oversee the complexity of the case. Risk assessment might be necessary in certain cases and should also include the child's environment (grandparents, parents, teachers, the neighbourhood); however, needs assessment should be in the forefront in the case of children. Considering differences in focus and methods of security actors and social services staff, it would be important to have reciprocal exchanges and training about each other's specific activities. The following recommendations may be outlined:

- Resort to previous experiences with cult victims and children raised in cult and extremist environments. This does not need to be limited to contemporary phenomena but can include historical cases. Knowledge about these situations and specific knowledge about the situation in Syria needs to be accumulated and factored into the rehabilitation and reintegration work.
- Creating a narrative and helping children to construct a new identity are important steps in their rehabilitation and involves deconstructing the previous one and creating a healthy rapport to their stories. Encouraging children to take on new identities or lie about experiences only works in the short term. Creating a holistic and sustainable narrative needs to occur in a safe space where children can feel comfortable to open up.
- Access to education is crucial. An important aspect of this process is making sure that stigmatisation does not occur, or that the response is immediate. It's important to address the challenge of potential stigmatisation through information sessions with relevant actors in schools and communities, getting to know each other and finding the right balance between belittling and dramatisation.
- Provide therapeutic care where necessary. This may include the educational context, but also families, whether it is foster families, mothers or grandparents.

- It is important to build long-term approaches to children, as aspects such as stigma or trauma might manifest themselves at a later point in time.
- Trauma sensitive training should be considered for frontline workers and other actors involved in the work with children. Alternatively, trauma specialists should be consulted in individual cases.
- There are different approaches in the EU, based on national legislation and practices, with regards to leaving children in the care of their mothers, foster families and their extended families. Either way, it is important to know these individuals, evaluate them, provide them with attachment and trauma training and carry out a longer-term supervision of the child in this environment.
- It is necessary to develop a needs assessment template for children. The template should also include the child's environment, the family and the neighbourhood. Tailor-made approaches should be developed based on the needs assessment.

Women

When working with women, authorities and actors involved in prosecution and rehabilitation are slowly learning to overcome gender stereotypes. This is reflected in new practices of prosecuting women, including for other crimes than terrorism, such as crimes against humanity; but also in the awareness that specific approaches are needed for women for the purposes of rehabilitation and reintegration. While these areas are still in development, a series of recommendations have been identified:

- The prison-exit continuum for women presents additional vulnerabilities which need to be considered in rehabilitation work.
- The perspective of being reunited with their children can function as a motivation to participate in deradicalisation programmes.
- Similar to the case of children, it is also important to work on the narrative and on identity, which for women is multiple: mother, wife and citizen. In this context, it is recommended to allow mourning as it is part of the process towards eventually moving on, and because it is important for the mother to communicate to the children that they are allowed to exist. Additionally, it is important to help mothers create the narrative for their children. New experiences and memories should be created and other identities should be explored beyond the obvious story of perpetrator/victim.
- Part of the experiences of women (as is the case with children) in the Daesh territories and the camps can include domestic violence, forced marriage and sexual abuse. This multiple form of victimisation should be included in tailored approaches. On the other hand, there might have also been positive experiences that are part of their identity and should be acknowledged. From a different perspective, the period spent in the camps can be considered for the trial and can contribute to healing, rehabilitation and reintegration.
- Upon return, it is important to investigate the family background and the women's contacts to ascertain whether this social environment might be beneficial or detrimental to reintegration.
- Given the challenges associated with women returnees, from knowledge gaps to multiple identities and multiple forms of trauma, as well as their potential involvement in violence and abusive behaviour, cooperation and information exchange between the various authorities is key. A possible approach is to establish standing teams at the municipal level to cooperate and learn from each other.
- In principle, it is advisable to facilitate the contact of imprisoned mothers with their children, as separation can be very harmful and traumatic. At the same time, the continued contact could help reinforce women's identities as mothers and support their rehabilitation process. Such decisions need to be balanced with assessing the needs of the children and what is in their best interest.

Prison-exit continuum

The prison-exit continuum still presents a particularly vulnerable dimension of the rehabilitation and reintegration work. As opposed to the work with women and children, this area benefits from longer existing and more established practices. From this perspective, the following recommendations can be made:

- It is never too early to start the exit interventions. Ideally, exit workers should be in contact with prisons before a specific case comes up. This can be achieved through regular meetings, joint courses or trainings. Additionally, a kick-off meeting between prison administration and an external exit provider can take place, in which for example relevant details on the prison sentence are shared.
- Ideology can be addressed on a case-by-case basis. The approach to theology should be based on needs. For example, if the individual uses heavily religious arguments and religion appears central for their identity. In general, however, theological debates and discussions should be avoided as much as possible.
- The different characteristics and personality traits of the counsellors may play a role with regards to accessing an inmate. The overall goal is to establish communication and facilitate R&R, the choice of counsellors should be determined on a case-by-case basis and might also change. An option is to work in teams.
- It is important to try to engage people in topics other than their Muslim identity. It might be that some inmates are hiding their true identity behind an ideology so that personal and social aspects are not apparent. However, this might be more relevant than the ideological dimension. Hence this aspect needs to be approached with great care.
- If multi-agency cooperation is established, role playing in the case of conferences can be a good tool to learn and understand the perspectives of other professionals involved. This can be discussed in terms, for example, of ensuring there is continuity.
- In cases with a small number of VETOs and where big investments in exit programmes are not justifiable, the focus should be on prevention, but also resolving more basic issues in prison and probation systems, strengthening the fundamentals – such as the more general rehabilitation and reintegration work, while also streamlining mental health approaches.

Relevant practices

1. The **attachment-based parenting intervention** (NIKA method) from Child Protection in the Netherlands focuses on children between 9 months and 6 years of age who have a high risk in disoriented attachment or show signals of attachment issues. The overall goal of the NIKA method is to prevent or reduce the attachment issues between parent and child. The method trains parents to mitigate/stop disrupted parenting and develop a sensitive parenting style by using video feedback, psycho-education and take-home assignments. This helps prevent or repair a disturbed attachment relationship.
2. Gender-specific deradicalisation project in Germany: **“Intervention points for gender-sensitive deradicalisation work among women and girls in the area of Salafism”**. The project’s goal is to achieve a better understanding of radicalisation and exit processes of women, as well as identifying intervention points for a gender-sensitive approach to deradicalisation measures for women.¹
3. The CVE centre in Sweden supports municipalities to implement a mentorship scheme, especially for FTFs who have not been convicted and are not in prison or on probation. The focus is on the FTFs who have returned straight to their municipality.

¹ More information: <https://www.unibw.de/ciss-en/projects/gender-sensitive-deradicalization-work>

Follow up

Several suggestions have been tabled for future discussion and research.

- Topics about children:
 - One important topic would be to explore and define what is the best interest of the child. This should include a parallel review of how different systems assess and implement in view of the best interests of children who are repatriated.
 - Another topic would be the ambivalence between children considered offenders and children viewed as victims. One way to tackle this issue is to explore the projects and approaches that can bring this ambivalence in people's minds and how to find a middle ground.
 - Finally, evaluation of existing approaches is important to take stock of existing knowledge and experiences. This can include concrete cases and children and their experiences with specific approaches.
- In the area of working with women returnees, evaluation, case studies and collecting lessons learned should be continued.
- Regarding the prison-exit continuum, one relevant topic could be the different ways to develop trust and security protocols between CSOs and security services, as well as some basic objective standards on how to approach security issues.
- A further topic might revolve around standards and quality criteria on the national and European level in rehabilitation and reintegration work. This might include commonly used risk assessment tools, but also tools used by social workers (e.g. social diagnostics).

Further reading

- RAN Paper (2021) [Gender-sensitive responses to returnees from foreign terrorist organisations: insights for practitioners, December 2021](#).
- RAN Paper (2021) [Focus on Children – The challenge to reflect on values with imprisoned extremist parents, November 2021](#).
- RAN Paper (2021) [The role of psychotherapy in rehabilitation and exit work, November 2021](#).
- RAN Conclusion Paper (2021) [RAN REHABILITATION Returning FTFs and their families: Practitioners' insights on improving the return process](#), online meeting 16 September 2021.
- RAN Conclusion Paper (2021) [RAN REHABILITATION Crises in rehabilitation – safeguarding practitioners and approaches](#), online meeting 27-28 May 2021.