

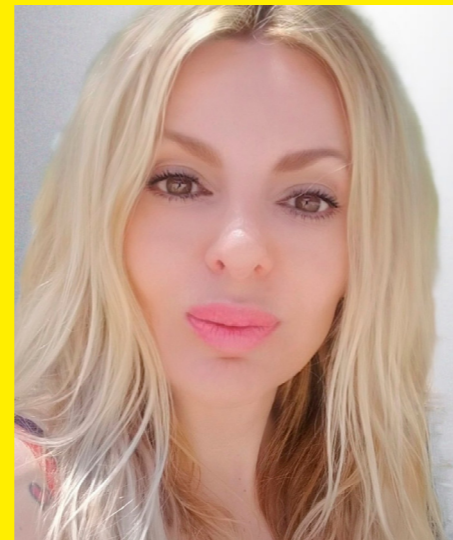
# SPOTLIGHT

OCT 2021



**FAMILY MEMBERS  
AND CHILDREN OF  
FOREIGN TERRORIST  
FIGHTERS (FTFs)**

**10** YEARS OF  
RAN

**Daniella PISOIU****Angela ANTONOVA****Eva JIMENEZ****Habiba ALI****Laura YLRIUKA****Armin LAAF****Luisa ROEMER****Kerstin SISCHKA**

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**EDITORIAL**

Following the collapse of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Europe saw the return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs), and their families, who had left EU Member States to fight in Iraq and Syria. This posed a significant security challenge to Member States, which sparked a policy debate about the best way to handle their return.

Although the conflict in Syria still rages, the security situation in Iraq continues to steadily improve, enabling those FTFs and their families that still remain in the country or camps outside of it easier passage to return to Europe. While they might not return in such large numbers as before, Europe will continue to see a trickle of returnees over the coming years.

The rehabilitation and reintegration of FTFs and their families back into communities across Europe is therefore now one of the most pressing tasks facing EU Member States and P/CVE practitioners. The nature and scale of the task necessitates a multi-agency approach, with the involvement of practitioners working in multiple fields, from prisons to communities.

While many FTFs are sent to prison, some of their families who returned with them, and particularly the children – who might have been born in Europe or in Iraq or Syria – face an uncertain future. As means of social interaction were cut off due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the task of reintegrating them became all the more difficult.

In this Spotlight, RAN practitioners and Working Group leads share their views, insights and their work in dealing with family members and children of FTFs, including dealing with the trauma that they (might) have faced, handling them in schools and support for families “left behind”. Many of these topics have been addressed by RAN Practitioners through Working Group and small-scale meetings during 2021.

As always, we want to hear from you! If you would like to contribute to future editions of Spotlight, or if you have ideas for an article, interview or feature, please get in touch with the RAN Practitioners communications team at [ran@radaradvies.nl](mailto:ran@radaradvies.nl)

**The RAN Staff**

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# Contents

03

EDITORIAL

08

ARTICLE  
**The European children  
of FTF challenge**

12

FILM  
**Foreign Terrorist  
Fighters & their  
families**

14

PAPER  
**Repatriated FTFs and  
their families**

16

FEATURE  
**Returnee coordination  
in Hesse**

20

ARTICLE  
**FTF children: a mental  
health perspective  
in view of their  
reintegration**

26

PAPER  
**Female Returnees &  
their children**

28

ARTICLE  
**Support for families  
of FTFs**

34

INTERVIEW  
**Avoiding stigmatisation  
in local communities**

38

PAPER  
**Support measures for  
children returning from  
conflict zones**

40

HIGHLIGHTS  
**RAN activity on FTFs**

42

LIBRARY  
**Discover more**







# ARTICLE: THE EUROPEAN CHALLENGE CONCERNING CHILDREN OF FTFs



Daniella PISOIU

The discussion surrounding the repatriation of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from EU countries remains heated as practical arguments often hit the wall of diffuse fear and threat assessments with insufficient analytical depth. Some exceptions have been recently made for children and this category of returnees poses its own set of challenges regarding reintegration...



**Beyond legal arguments related to the rights of the child and the states' decisions about their repatriation, intervening timely on those children is also a matter of preventing further radicalisation in the long term.**

#### **Who are the children of the FTFs?**

One of the particularities of the Daesh agenda was to build a state and corresponding state structures, as well as a 'new' society. This made the Daesh project attractive to women and families to a significantly higher degree than previous foreign fighting jihads; and it subsequently created a situation where children and their mothers constitute a significant contingent of returnees. Children returnees are therefore children who left the EU with their families, but also children who were born in conflict zones. While concrete numbers differ, the fact remains that women and children constitute the majority of the population in the Northern Syrian detention camps. The risk of further radicalization, and the possibility that individuals traumatized and socialised in conflict situations can turn – especially in the long term – into a real threat for the countries of origin once they are back, are all elements of the complex debate about child returnees.

#### **The challenges of reintegrating children of FTFs**

Different activities and approaches will be necessary on return depending on the category of children in any particular case. With regard to age, it is usually differentiated between infants and toddlers (0-3 years), pre-schoolers and younger children (4-10 years) and teenagers/adolescents (10-17 years). Gender also matters, as girls will have been confronted with different situations and experiences than boys. Generally, it is assumed that the younger the child, the less indoctrination will have taken place, thus the lesser need for measures addressing that specific aspect. Indeed, the majority of children returnees are under the age of 10.

For older children, there is also the theoretical possibility of processing through the juvenile justice system; yet research and practice on the broader topic of child soldiers suggests that

imprisonment should be avoided for the purpose of successful reintegration of children. Overall and regardless of gender or age, the two main priorities in dealing with children returnees should be: identifying and treating trauma, and normalisation. Children who have experienced armed conflict are very likely to face multiple and ongoing trauma concerning various kinds of violence, sexual abuse, hunger, malnutrition, neglect and abandonment.

Normalisation refers to the establishment of regular routines and the integration into an environment whereby the child is not viewed as the odd one out. This requires cooperation between the various entities dealing with these cases and an active involvement of the respective schools and its relevant personnel. A tailored approach is necessary, meaning that each case will need to be assessed on the basis of its own background, dynamics, risks and opportunities for reintegration, which should be reflected in a risk and needs assessment. Health checks and measures are needed upon arrival in many cases and a psychological/psychiatric assessment and long-term file is recommended, for the event that effects of trauma become visible at a later point.

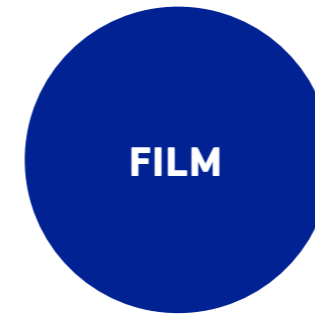
Contact with parents and the broader family is recommended, unless they are detrimental to the reintegration efforts. Even in these cases, as well as for children whose parents have died or remained in the conflict zone, it is important to create a narrative about the war experience and the role of the parents, in order to prevent identity issues later on. Overall, the best interest and the well-being of the child need to remain paramount. Experience shows that children are capable to more easily and rapidly recover from traumatic experiences and reintegrate into mainstream society after conflicts. Thus, the chance of intervening at an early age should be taken in time.

***Daniela Pisoiu, PhD*** is a Senior Researcher at the Austrian Institute for International Affairs and Lecturer at the University of Vienna. She has been researching radicalisation processes for over 16 years and is a member of the Editorial Board of the Radicalisation Awareness Network.



FILM  
**FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS  
AND THEIR FAMILIES**

A short five-minute film, produced by RAN Practitioners, provides an introduction to the topic of returnees. We hear from four voices who offer different perspectives on the challenge facing EU Member States today, including a policy maker, a researcher, a practitioner working with returnees in prisons and a practitioner working in communities. The voices touch upon the process of rehabilitation and reintegration and the policy around women and children. You can view the film in full [here](#).



FILM  
**FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS AND  
THEIR FAMILIES**

OCT 2021  
**FAMILY MEMBERS AND CHILDREN OF FOREIGN  
TERRORIST FIGHTERS (FTFs)**



**As foreign terrorist fighters [FTFs]  
and their families continue  
to return to Europe**



A paper, produced by RAN Practitioners in 2021, 'Repatriated foreign terrorist fighters and their families: European experiences & lessons for P/CVE', provides practitioners with an overview of general approaches towards repatriation in EU countries and the Western Balkans, with concrete examples of practices, various types of multi-agency and national coordination, as well as exit programmes and interventions for both adult and child returnees. You can read the paper in full [here](#).

PAPER



# Repatriated foreign terrorist fighters and their families: European experiences & lessons for P/CVE

Authored by Anita Perešin & Daniela PISOIU,  
RAN Expert Pool Members

Radicalisation Awareness Network  
**RAN** 

## REPATRIATED FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

This paper outlines general approaches and experiences in the EU and the Western Balkans, followed by some specific practices as well as lessons learned.

According to a recent estimation citing European intelligence sources, around **5 300** men and women from Europe have left for Syria and Iraq since 2012. It is further estimated that around **1 000** children left together with their parents, and that some 600 were born there. Taking into account the several waves of returnees, the war casualties and the fighters who left to join other war theatres, around **2 500** of 5 300 people are believed to still be in these territories. Importantly, the ratio of children returning is much lower: around **1 400** of 1 600 are estimated to remain (not considering war and famine casualties). Arguably, it has been more difficult for families, women and children to return; currently, **most Europeans still remaining in former Daesh territories are in fact women and children**<sup>5</sup>.

### Managing repatriations and working with returnees

Approaches to returning FTFs and their families in Europe vary<sup>6</sup>. Such approaches are typically built on pre-existing programmes, initiatives and legal frameworks designed to deal with terrorism and radicalisation more broadly and depending on local context.

Three broad categories of returnees can be distinguished, as explained below.

- Individuals returning **on their own**. There are several waves in this category: individuals (both male and female) but also families who returned in the early years of the Syrian conflict (2012–2013); next, those who returned during the period of the caliphate; and finally, the individuals returning after its fall. The criminalisation of various additional activities relating to involvement in terrorism (including specific aspects of foreign fighting) was only implemented in 2014 and 2015 in the EU<sup>7</sup> and in the following years in most Western Balkan countries, after amendments to the criminal codes. While 'membership in a terrorist organisation' was previously regarded as a criminal offence, the threat associated with such leavers was considered lower from 2012 to 2014. So early returnees usually remained outside the judicial system; at the time, there was relatively little awareness among leavers about the Daesh atrocities to come, and most returned after a relatively short time.
- Individuals including children (with or without their mothers) who were **actively repatriated** from Syria (the percentage is higher in the Western Balkans; in the EU, the number is limited, and usually involves only young and/or orphan children, and very rarely, their mothers).
- Individuals for whom **secure return** is ensured **from Turkey**.

The two latter categories of repatriation involve specific procedures hinging on diplomatic channels that – for specific countries – are unavailable in the case of Syria. This is flagged by some governments as an obstacle to repatriations.

<sup>5</sup> Renard & Coolsaet, *Children in the Levant: Insights from Belgium on the dilemmas of repatriation and the challenges of reintegration*.

<sup>6</sup> All information which has not been referenced is sourced from expert interviews in Belgium, France, Germany, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo.

<sup>7</sup> This refers to the implementation of Council Framework Decision 2008/919/JHA that includes three new offences: public provocation to commit a terrorist offence, recruitment for terrorism, and providing (but not receiving) training for terrorism. See Directive (EU) 2017/541 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2017 on combating terrorism and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA and amending Council Decision 2005/671/JHA (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2017/541/oj>) concerning a number of terrorist offences and offences related to a terrorist group, as well as offences related to terrorist activities, such as public provocation to commit a terrorist offence, recruitment for terrorism, providing training for terrorism, receiving training for terrorism, and travelling for the purpose of terrorism.



FEATURE

# Returnees coordination in Hesse...

Luisa ROEMER and Armin LAAF



Since the cessation of the so-called Islamic State due to its loss of territory and manpower, Germany has faced the challenge of repatriating and reintegrating the remaining FTFs and their families. About 1,070 individuals once left Germany in order to allegedly join and support a terrorist organisation.



**About 1,070 individuals once left Germany in order to allegedly join and support a terrorist organisation. Most of them lived in jihadist conflict areas in Syria and Iraq for several years. Today, the majority of women and children reside in refugee camps, waiting for the possibility to return. Meanwhile, German authorities stay alert as those potentially highly radicalised German citizens may pose an increased security risk.**

In order to coordinate all necessary repressive, preventive and social measures, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge) launched the model project “Coordination for returning FTFs and families from Syria and Iraq” in early 2019. It was implemented in seven particularly affected federal states, one of them being the State of Hesse. In Hesse, the Returnee Coordination is located within the Hessian State Criminal Police Office and staffed by two political scientists.

The Returnee Coordination serves as the central information interface between all actors involved on federal, state and local level, including security authorities, public bodies, local communities, and civil society organisations. That means that we are not in direct contact with returnees, but rather identify as a service provider and are first and foremost helping the helpers. Over the last two years we established a broad and reliable network with actors from different sectors. We interconnect and support all of them in their efforts to deradicalise and reintegrate the returning persons, families or children into society. Moreover, we offer training and conduct meetings to increase awareness and a nuanced understanding of the topic. This creates comfort in handling the cases and helps mitigating strong opinions or even skepticism. We also pool and steer the demand-oriented flow of necessary information at all levels to guarantee an efficient exchange and coordination of measures.

The fundamental aim of the Returnee Coordination is to facilitate a multidisciplinary and holistic case processing (both for adults and children), which is divided into three phases: departure and stay in Syria or Iraq, repatriation, and reintegration in Germany. During the first phase we collect and process information about the individual cases. In the second phase we help prepare their return by working together with federal agencies. As soon as a date and time of the repatriation are confirmed, we inform the relevant social and civil society actors according to a predetermined reporting chain. Our communication usually is their first contact with the case. During the third phase the Returnee Coordination offers a platform to regularly and sustainably exchange information through roundtable meetings. In between those, we like to keep

close records of current and prospective measures bilaterally to identify gaps or introduce new actors. We pride ourselves with being always approachable and having an open ear for problems and challenges. The holistic approach intends to both minimise the potential danger to society posed by returnees as well as maximise the chances for a successful and sustainable reintegration.

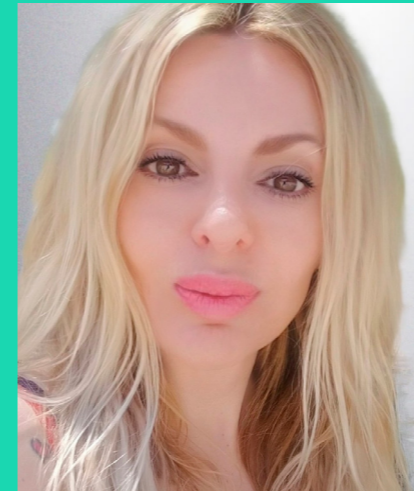
Cooperation between actors is based on trust, transparency and practicality. We never interfere in an actors’ area of responsibility and decision-making competences and usually inform hierarchically or through predetermined points of contact. We respect data protection regulations and generally proceed restrictively on a need-to-know basis as we like to avoid cases from becoming public and fear stigmatisation and negative reactions against returnees.

In conclusion, the Returnee Coordination contributes significantly to the overall handling of repatriating and reintegrating FTFs and their families and is perceived as a valuable central interface with a diverse range of functions and support mechanisms.





# ARTICLE: FTF CHILDREN: A MENTAL HEALTH PERSPECTIVE IN VIEW OF THEIR REINTEGRATION.



Dr. Eva  
JIMENEZ

The phenomenon of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) is not new. However, the awareness of the nature of the threat posed by Foreign Terrorist Fighters to the EU has increased in the last few years...

ARTICLE



**It is also now widely understood that many FTFs have psychological problems and have experienced some compensation mechanism for the potential trauma involved in attacking other people (they have been brainwashed, they have learned to use bombs against human targets, their tolerance for extreme violence has grown significantly, and they receive the support of groups that not only excuse their actions, but also dignify them).**

For these reasons, mental health practitioners are required to assist in the prevention of radicalisation and in the development and implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for returning FTFs and their families. This brief analysis highlights the dramatic reality of children affected by the phenomenon of foreign combatants.

According to the international human rights framework, all children under the age of eighteen who are associated with parties to an armed conflict should be considered primarily victims of recruitment and abuse. Furthermore, it has been observed that children who are recruited and used in hostilities are often doubly victimised by being subsequently detained for their previous association with armed forces or groups.

It is known that some children have been mistreated, tortured and/or raped. As a result, half of FTFs' children suffer long-term psychological consequences. Research on the psychological damages of these minors yields conclusive results, which could be summarised in the following factors:

- The existence of a significant and consistent association between having a connection with FTFs and the risk of presenting psychopathological and social alterations (high levels of anxiety, post-traumatic stress, manifestations of anger, depression, high warning signs, night fears, feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, lack of empathy, social integration difficulties);



- The quality of life of these children is lower than that of the “normal” population of the same age;
- Being the son/daughter or sibling of an FTF is significantly associated with an increased risk of mental health;
- When family support is perceived by the child as scarce, insufficient or null, the risk of presenting psychopathological alterations increases significantly.

Synthesising the results, it could be said that these children are a group clearly vulnerable to the probability of presenting emotional consequences, having a negative impact on the quality of their life and on their close relationships.

The question of what to do with children formerly associated with terrorist groups has become more acute. These children may be victims but could also pose a security threat. If very young children born into terrorist groups are not shown a different kind of existence before becoming too scarred, they may themselves be in danger of recruited into extremist circles in the future.

These minors present psychological injuries of various kinds. The most frequent clinical symptoms and syndromes include depression, post-traumatic stress, panic attacks, anger and aggressiveness, abuse of drugs, as well as extreme behaviors of fear and avoidance (phobic behaviors). Thereupon, what is essential is to ensure their eligibility for the support of child protection programmes and their reintegration into society.


There are still many challenges, and one of them is to recognize the urgent need for EU Member States to develop tailored, specific and context-sensitive approaches to these children, to ensure their successful rehabilitation and reintegration. Finding the right balance between ensuring security of our societies and reintegration of these children remains challenging,

**“According to the international human rights framework, all children under the age of eighteen who are associated with parties to an armed conflict should be considered primarily victims of recruitment and abuse.”**

**Dr. Eva María Jiménez González** is co-leader of the RAN Practitioners Working Group on Mental Health. She is a doctor of Clinical and Forensic Psychology and Head of the Institute of Forensic Psychology in the Ministry of Justice in Spain. She is a member of the “Peacekeepers Team” of observers for peace missions hosted by Ministries of Defence across member States under the auspices of the United Nations. She holds a position as Director of the International Master in Clinical and Forensic Psychology at the International University of Menéndez Pelayo.



A paper, produced by Violence Prevention Network (VPN) in 2020, 'Female Returnees and their Children' provides practitioners with insights about the psychological and psychosocial aspects of the repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration of women and children, exploring in depth issues of trauma. You can read the publication in full [here](#).



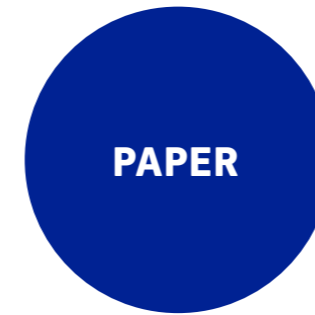
## Female Returnees and their children

Psychotherapeutic perspectives on the rehabilitation of women and children from the former territories of the so-called Islamic State

Publication Series  
Issue 4

Kerstin Sischka

in cooperation with  
Christoph Bialluch and Claudia Lozano



**Kerstin  
SISCHKA**

**Kerstin Sischka** is a psychoanalyst and psychotherapist in Berlin working for 20 years with families, youths and criminal offenders in the framework of rehabilitation and exit. She is also a project manager at Violence Prevention Network in the project NEXUS – a network of psychologists working in the area of justice/extremism and in the project TRIAS Berlin which explores new multi-agency cooperations in the prevention of extremism.

Violence Prevention Network Publication Series Issue 4: Returnees and their children

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### *Jihadi socialisation in the training camps*

In the training camps for the "cubs of the caliphate", jihadi education intensified for some of the children and adolescents from 12 years of age, sometimes even earlier. This education, sometimes lasting several months, focused on in-depth, religious indoctrination, weapons training and physical combat training. Children and adolescents who were brought to the jihadists in the training camps often had to participate in extreme violence. They were forced to watch videos of beheadings, be present at executions and even kill prisoners. Disobedience was brutally punished. Some of these children and adolescents were forced to join "IS" because their families were blackmailed or threatened. Others were orphans or, as with the Yazidi children, kidnapped and brought to the training camps. Some were even sent there by their jihadi parents (Bouzar/Benezech 2019).

The totalitarian ideology in these training camps focused on an elite identity of the boys, who became both victims and perpetrators. Those who were recruited and trained by "IS" were given a feeling of being chosen and were given a higher social status at the start of the "caliphate" - which was also to prevent the recruits from turning to other ways of life. After completing their training, young people were given specific roles in the terror militia, be it as fighters, guards, spies, propagandists or similar roles (Vale 2018, van der Heide/Alexander 2020).

It was not uncommon for children to be used as suicide bombers with the promise of a "reward in paradise".

### 1.2 Germans who left to join "IS"

While "IS" was conquering and expanding, it used propaganda to intensively recruit foreign supporters. The key message was that Hijrah (leaving to join the "caliphate") is a duty for every Muslim. Everyone could find their place for a "good life", a high standard of living and a useful purpose in Islamic State. The propaganda mainly targeted young people who would start families and have children.

Between 2013 and 2018, around 5,000 young people left Europe to go to "IS"-controlled regions, around 1,050 of them were from Germany (BKA/BfV/HKE 2016). They were mainly young adults between 18 and 29 years of age, although the figure also included a certain number of minors. The majority of those who left Germany (N=784) were German citizens, 79 % male and 21 % female. It was known that 37 % of the group (290 people) had children at the time that they (first) left Germany (BKA/BfV/HKE 2016). Some of these 784 people, mostly women, left Germany with children to join "IS". According to their ideological beliefs, they often saw it as the only possible way to give their children a "better world under God's law" and not to leave the child to the "dark forces of the infidels".

Using children as bait to recruit younger Europeans was an explicit part of the "IS" strategy. The propaganda films often showed happy children laughing in playgrounds or with their fathers in leisure parks, as well as schools, orphanages and seemingly well-equipped hospitals. This was how the "caliphate" portrayed itself to be a child-friendly country and these propagandist sequences affected many young women who felt drawn to the idealising images (Bouzar/Benezech 2019).

5



# ARTICLE: SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES OF FTFs



Angela  
ANTONOVA

Within the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN Practitioners) when we talk about Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) leaving for Syria or Iraq, we also focus our attention to a network of people affected by an FTF's departure, death or return - whether a partner, children, (grand)parents or siblings...



Over the past couple of years we have discussed the best ways to involve families of FTFs in the process of resocialisation and reintegration in the case of an FTF's return. We also addressed other scenarios. For instance, family support needs to be in place for those families, whose (grand)child, sibling, parent, or other family member has not yet returned to their home country or will never return. In the RAN Working Group Families Communities and Social Care we all agree that it is vital these families 'left behind' remain a strong and active part of society as a whole and therefore receive solution-focused support.

An FTF can originate from any family, mine, yours, or the family of our neighbours, but all members of FTF families are confronted with similar challenges.

During the RAN Families, Communities & Social Care Working Group meeting, 'Families of FTFs', held on 29-30 June 2020, we have identified the main challenges for families of FTFs:

**- Dealing with the psychological consequences of the departure, death or return of an FTF.** FTF family members have to deal with a flood of emotions (depending on the individual and on the situation), such as anger, immense grief, but also guilt and shame. They find themselves in anguishing dilemmas. On one hand, some of the families may feel revolted by the FTF's actions, while on the other they desperately miss their loved one. The FTF's family members have to deal with many insecurities (will they ever see their family member again?). Grief particularly applies when an FTF has deceased in a conflict zone and often no records of what happened are available. Additionally, some family members are in contact with the FTF who is or has been facing many atrocities in conflict zones or refugee camps (aggressive guards, a lack of drinking water, no medical care etc.) which can be traumatising as well.

**- Dealing with stigmatisation in the social network, community and/or society of the family.** Most people are very aware of the atrocities of Daesh, Al Qaeda and other violent extremist groups. Persons returning from these terrorist organisations will be treated with distrust and hostility. However, families of FTFs encounter stigma even when their family member has not (yet) returned. Their cases are often covered in the media, and people in the families' communities or cities place the families

in a negative spotlight. The feeling of having failed as a (grand) parent can aggravate the feeling of isolation as well. Children in families of FTFs experience stigmatisation, bullying, and isolation by peers in schools.

**- Dealing with (local or national) authorities.** Families are desperate for information on what is going on, how they can get their family member back, and what exactly will happen when/if their relative returns. Families also often have no idea what their city's organised support structures (psychological, practical, legal, organisational) are, or even if they exist, and families can also encounter difficulties with reaching the right person who can provide support for specific needs. Moreover, there are multiple cases of severe mistrust towards the system, which makes it even more complex to meet the needs of the family. As a result, families of FTFs often feel forgotten and left out. The situation of their family members in camps abroad and the perception that authorities are not willing to get them back aggravates the mistrust.

**- Dealing with practical and legal questions.** Families are mostly unaware of the legal framework around terrorism and are uncertain whether they inadvertently break the law when they try to facilitate or speed-up their family member's return (e.g. by transferring money to them or trying to help them reach a camp) or when the status of their family member is not clear. Sometimes the death of the FTF has been communicated, but the family members do not know how to receive the death certificate. Apart from the legal perspective on criminal activities that varies per Member State, families struggle with daily practical issues, such as financial problems due to the disappearance of a family member, organisational and bureaucratic procedures, problems with schools/housing/ work, dealing with media requests, and so on.

Anyway, there are also some effective solutions. One example of a good practice concerns the early engagement of families of FTFs in the repatriation and rehabilitation process: educating families of FTFs about prisons at an early stage and make them part of the process when an FTF returns and is imprisoned; showing a family the prison and make them familiar with the environment, rules and even the staff are examples of interesting existing practices.



It's not just families themselves that are affected by the departure or return of an FTF. The first-line practitioners, who are looking out for the wellbeing of these families, are also impacted by the work they are carrying out. Practitioners feel challenged in their work in multiple ways, such as: How to build trust? How to deal with media attention? How to provide the right support to those families?

Family, community and social care workers play a crucial role in providing support to families, including children, of FTFs, both when a family member leaves and returns, goes missing, or has passed away. These first-line practitioners can find support, recognition, and inspiration for their work also in the RAN FC&S Working Group, that brings together community leaders, family workers, youth workers, teachers, social workers and religious leaders.

**“Anyway, there are also some effective solutions. One example of a good practice concerns the early engagement of families of FTFs in the repatriation and rehabilitation process.”**

**Angela Antonova** is co-leader of RAN Families Communities and Social Care Working Group. She has over thirty years' experience in psychology, youth work, anthropology, clinical social work, including an understanding of the mental health issues that often underlie a drift into radicalisation. She is co-founder of the Bulgarian Association of Social Workers and the Network of Psychologists in Bulgaria.



# Interview: Avoiding stigmatisation in local communities



**Habiba ALI**

**We spoke with Habiba Ali, a programme coordinator for the Finnish Network for the Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, and asked her about her work supporting children of FTFs.**

## **How do you currently work with children of FTFs?**

We support families, and young people in particular, affected by violent radicalisation and extremism, as well as public authorities (including the police, social workers and other municipal workers), religious communities and other organisations working to prevent violent extremism and radicalisation and address the trauma caused by it.

## **What difficulties do children face when reintegrating into their local communities?**

Children of FTFs often face stigmatisation and are often left traumatised and disoriented by their experiences and the new reality that they now face on return to their local community, so it is hard for them to reintegrate. Any child might be traumatised coming from a conflict zone, this will be made worse when after their return society treats them as part of the problem, or blames them for the actions of their parents. Stigmatisation will make it harder for children to seek help, local community might not want to associate with people somehow linked to terrorism which will increase isolation, and local authorities might not understand their role in the reintegration process.

## **What could the long-term effects of stigmatisation be?**

If they don't get support, make new connections and find a way to participate in society, they might fall into depression or anti-social behaviour. It might also impact integration and participation in education and work life. Not being accepted back into society can be a push factor into extremist groups.

## **How important are local communities in the successful rehabilitation of children?**

Local communities often have a crucial role. The prevention of radicalisation or the successful rehabilitation and reintegration of young people cannot be achieved without the support of a wider network of people, all working to support the young person, including family members, other relatives, the local community, and local authorities.

**INTERVIEW**



**Is it as simple as just offering ‘community projects’ or does it require a more multi-level approach?**

We need a multi-level, multi-agency and integrated approach. It requires the involvement of many different actors, working together collaboratively and in a coordinated manner to support young people in their journey to becoming productive members of society and having successful futures. This means schools, local authorities, support services, families and communities need to work together.

**What tips would you give to practitioners working in this space?**

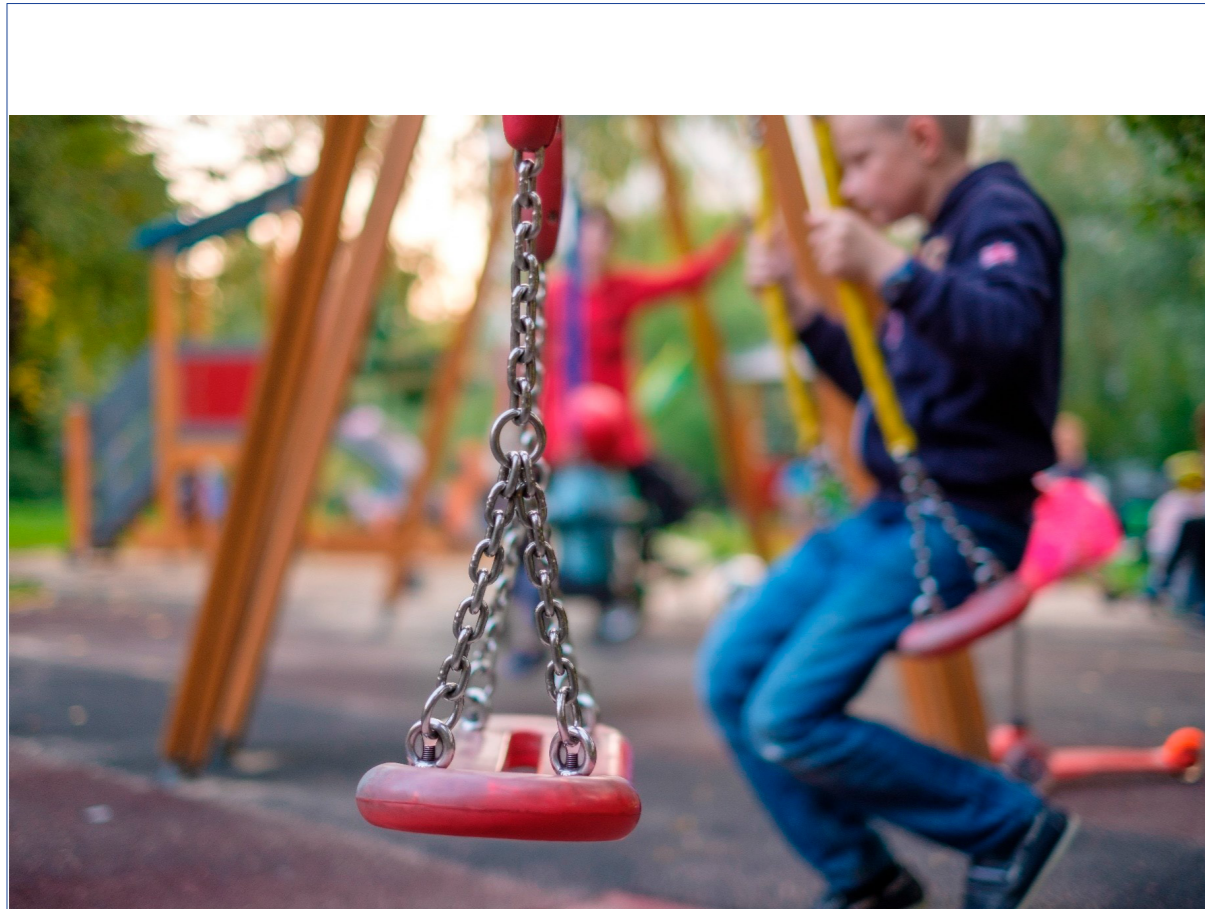
To do this work effectively trust is the key, and for this you need empathy. Beware of vicarious trauma, maintain your own health and find support when you sometimes feel exhausted. Continuously educate yourself and stay up-to-date with best practices, understand there is no one-size fits all solution, have a clear understanding of what your own role and responsibilities and limitations are, have a realistic expectation of the work itself, and include the victims in the decision making as much as possible.

**“To do this work effectively trust is the key, and for this you need empathy. Beware of vicarious trauma, maintain your own health and find support when you sometimes feel exhausted. Continuously educate yourself and stay up-to-date.”**



**Dr. Laura Ylriuka PHD**, of Social Sciences and docent of social work, development manager of child welfare in THL (Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare).

A paper, produced by The Centre of Excellence on Social Welfare in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area (SOCCA) in 2021, 'National modelling for arranging long-term support measures for children returning from conflict zones and their family members', presents practitioners with a three-stage process for long-term support for children that will ensure a safe and functional everyday life for them. You can read the paper in full [here](#).



## National modelling for arranging long-term support measures for children returning from conflict zones and their family members

Expert report  
2021

## 2 KEY CONCEPTS AND CONTEXT

### 2.1 Key concepts

**Family** means a group of people interconnected by blood relations, marriage, or other close relationships whether by family ties or cohabitation (or any combination of the above).

**Child** means an individual under 18 years of age.

**Returnee** means an individual who has left Finland or has been taken from Finland to another country and who is either returning to Finland or has expressed a desire to return to Finland. Children of such individuals born outside Finland are also referred to as returnees.<sup>1</sup>

**Conflict zone** means a geographical area where an armed conflict within a country or between countries is ongoing and may be considered to pose a danger to the life or health of civilian individuals traveling to the area.<sup>2</sup>

**Child returning from a conflict zone** means, for the purposes of this modelling, an underage returnee arriving in Finland from a conflict zone. Children may be in different situations depending on which of their parents and close family members are actively involved in their lives, and depending on whether their parents are alive, whether they are returning to Finland with them and whether both child's parents are the child's guardians or only one of them.

**Violent Islamist<sup>3</sup> extremism** means an extreme ideology that condones and encourages violence towards people of other faiths. Islamist groups encouraging violence include the Sunni-oriented ISIS (Islamic State of Syria and Levant).<sup>4</sup> In violent extremism, individuals undergo a **radicalization process**

<sup>1</sup> These definitions are based on the RAN Ex post paper Nice 2017, whose guideline for working with radicalized families was adopted as part of the long-term support process in the modelling.

<sup>2</sup> National Institute for Health and Welfare, undated.

<sup>3</sup> There are about 1.6 million Muslims in the world. The largest major branch is Sunni Islam, whose fundamentalist and ultra-conservative faction is referred to as Salafism. Salafism, in turn, has a violence-oriented branch known as Jihadism. The other major branch of Islam is Shia Islam. Islamism means politicized Islam. (Kaleva, 2018.)

<sup>4</sup> RAN Centre of Excellence 2019.



## Highlights: RAN activity on FTFs

To participate, get involved or simply find out more information about RAN Practitioners' work on emerging threats, please find further information below.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the foreseen activities will take place online. The insights and outcomes gathered from these meetings will be published in the RAN Practitioners Update and on the RAN website.

Stay tuned for updates on RAN social media channels.

For more information about RAN Practitioners activities please visit the Calendar on the RAN website [here](#).



Small-scale meeting

Returning FTFs: exploring post-conflict reconciliation.



Small-scale meeting

Effective communications when FTFs return.



Paper

Management and Reintegration of returning FTFs and their family members, with a focus on returned women and on the management of returning children and their mothers.



# LIBRARY: DISCOVER MORE

IF you would like to discover more about the topic of youth engagement you can get in touch with the RAN Staff, take a look at the [RAN Collection of Inspiring Practices](#) or read through some of the latest [RAN papers](#). We have included some of these papers in a carefully selected collection of interesting and relevant articles below.

RAN (2021)

[‘Dealing with returning children and their mothers from Daesh’](#)

RAN (2020)

[‘Local communications when FTFs and/or their family members are returning’](#)

RAN (2019)

[‘Returned Women and Children – Studying an Ongoing Experience on the Ground’](#)

RAN (2019)

[‘Safeguarding troubled refugee children in the classroom’ 23](#)

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