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## CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN FC&S – Families of Foreign Terrorist Fighters

29-30 June 2020

Digital meeting

# CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS WHEN WORKING WITH FAMILIES OF FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS

## Summary

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When a foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) leaves for Syria or Iraq, there is always a network of people affected by the FTF's departure, death or return - whether a partner and children, or (grand)parents and siblings.

In the past years, attention has focused on ways to involve families of FTFs in the process of resocialisation and reintegration in case of an FTF's return. However, it is crucial to also address other scenarios: 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. It is vital that these families 'left behind' remain a strong and active part of society as a whole and therefore receive solution-focused support. Therefore, the RAN Families, Communities & Social Care Working Group gathered family, community and social workers on 29 and 30 June 2020 in order to exchange insights. This conclusion paper reflects the outcomes of this meeting about:

- **Challenges** that family members of FTFs are encountering in their daily life, such as psychological issues, dealing with authorities, stigmatisation and/or practical and legal issues;
- **Practical tips** for solution-focused support by practitioners working in family support and adjacent fields in order to respond to these challenges.

# Introduction

Whereas monitoring procedures and law enforcement measures for returnees exist in EU Member States, not many foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) have been able to return to the EU in 2019 due to restrictions in travel to and from the conflict zone through neighbouring countries.<sup>1</sup> The distress this causes for the families in the EU who are left behind becomes clear from recent media reports about (grand)parents searching for their 'lost' family members<sup>2</sup>. This also follows from for example personal testimonies of families of FTFs that appear in the media and online: "From what I have seen, these are stories about vulnerability, destruction, loss and heartbreak and the fear of being overlooked, stigmatised and alienated by society is a very real reality."<sup>3</sup> Challenges for families of FTFs could have profound personal, economic and social consequences on their lives. Remaining an integral and strong part of society as a whole could become more difficult when families' issues remain unresolved.

Family, community and social care workers play a crucial role in providing support when a family sees one of its members leaving as a foreign terrorist fighter (FTF), but also in later stages when an FTF returns, goes missing or has passed away. During the past years, Member States and practitioners have worked on tangible structures to involve families as partners in the reintegration and rehabilitation process of radicalised individuals. Now that it is clear that a number of FTFs have not returned or will never return, it is crucial to build upon this existing work. In the RAN Families, Communities & Social Care Working Group (meeting: *Families of FTFs, 29-30 June 2020*), practitioners expressed their need for practical tips to work on the varied contexts and situations that the families of FTFs find themselves in. The aim of this paper is to provide first-line practitioners (mainly family, community and social care workers) with the outcomes of this meeting, including an overview of challenges experienced by FTFs and recommendations to effectively respond to families' needs and challenges.

## Challenges for families of FTFs discussed during the meeting



❖ **Dealing with the psychological consequences of the departure, death or return of an FTF:** Practitioners deal with family members of FTFs who go through complex traumas. They 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 Daesh 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 Daesh 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.<sup>4</sup> However, participants discussed that families

<sup>1</sup> Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2020 (TE-SAT)*, Europol (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2020>

<sup>2</sup> For example, see: 'A mother told me her son joined Isis and is now dead', *The Guardian* (12 January 2019). Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jan/12/mother-son-joined-isis-dead-charity>

<sup>3</sup> Safe Together, 'Why should we stop to think about the families of terrorists?' (2018). Retrieved from <http://www.safetogether.org/2018/04/stop-think-families-terrorists/>

<sup>4</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), *RAN Manual – Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families* (2017), p. 55. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/ran\\_br\\_a4\\_m10\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/ran_br_a4_m10_en.pdf)



# Recommendations

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## Starting point: the impact of different family profiles and settings

- ❖ As explained by several practitioners throughout the meeting, a **variety of settings can unfold** when a family member leaves to join Daesh. For example, families at home are blackmailed by an extremist organization or human traffickers, FTFs are being held in refugee camps or the family has a complete lack of information. Families of these FTFs are often concerned by the FTF's living conditions, which should be taken into account when supporting the families at home.
- ❖ When an FTF returns, it is important to restore family links and adequately support the family members in the reintegration process. Practitioners recommend to take into consideration both **the history of family dynamics and the families' responses to the Daesh-affiliated family members**. For example, practitioners have shared insights of family reception of a hero returning home, handing out presents despite one's own financial disposition. Others have reported *blue-eyed* (uncritical) reactions towards the family member convicted for terrorism. It is recommended to involve the family as early as possible (even before a return if possible).
- ❖ **Men and women** within the family **might need different kinds of support**, which family, community and social care workers can assess when setting up support-structures for FTFs families. These gender-sensitive considerations have been identified as a key approach and may include awareness of a history of domestic abuse within the family or prepare families to deal with the trauma of sexual abuse in refugee camps. Further research on this gender dimension of family support would prove useful.

The section below provides guidance for practitioners that want to address one or more challenges. Each of the topics below has been handled by a group of practitioners during break-out sessions.<sup>8</sup>

### 1) Dealing with psychological issues

- ❖ It is important to find out whether the family is aware of *how* psychotherapy functions. Information on this general **notion of psychotherapy** is also important for other professionals who are working with the families, such as NGOs, in order to create links to the relevant psychological help options.
- ❖ Actively **raise awareness** to families of FTF? of available psychological support options.
- ❖ When building trust is an issue, it is crucial to **identify the source of mistrust** and try and understand why it is hard to build trust in others and in authorities.
- ❖ It is crucial understand the situation that has led to the FTF's radicalisation as well as to articulate **potential to help the family understand, articulate and process difficult emotions**.

### 2) Dealing with authorities

- ❖ The family, community or social care worker can take the role of a **mediator**, who coordinates different actors and provides information about the functions and responsibilities of the authorities. Besides this, they could also work on inter-agency communication between authorities involved. Accompanying families to appointments with authorities is beneficial.
- ❖ **Local outreach** to families and the communities that FTFs and their families are from, by both practitioners and authorities is important. Language skills can help to create bonds between families and social services, police officers and local authorities involved.
- ❖ **Instil clear responsibilities**: it should be clear for both family members and all actors involved who is responsible for what.
- ❖ **Transparency** on information-sharing needs to be assured for families in order to help them understand what information is needed for what reason. This increases the chances of building trustful relationships.

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<sup>8</sup> RAN FC&S meeting on 29-30 June.

- ❖ **Use a bottom-up approach and involve families at an early stage.**

### 3) Dealing with practical and legal questions

- ❖ Address all legal issues for the families with all key actors together with **existing judiciary state services**.
- ❖ Refer families to **legal experts**. Families should be advised how to stay out of illegal actions (such as paying blackmail money) and provided legal counselling if family members are in camps.
- ❖ Advise families on **communication with the media**, when approached by journalists: 1) Educate families about the risks of becoming active in the media (e.g. stigmatisation, becoming target of other extremist groups). 2) Train them on how to talk to the media if the family wants to go public. 3) Key actors involved with the family (schools, social services) should be informed and be aware of their role in communicating with the media.
- ❖ Often, **easy and practical help** can be an effective way to support families with a range of issues (doctors appointments, child care, prison visits, job courses, etc) that are not connected to the FTFs directly, as they help them develop a daily routine. Concrete action builds sustainable trust.

### 4) Dealing with stigmatisation

- ❖ **Communication can be a stabilising factor** for the daily local environment. It is recommended to involve/inform neighbours, employers, etc. to foster understanding for the family's situation.
- ❖ **Carefully identify trustworthy/empathetic listeners for families** (peers, family members, a practitioner, friends) to reduce the effects of stigmatisation.
- ❖ **Organise self-help networks**, where families can meet to talk about their problems.
- ❖ **Collaborate with schools** or kindergartens to help families and their kids deal with stigmatisation by peers.

### Involving families in P/CVE interventions

Family members of FTFs are at times involved in P/CVE interventions and can be a supporting factor in getting their lives back on track again. Practitioners working with families did highlight the following points to take into account:

- ❖ **Always involve an experienced practitioner**. Never let a family member of an FTF work on a P/CVE intervention on his/her own.
- ❖ **Be aware of the context**. What could be the reactions of the audience? Is the city/school/organisation polarised?
- ❖ Prepare the family member in case there are any **negative reactions** from the audience.

# Learning from adjacent fields – families of convicted criminals

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Whilst every family is unique in its complexity, there are adjacent fields that have an overlap when it comes to families' needs and support. During the meeting, participants explored how practitioners working with family members of convicted 'regular' perpetrators deal with the families' needs:

- ❖ Use a **system approach**: Always view the individual as part of the bigger system, the family; help families to understand the offenders' perspective and situation. When the system understands the situation, they become more understanding and can provide a safe environment upon return.
- ❖ **Don't judge and don't stigmatise**. You cannot teach behaviour, but you can make people think about it.
- ❖ **Do not overlook the impact of stigmatisation** on families.
- ❖ **Set realistic goals** to prevent frustration for both the practitioner and the family.
- ❖ **Use a bottom-up approach** to give the family the feeling that they are heard. This leads to less hate towards the justice system.
- ❖ **Educate families** to avoid falling for "fake" offers made by an extremist group (as taught by the field of human traffickers).
- ❖ **Children can be a positive factor** for family dynamics, include them in your approach.

## Possible follow-up

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Participants during the meeting indicated that lessons from adjacent field may be beneficial, since they deal with similar situations. Adjacent fields that were mentioned are: families of missing people, families of gang members, the field of military deployment and families of people imprisoned abroad.

## Relevant practices

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- ❖ **Hayat** (Turkish and Arabic for "Life") - is the first German counselling program for persons involved in radical Salafist groups or on the path of a violent Jihadist radicalization, including those travelling to Syria and other combat zones. Furthermore, Hayat is available to the families of radicalised persons and FTFs.
- ❖ The **municipality of Sarpsborg** (Norway) - employs a holistic and systematic approach when supporting families to prevent or reverse radicalisation processes with affected family members. They focus on consolidating user involvement, building trust and strengthening family networks.
- ❖ **CAPRI –** is a French organisation supporting families, young people and practitioners.

## Bibliography & further reading

- ❖ RAN P&P and RAN YF&C (2019) '[Radicalised and terrorist offenders released from prison: Community and family acceptance](#)'.
- ❖ [RAN MANUAL Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families](#) (2017).
- ❖ For tips on capacity building and methods in family support, see this RAN ex post paper: [Family support: what works?](#) (2016).