

30/06/2021

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN PRISONS WG Multi Meeting, with input from RAN Police, RAN Rehabilitation and RAN Families, Communities and Social Care

23-24 June 2021, Online

Practitioners' questions and needs for the future, based on experiences in dealing with Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Violent Extremist or Terrorist Offenders

Key outcomes

The RAN Prisons meeting brought together 22 practitioners working within the prison context. It provided them a unique opportunity to table questions and discuss needs concerning their work with imprisoned foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) as well as violent extremist or terrorist offenders (VETOs). The meeting was organised with support from the RAN Police, Rehabilitation, and Families, Communities and Social Care Working Groups. It included interview-style presentations from expert-practitioners, inspiring practices and relevant research, as well as multiple group discussions.

Highlights and key recommendations of the meeting included the following.

- FTFs and other VETOs in the media and the general societal discourse leads to a perception of them being more dangerous than other offenders. The risk is that isolating and excluding them from offers that other inmates receive in prisons might have adverse outcomes as regards their deradicalisation and rehabilitation process.
- Very strict security measures for FTFs and VETOs, such as individual screening of books or restricted access to spiritual counselling, may have similar adverse effects.
- Tailor-made approaches based on multi-agency cooperation were requested by practitioners to adequately address the needs of the target group and support their rehabilitation from the beginning. Following their release, this may include the provision of housing and working since many will have lost ties to their family and support networks.
- Long-term political support and commitment is required to provide holistic training for prison staff on prevention of radicalisation. This includes initial as well as follow-up trainings, for example on the Dynamic Security approach.
- Returned FTFs and their family members are often connected across Member State borders. Cooperation and information sharing is required on matters of shared custody between citizens of different EU Member States.

- Addressing the potential risk of false compliance, practitioners explained that a good relation to a FTF or VETO as well as the group of inmates they are in contact with is key to conducting a realistic assessment of changes in attitude. Nevertheless, deradicalisation should not be perceived as a process with a defined ending, but as a process that continues indefinitely.

This paper summarises the outcomes of the meeting. Firstly, the paper will dive into the highlights of the discussion and explore the challenges regarding FTFs as well as other VETOs. Next, it will highlight the main recommendations formulated by practitioners.

Highlights of the discussion

Specific challenges in dealing with FTFs

- Many returning FTFs **lost ties with all remaining social/familial networks in their country of origin**. This means rehabilitation and reintegration efforts may be more difficult as family members and/or peers are absent from the process. Considering how important a stable social/familial network can be for rehabilitation, this issue is a major challenge.
- The question regarding **citizenships or possible deportations** for individuals who have dual citizenships is extremely controversial. Rehabilitation, reintegration and deradicalisation efforts could be hindered by the risk of being stripped of citizenship and/or deportation. If individuals have no credible and concrete options for the future to stabilise their life, it is difficult to build up a working relationship and to create intrinsic motivation for participation in a rehabilitation programme.
- There is concern that FTFs who expect to be expelled after detention, **might not leave the country**. This results in people going into hiding, remaining under the radar and not completing their disengagement, deradicalisation or resocialisation programmes.
- There is **wide variety among FTFs** as regards the following factors.
 - Level of physical and/or mental vulnerability
 - Women's agency in processes of violent extremism (female returnees)
 - Level of influence of positive networks (friends and family) on transformation
 - Length of sentence
 - The degree of opportunities and future perspectives
- It is harder to gain a holistic view on a case because it is not always possible to obtain information about all actions and crimes committed while being part of a terrorist organisation abroad. This also makes it **more difficult to detect false-compliance** during the rehabilitation process.
- The risk of stigmatisation** faced by FTFs is extremely high compared to most other offences. Media reporting as well as a societal atmosphere of fear around terrorism and ideology makes reintegration more difficult than for other target groups. As such, it's important to consider the following factors.
 - Housing:** Having a place to live is key and the start of the rehabilitation process. FTFs need special support in finding housing since most landlords may be hesitant to rent to them. Those who have contacts with their family, can stay with them but only after the role of the family in the radicalisation process has been determined.
 - Employment:** Many jobs require a police clearance which will reveal what the individual was sentenced for. Compared to other serious offences such as murder, there is a much higher scepticism of employers towards individuals convicted for extremist and terrorist offences. However, (financial) stability and a

meaningful way of life are particularly important for the rehabilitation process of FTFs in order to decrease the risk of recidivism and relapse into the extremist scene.

- Many FTFs have **European ties and networks** in different Western countries. For instance, some may be married (with or without children) to other European FTFs who are residing and/or imprisoned in a different country. As this is in the hands of security and intelligence services, this poses a specific challenge for practitioners as they often have no comprehensive information on the situation but are the ones responsible for the cases.
- Research conducted in prisons in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia over the course of the past six months was presented in the meeting. Preliminary findings from interviews with prison staff suggested that religious counselling for Muslim inmates has to overcome a variety of obstacles until it is fully established in a prison. Even then, limitations to the work of the Imam remain such as limited access and even mistrust vis-à-vis the imams. Further, interview partners wish for more cooperation with civil society organisations, but find it difficult to establish reliable networks due to lack of information about programmes on the one side and insufficient resources of the few organisations which are prepared to work in prison contexts on the other.

Further challenges and observations

- Practitioners feel the **constant need to raise awareness** regarding radicalisation. As there are many other issues coming up (e.g. gang-related violence) their concern is that P/CVE will be pushed to the side-lines. This has increased in recent years as the phenomena of individuals travelling to Syria and Iraq had decreased. This, however, does not mean Islamist radicalisation is no longer a threat. While the focus on right-wing extremism (RWE) is becoming stronger, practitioners report the same here.
- Practitioners shared that in some cases, prison regulations have gotten stricter in the context of (religious) material brought in from the outside. For instance, it was reported that sometimes it is harder now for a visiting practitioner/counsellor to lend a book to their client in prison. This may now in some places be subject to stricter inspections than before.
- The phase following a prisoner's release is crucial for their rehabilitation process. In order to be able to build on an existing foundation after their release, it is important to start working with an inmate as early as possible during their time in prison. Since participation in P/CVE programs is usually voluntary, both inside and outside of prison, it is easier to engage them inside the prison than it will be outside, where there are many more diversions.

Recommendations

- **Early access to prisons for external partners is key** as rehabilitation processes should start as early as possible, see also the RAN Rehab Manual.¹
- There is a need to address the challenges of revoking residence permits or citizenship rights. It is important to address the issues facing the undocumented clients and how the lack of legal residence status affects their outlook for reintegration.
- Rehabilitation and reintegration of FTFs and VETOs should be understood as a task that requires the collaboration of a **diverse group of professions**. Prison staff can create a cognitive opening among inmates through daily interactions, which can help support a positive outlook on life after release. Outside of prison, released offender then require support from other professionals in aspects such as finding education, employment and housing. Therefore, it is crucial to offer training inside as well as outside of prison as well as foster exchange beyond prison walls.

¹ RAN Rehabilitation Manual, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/rehabilitation-manual_en

- Internal consultation platforms should be utilised to track VETOs' development and enable better (and more frequent) communication between all staff members involved with the inmate.
- Considering the marriages formed between returnees from different European countries and children born from those relations in Syria and Iraq, there should be European cross-border information sharing and coordination.
- There is a need for a **long-term vision** regarding P/CVE, including the management of returning FTFs and VETO. The work of practitioners is directly influenced by this shifting attention and corresponding funding. Especially NGOs who deliver intervention and deradicalisation work suffer from short-term funding and short-term contracts. This means it is sometimes uncertain if P/CVE work with certain individuals can be continued. Without any long-term prospects, the knowledge, expertise and trust created by practitioners will be lost, if and when they decide to leave. Therefore, a more general and broader long-term funding of intervention initiatives independent from focus on certain ideologies is crucial.
- All religious caregivers need secured and less limited access to prisons regardless of their religion. If this is not the case, it can lead to a perceived discrimination among religious inmates and contribute to radicalisation.
- The collaboration between all actors (state and non-state) is crucial in term of sharing of information, public and political support during the resocialization, especially in the case of returnees after their release. There is a need for improvement of multiagency cooperation; some restrictions in prisons can pose a challenge for NGOs and religious caregivers to provide proactive support to prison staff and inmates. Prison authorities are obliged to maintain the safety and security in prisons and to follow strict national regulations. There is a need for commitment between professionals and policy makers that radicalisation is an ongoing issue. The contribution of all stakeholders will support the prison authorities to target the issues and at the same time to improve the conditions of the prison environment.

Relevant practices

1. **MAR – Multi-Agency Approach for Resocialisation, the Netherlands:** The MAR is a round table that brings together prison staff of the Terrorist Wings, Terrorism and Radicalisation experts Probation, municipalities in order to prepare the release of VETOs. The main goal of the MAR is to synchronise the plan of actions as many actors have single action plans. This helps to ensure that all relevant information is collected and the right actor can intervene at the right time. MAR includes, among others, prison staff, police, probation, NGOs, the case manager and the municipality. It aims at creating a balance between security and rehabilitation. Following release from prison, the case discussion is transferred to the local or regional safety house chaired by the local municipality.
2. **Advice Centre of Hesse – Religious Tolerance instead of Extremism, Violence Prevention Network gGmbH, Germany:** The advice centre of Hesse delivers both interventions as well as prevention work. This includes working with returnees inside prison and after their release. The project is based on a resource-oriented approach. Together with the client, it aims to set up an environment of comfort and to stabilise the situation of the client.
3. **Legato,** a German NGO, delivers disengagement and deradicalisation programmes in prison. They work with a client-centred systemic approach. Legato also provides training to prison staff and others in this approach.
4. **CAW Limburg,** a Belgian NGO, delivers counselling for offenders of terrorism-related crimes as well as to detainees vulnerable to radicalisation. CAW strengthens existing efforts and services in prison and promotes a multi-agency approach.

Follow up

- The challenges with FTFs will be incorporated in the RAN thematic cross-cutting event on the topic of the "Prison-Exit Continuum" in cooperation with RAN Policy Support in the second half of 2021
- The RAN PRISONS meeting **on training courses** in November Q4 will address the challenges and solutions highlighted during the meeting.

Further reading

If you would like to read more about the topic of FTFs and VETOs in prison as well as experiences and advice for rehabilitation and reintegration of the target group, please consult the following RAN papers:

RAN Specialised Paper [Rehabilitation work with convicted offenders outside of prison](#) (2021).

RAN Specialised Paper [Repatriated foreign terrorist fighters and their families: European experiences and lessons for P/CVE](#) (2021).

RAN Specialised Paper [The potential of social diagnostics for P/CVE](#) (2021).

RAN Specialised Paper [Risk Assessment in Prison](#) (2021).

RAN SPOTLIGHT [Spotlight on Prisons Rehabilitation and Reintegration](#) (2020).